The Growth of Relic and Icon Veneration in the Eastern Roman Empire during the Reigns of Justinian and his Successors (527-602) and their Impact on the Hyper-Sacralisation of Imperial Power

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Abstract

The evolution of the cultural and political landscapes of the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century presents many challenges for scholars. The emperor Justinian and his successors reigned during a dynamic and turbulent period of cultural and political change. For two centuries, Christianity had taken shape within the eastern Roman empire by developing its own traditions. By the end of the sixth century, Christianity encompassed all aspects of eastern Roman society. It impacted the cultural and political landscape in which the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty displayed their imperial authority and promoted their ideologies. Yet classical culture and mentalities had not disappeared. In fact, at times, antiquarian or classical mentalities informed Christian innovations and were often integrated within the new Christian landscape. By the sixth century, however, the continuation of the classical tradition had the potential to create tensions within the Christianising empire. We are thus left at a crossroads between two seemingly contradictory traditions during a period of cultural and political transition. This is the cultural background that shaped the imperial ideologies of the emperor Justinian and his successors.

This thesis brings together in one coherent study three widely debated topics in academia and sheds new light on the impact of Christianity on the cultural and political evolution of the eastern Roman empire during the reigns of the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty. The primary concern of this thesis is the integration of Christianity within the imperial ideologies of the emperor Justinian and his successors at the same time as they tried to promote Roman imperial renewal or restoration during a period of transition. Previous scholarly contributions paved the way for further research of the topic at hand and several approaches have been presented in academia, but the nature of this evolution remains obscure. This thesis offers a different approach by combining three ongoing debated topics, namely the rise and growth of relic and icon veneration in Late Antiquity, the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power, and the Christianisation of eastern Roman society during the sixth century. By examining the primary Greek, Latin and Syriac sources, this thesis argues that Christian cults of veneration, namely those of the saints, their relics and icons, impacted the cultural and political evolution of the sixth century, particularly in regard to imperial ideologies.

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1. Introduction: the Cultural Landscape of the Eastern Roman Empire under the Justinianic Dynasty

1.1 The current state of research on the cults of veneration in the sixth century[1]

This thesis traces and evaluates the cultural evolution of eastern Roman society and imperial power during the sixth century by method of a historical and art historical analysis. We argue that by the second half of the sixth century, the cultural evolution of eastern Roman society had a far-reaching impact on imperial ideology and even transformed fundamental principles of Christian veneration. We believe that crucial insights can be gained on the evolution of the eastern Roman cultural landscape by examining the growth of the cults of relics and icons and how this development impacted imperial power during the sixth century. We aim to establish a link between the growth of Christian cults of veneration and the increasing sacralisation of imperial power during the reigns of Justinian and his successors. Despite the efforts of a number of scholars, the nature of the link between the veneration of relics and icons and the increasing sacralisation of imperial power during this period remains obscure.

We will focus on the eastern Roman emperors of the Justinianic dynasty and their engagement with the growth of the cults of relics and icons in the sixth century.[2] The dominant position of the emperor in religious affairs meant that the development of Christian cults of veneration inevitably involved imperial patronage. Thus, this thesis also concerns the actions of the emperor in regard to the increasingly Christian landscape of the empire. Yet, it will soon become clear that the sixth-century emperors did not simply generate interest in

[1] All dates are in A.D unless otherwise specified.

[2] The emperors at the centre of this thesis enjoy variable attention in scholarship. The emperor Justinian is a well known figure and the focus of numerous studies and monographs in virtue of his long reign and the sheer number of events surrounding him. Some of the more relevant works on the reign of Justinian and his involvement in political and religious affairs include, but are not limited to, Mischa Meier's study *Das Andere Zeitalter Justinians: Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr* in 2003, *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* edited by Michael Maas in 2005, Hartmut Leppin's 2011 study "Power from Humility: Justinian and the Religious Authority of Monks", Peter Bell's 2013 study *Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian: Its Nature, Management, and Mediation*, Pierre Maraval's 2016 monograph *Justinien: Le Rêve d'un Empire Chrétien Universe*l, Peter Heather's 2018 monograph *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian*, and Peter Sarris' 2023 monograph *Justinian: Emperor, Soldier, Saint*. In the face of Justinian's monumental reign, his successors enjoy less attention in scholarship. While interest in the political and religious affairs of the emperors of the second half of the sixth century has not been the subject of a monograph since Ernst Stein published his thesis "Studien zur Geschichte des Byzantinischen Reiches, vornehmlich unter den Kaisern Justinus II, und Tiberius Constantinus" in 1919, several studies concerning specific events or aspects of the reigns of Justin II, Tiberius II and Maurice have been published in the 1970s and 1980s by Averil Cameron and Michael Whitby, and in the past five years with the theses of Robert Main in 2019 and Silvio Benno Roggo in 2022. Furthermore, a new *Brill Companion to the Successors of Justinian* is now planned.

relic and icon veneration through active patronage. On the contrary, the patronage and subsequent integration of Christian cults of veneration within the sphere of imperial rule arrives as a reaction to evolving mentalities across the empire in the early to mid-sixth century amidst changing circumstances. As a result, the emperors, wishing to protect themselves and their rule, carried on a process of self-sacralisation to an unprecedented extent, a process referred to by Mischa Meier as hyper-sacralisation.[3]

There is strong evidence, as we will see in the chapters that follow, that the emperor Justinian planted the seeds for the evolution of the very concepts surrounding imperial power which later saw the emperor increasingly associate himself with Christian holy figures. It is therefore no surprise that his successors not only promoted, but also integrated, Christian cults of veneration, as well as all elements associated with them, within the sphere of imperial ideology. This study, then, unfolds against the backdrop of a growing interest in understanding the phenomena surrounding the process of Christianisation of eastern Roman society during the sixth century which include the rise of relic and icon veneration and the sacralisation of imperial power. At the heart of this study are three academic debates, namely the period when icons came to be venerated as a general practice, to what extent Christianity impacted imperial power during Late Antiquity, and to what extent did Christianity affect eastern Roman society.

Much has been done in the field of Late Antiquity with respect to the study of relics and icons, the sacralisation of imperial power, and the Christianisation of eastern Roman society. The works of Averil Cameron and Mischa Meier form the basis of our present study. Their works provide preliminary studies on the three phenomena that are at the heart of this study. Building on the studies of Ernest Kitzinger, André Grabar, Gilbert Dagron and Peter Brown, Averil Cameron provided several densely written surveys on the development of Christian discourse and representation, of which relics and icons are a part, and its link with imperial power against the contemporary background of the sixth and seventh centuries.[4] She argued that the second half of the sixth century was a crucial period for the rise of the cult of icons. Against this, however, scholars John Haldon and Leslie Brubaker argued instead that a cult dedicated to the veneration of icons only developed at the end of the seventh century.[5]

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[3] Especially in Meier 2016a: 95.

[4] Cameron 1992; 1991: 189-221; 1979. See also Kitzinger 1954; Grabar 1967, 1984; Dagron 1984; Brown 1973. See also Marsengill 2018, 2010. Katherine Marsengill argued that the sixth century was a crucial period for the development of Christian iconography.

[5] Brubaker and Haldon 2001, 2011; Haldon 1997; Brubaker 1998, 2009, 2010, 2012.

More recently, Mischa Meier analysed the long-term effects of cultural changes and the evolution of eastern Roman mentalities following the plague of Justinian. He argued that the plague accelerated the process of Christianisation which is seen in the sacralisation of imperial power, the rise of the cult of the virgin Mary, the emergence of iconolatry, and the liturgification of eastern Roman society.[6] Meier added that these developments prompted or reinforced the transformation of the Roman empire into the so-called Byzantine empire.[7] These developments, and events, Cameron and Meier concluded, affected the cultural trajectory of the eastern Roman empire in that by the end of the sixth century, Christianity encompassed all aspects of society while secular and classical traditions fell away.[8]

Like Cameron and Meier, scholars Peter Bell, Peter Sarris and Peter Heather argued that by the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh century, Christianity became the primary marker of the eastern Roman cultural landscape, particularly in regard to the political ideology of the empire.[9] Against these hypotheses, however, Anthony Kaldellis challenged this long-standing academic tradition arguing that Christianity had less of an impact than previously believed. He acknowledged the rise and growth of Christianity during Late Antiquity, but argued that the classical traditions as well as the secular institutions of the Republican period and the Principate remained ingrained and integral to the cultural, legal and political foundations of eastern Roman society.[10] The cultural trajectory of Late Antiquity, more precisely the cultural evolution of the sixth century, thus remains uncertain due to opposing views in academia.

It is in the context of these three debates surrounding the cultural evolution of eastern Roman society that this study is necessary. In one coherent study, we provide clarifications and bring precisions to the process of Christianisation of eastern Roman society which include the growth of Christian cults of veneration and the increasing sacralisation of imperial power. Because each phenomena influences one another in the context of a cultural evolution, there is a conscious element of circularity throughout the study that cannot be entirely avoided. We mitigate this, however, by analysing one topic per chapter from a top-down perspective, while retaining a logical thread throughout the thesis. We wish to contextualise the sixth-century emperors in this cultural evolution, as well as understand their roles in this evolution. We also wish to understand how the emperors of the Justinianic

[6] Meier 2020: 187-191; Meier 2016b: 284.
[7] Meier 2016b: 270. See also Meier 2003.
[8] Cameron 1979, 1991, 1992; Meier 2020: 187-191; 284.
[9] Bell 2013; Sarris 2011, 2023; Heather; 2005, 2018.
[10] Kaldellis 2015.

dynasty were impacted by these changes, and how they impacted eastern Roman society in return. We do, however, acknowledge that a certain circularity exists nonetheless.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

In order to trace and evaluate the cultural evolution of the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century through an examination of the growth of Christian cults of veneration and their impact on imperial power, we have divided this thesis into five chapters. The present introduction constitutes the first chapter and is followed by three main chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter two, which constitutes the first main chapter, examines the emergence and growth of Christian cults of veneration across the eastern Roman landscape. It discusses the changing mentalities surrounding veneration during Late Antiquity and demonstrates the various initiatives of the sixth-century emperors to promote the cults of relics and icons. The guiding question in this chapter concerns the period when holy people and icons became subject to a cult in the eastern Roman empire and how they came to be venerated in the context of a Christianising society.

Chapter three, which constitutes the second of the three main chapters, explores in detail the main theme of this thesis, the hyper-sacralisation or auto-sacralisation of imperial power during the second half of the sixth century. It connects imperial power with the world of relics and images and demonstrates the process of sacralisation of imperial power in which the emperor assumes an almost sanctified status reminiscent of the deification of classical emperors. The guiding question in this chapter concerns the manner in which Christian cults of veneration impacted imperial ideology and representation.

Chapter four, which constitutes the third main chapter, discusses the subtheme of this thesis, the process of Christianisation of eastern Roman society during the sixth century. It evaluates the process by which Christianity encompasses all aspects of eastern Roman society and brings precisions to the evolution of the eastern Roman cultural landscape under various changing circumstances. The guiding question in this chapter concerns the manner by which the sixth century emperors reflected their ideologies on eastern Roman society and how their policies impacted the overall cultural trajectory.

Finally, the conclusion explores the possibility of the emergence of an unofficial Christian imperial cult in which the sacred emperor is venerated alongside Christian holy figures.

1.3 Terminology

Finally, some notes on terminology: since this thesis discusses the sacralisation and hyper-sacralisation of imperial power, we must define the parameters of each term. The sacralisation of imperial power refers to the process whereby sacred or religious value is attributed to imperial rule, its foundation and representation. Sacralisation was not a uniform or linear process. But the sacredness of eastern Roman emperors tended to increase over time throughout Late Antiquity.[11] We may identify distinct forms of heightened sacredness during Late Antiquity among the emperors Constantine I (306-337), Theodosius II (408-450), Justinian I (527-565), and Heraclius (610-641), each manifesting in various ways.[12]

Hyper-sacralisation is distinguished from sacralisation by a deepening of the sacred or religious value attributed to imperial rule.[13] The hyper-sacralisation of imperial power refers to the process whereby the relationship between the emperor, the sacred and the divine, is rendered explicit. It implied a process of self-sacralisation whereby the emperor initiated a fundamental change in the way he displayed his religious image to the public. It also implied a growing intensification in the relationship between imperial power and religious authority. The reigns of Justinian's successors saw a renewed surge of self-sacralisation wherein Christian ideology of rule and the representation of imperial power required constant reaffirmation following a period of political 'disorder'. It is in this context that we employ the term hyper-sacralisation in this thesis.

In this thesis we prefer the term Christianisation as opposed to Liturgification to describe the process by which Christianity came to envelop every aspect of eastern Roman society. The choice comes after a careful consideration of the meaning surrounding both terms. The term Liturgification is widely used by scholars of Late Antiquity to denote the cultural evolution whereby the development of Church rites and ceremonies impacted the general cultural landscape of the eastern Roman empire.[14] In this thesis we see Liturgification as a part of the overall Christianisation process of eastern Roman society. We prefer the term Christianisation in this thesis for its simplicity and the broader implications surrounding the cultural evolution of the eastern Roman empire. The terms, however, can be evoked in a similar context.

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[11] Meier 2016a: 77.
[12] Meier 2016a: 77.
[13] Meier 2019: 509.
[14] Meier 2016a: 94. "Liturgisierung' hat mit dem geläufigen Verständnis von Liturgie nur wenig zu tun - allenfalls in der Weise, dass in ihrem Gefolge das gesamte Imperium Romanum zu einer Art liturgischem Raum mutierte, also einem abgeschlossenen (und in der Vorstellung von Zeitgenossen auch abgeschirmten) Bereich, innerhalb dessen eine nach religiösen Vorgaben strukturierte Ordnung weitgehend den Alltag gestaltete."

Furthermore, since we address both icons and imperial images in this thesis, we must note that we treat them separately on the basis that the emperors held power over the secular domain and were not generally seen as ecclesiastical or spiritual figures. However, in chapter three of this thesis we will demonstrate that the emperor wished for his image to be viewed in the same capacity as religious icons. We provide a definition of what constitutes a Christian icon in the second chapter of the thesis in the section discussing the growth of icon veneration. Lastly, for personal names, we always give the Latin version for simplicity, unless there is a more common Anglicised form. For example, we prefer Procopius and Evagrius, instead of the Greek forms Prokopios or Evagrios, and the Anglicised John and Paul, instead of the Greek Johannes or the Latin Paulus. Also, only the Anglicised form for the names of emperors will be used. The personal name Romanos is the only exception where the Greek version is preferred.

1.4 Greek, Latin and Syriac sources

To allow us to explore the cultural evolution which lies at the heart of the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century, a wide range of sources is available. These sources are chosen from a variety of genres including histories with varying subjects, chronicles and *breviaria*, poems and panegyrics, hagiographies, mirrors of princes and dialogues, and legal texts. Each source presents particular problems and biases and therefore must be treated carefully and in conjunction with others in order to provide a clear analysis of the evolving process that took place in the sixth century. Given the multitude of sources employed throughout this thesis, the main Greek, Latin and Syriac sources will be treated here below, while minor ones will be treated on a case by case basis as they appear in the thesis. The main authors include: Procopius, John Malalas, Paul the Silentiary, Corippus, John of Ephesus, Evagrius, and Theophylact.

Procopius of Caesarea remains the principal source for the reign of Justinian. He hailed from Caesarea Maritima in the province of Palaestina Prima. He received the standard secular education of the elite class which was based on the imitation of the classical authors and on the study of rhetoric.[15] He also may have attended law school either in Beirut or Constantinople. He became the legal advisor of the general Belisarius upon the accession of Justinian to the throne in 527. Having accompanied Belisarius on campaign, he was a first-hand witness to many of the events in the east and the west. Furthermore, he potentially had

[15] Anthony Kaldellis argues that Procopius, in addition to a classical education, had extensive philosophical knowledge. Kaldellis 2004a.

access to privileged information from the imperial court and Belisarius. As a result, his accounts of the events of the reign of Justinian remain invaluable to our understanding of cultural and political dynamics of the sixth century.

Procopius wrote three major works, namely the *Wars*, *Secret History*, and *The Buildings*. According to Anthony Kaldellis, he also had plans to publish an *Ecclesiastical History*.[16] The bibliography surrounding the works of Procopius is extensive and subject to complex discussions.[17] There are several discussions in academia surrounding the background and social identity of Procopius. Among them, two are worthy of mention to understand the complexity of the social and cultural landscape of the sixth century. These concern the academic debates surrounding the Neoplatonist or orthodox Christian identity of Procopius, and a growing or ever-present disapproval of the regime of Justinian.[18] These two issues discussed at length in the scholarship of Procopius remain at the heart of our understanding of his works. As a result, they impact our views on the treatment of the reign of Justinian as a whole.

His largest works, the *Wars*, is a history of the wars of Justinian in eight books covering the imperial campaigns in the east and the west from the accession of Justinian to around 553. It was written in the classicising style of the Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, under the Christian regime of Justinian, thus reflecting the cultural tensions of the period.[19] The literary tradition which formed the basis of Procopius' work is also at the heart of the academic debates surrounding his identity. His second work, the *Secret History*, remains puzzling especially when compared to his last work, *The Buildings*. The former is a scathing invective against the regime's political dealings which remained unpublished until its discovery in the early seventeenth century, while the latter is a panegyric praising the emperor's achievements through his building projects across the empire. *The Buildings* was

[16] In his article "The Date and Structure of Prokopios' Secret History and His Projected Work on Church History" Anthony Kaldellis argues that Procopius planned to write one work in 550, and that was an ecclesiastical history. Kaldellis 2009: 586.

[17] For a select bibliography on Procopius and the discussions surrounding his three works, see the *Companion to Procopius of Caesarea* edited by Meier and Montinaro 2020, the monographs of Kaldellis 2004a; Brodka 2004, who also covers Agathias and Theophylact in the same study, and Cameron 1985. Several collected editions cover conferences on Procopius, see for example, Lillington-Martin and Turquois 2018. For studies on the *Wars*, see Kaldellis 2016, Kaldellis 2010a, Greatrex 1994. For studies on the *Secret History*, see Börm 2015; Kaldellis 2010; Croke 2005a. For studies on the *Buildings*, see Montinaro 2014; Greatrex 2013; Elsner 2007; Whitby 2001. For an overview of the scholarship on Procopius, see Greatrex 2014.

[18] These issues are also at the heart of academic discussions surrounding the works of the sixth century historians Agathias and Menander Protector. For Neoplatonism in Procopius, see Kaldellis 2004a: 217-221; cf. Bell 2009: 9-13; Meier 2004. For Orthodox Christianity in Procopius, see Cameron 2017: 13-27; Cameron 2016: 27-37.

[19] The classicising style of Procopius' *Wars* has been subject to much debate in scholarship, particularly between Averil Cameron and Anthony Kaldellis who disagree on the sincerity of the style. For analysis on the debate, see Ziebuhr 2024; Basso and Greatrex 2018: 59-72; Kaldellis 2004a; Cameron 1985: 134-151.

likely written at the behest of Justinian and remains a valuable work on the regime's self promotion. In contrast, the *Secret History* is valuable in its presentation of Justinian from the point of view of the disaffected traditional elite of Constantinople.[20]

John Malalas wrote the *Chronicle* in 18 books starting from the Creation to the reign of Justinian. We do not possess the original text, only a copy of the text from the twelfth century. According to the recent study of Richard Burgess, the *Chronicle* is written in the tradition of Hellenistic *breviaria*.[21] Although the *Chronicle* derives much of its information from Justinian's own propaganda, according to Roger Scott, it is not itself propaganda for the emperor.[22] It offers, generally, a sober and uncritical account of the emperor. Malalas is particularly interested in the Christian foundation of the world, the importance of the church and the Christian emperor in eastern Roman society. Yet secular events, such as the Nika riot, natural disasters and the plague, made up much of the content of the work, and although the wars of Justinian receive less attention, they were nonetheless treated. The secular material, however, was included within the larger Christian context. The *Chronicle* is a useful source for this thesis since it often provides scholars with information concerning the sixth century that is lacking in the works of Procopius.[23]

Paul the Silentiary was a Greek poet and courtier of the emperor Justinian. What little is known about Paul comes from the contemporary poet and historian Agathias, a friend of Paul, who describes him as coming from a rich and illustrious family.[24] He wrote several epigrams which are preserved in the *Greek Anthology*.[25] His most well known work, and the more useful for this thesis, is the *Description of Hagia Sophia*. The poem celebrates the second consecration of the great Church of Constantinople following the reconstruction of its dome in 562 after it fell as a result of an earthquake in the capital in 557. Paul presumably recited the poem to the emperor and a select audience during the week of Christmas in 562. The long description of the technical construction and the artwork of the church, is preceded and followed by two panegyrics dedicated to the emperor and patriarch, in which Christian and classical symbolism meet to portray a highly partisan image of the emperor's regime.[26] As a result, it is believed that the work was written at the behest of the emperor. Thus it is

[20] See Börm 2015: 305-346.
[21] Greatrex and Mitchell 2023: 21; Burgess 2021: 64-65.
[22] Scott 1985: 99.
[23] Scott 1996: 22-23.
[24] Agath, *Histories*, 5.9.7
[25] Most of the material comes from two manuscripts: the 10th century *Palatine Anthology* and the 14th century *Anthology of Planudes*.
[26] See the introduction to the translation in Bell 2009.

valuable for this thesis on account of its partisanship and its information concerning visual art and the link he creates between Christian and classical symbolism.

Flavius Cresconius Corippus was a Latin poet from North Africa. He appears to have been a teacher in a small town in Northern Africa, where he composed his first poem, an epic celebrating the accomplishments of Justinian's general John Troglita entitled *Iohannis* or *De bellis Libycis*, which was most likely completed between 548 and 551.[27] It appears that his work provided him with the opportunity of an imperial post in Constantinople as his second poem *In Laudem Iustini Augusti minoris* suggests. He may have also been attached to the service of the *quaestor* Anastasius according to a panegyric dedicated to the *quaestor* included in the author's later work.

The more useful work for this thesis is the *In Laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*. It concerns the accession of Justin II to the throne following the death of his uncle Justinian in 565, and to the consulship the following year. Its shape and style are curious as it does not constitute a traditional panegyric of Justin II, who tends to figure in a rather more narrative framework than as the object of direct praise. Averil Cameron argues that Corippus modelled the work, or at least some of it, on the classical epic, in a similar fashion to the *Iohannis*.[28] But, because portions of the work may possess influences from the genre of the panegyric, it must be taken with caution. Yet it remains a valuable source of information concerning eastern Roman visual art, triumphal iconography, and the manipulation of Christian vocabulary, while also providing insight on the ideology behind the imperial accession ceremony.

John of Ephesus was a Syriac historian and church leader. He was born in the city of Amida in the north of Mesopotamia and appears to have been ordained as a deacon at the Zuqnin monastery. John wrote two works, *The Lives of the Eastern Saints* and the *Ecclesiastical History*. The former is a hagiographical work consisting of 58 lives of Miaphysite ascetics with whom the author had personal affinity. The work illustrates the hardships the ascetics faced in their fight to preserve Miaphysite Christianity in the context of Chalcedonian persecutions.[29] The *Ecclesiastical History* survives in a partial state. Part I is completely lost, and Part II survives only as fragments preserved in the chronicles of Michael the Syrian, the Chronicle of Zuqnin and in the chronicle attributed to Pseudo-Dionysius of

[27] Zarini 1986: 82-84; Cameron 1976a: 1. See also Andy Merrills' new 2024 book entitled *War, Rebellion and Epic in Byzantine North Africa: a Historical Study of Corippus' Iohannis*.
[28] Cameron 1976a: 2-3, 10. For a more detailed study of poetry throughout Late Antique, see Zarini 2012: 17-32.
[29] Van Ginkel 1995: 41; Ashbrook Harvey 1990: 31-34

Tel Mahre.[30] Part III, however, is almost completely preserved and covers the years 571-588, though it lacks a consistent chronology.[31] In addition to the ecclesiastical narrative, according to John himself, it is a record of the 'wars and battles and desolation and bloodshedding which have happened in our days, for the information of those who come after us, should the world continue to exist for so long.'[32] As a result, there is a strong sense of the impending biblical apocalypse. The works of John are valuable for their unique insights on religious matters and on the perception of the emperor's image from a Miaphysite Christian perspective.[33]

The Greek ecclesiastical historian Evagrius Scholasticus provides insight into the ecclesiastical developments of the sixth century from a Chalcedonian Christian perspective. Evagrius was born into a wealthy aristocratic family with close ties to the political elite of the empire, having received a good education and pursuing a career as a lawyer in the service of Gregory, Patriarch of Antioch, along with his cousin John of Epiphania.[34] Evagrius had a sufficiently good relationship with the emperor Maurice's brother-in-law, Philippicus, to protect his reputation in his works. Furthermore, Evagrius composed a collection of reports, letters, decrees, speeches, and other material dedicated to the emperor Maurice who then granted him honorary titles.[35] Under Tiberius he received the honorary rank of *quaestor*, followed by the rank of prefect under Maurice.

His *Ecclesiastical History* covers the period from the first council of Ephesus in 431 to 593 halfway in the reign of emperor Maurice. He built on the *Ecclesiastical History* written by Zacharias Rhetor, a late fifth-century Miaphysite church historian whom he heavily criticised, the early sixth-century historian Eustathius of Epiphania, the chronicler John Malalas, Procopius and the pagan Greek historian Zosimus.[36] Along with its ecclesiastical narrative, the church history of Evagrius contains a higher proportion of secular events, especially in the later books.[37] It is valuable for this thesis for its treatment of the icon 'not made by human hands', which appears also in the mid-sixth century Syriac history

[30] Ashbrook Harvey 1990: 30. For a more detailed discussion on the surviving fragments and the manuscript tradition of Parts I and II of the history, see Van Ginkel 1995: 46-68.
[31] Ashbrook Harvey 1990: 30. For a more detailed discussion surrounding the manuscript tradition, the sources and the preserved portions of Part III of the history, see Van Ginkel 1995: 70-85.
[32] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.6.1. Translated by Robert Payne Smith.
[33] Leppin 2019: 113-135
[34] Whitby 2000: xiii-xv.
[35] Evagr. *HE*, 6.24.
[36] Whitby 2000: xxii-xxx.
[37] Greatrex and Mitchell 2023: 39. See also Liebeschuetz 2006: 161-163. We further discuss the incorporation of secular material in ecclesiastical histories in section 1.5 of the introduction.

attributed to Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor.[38] Furthermore, the work presents different opinions, whether positive or negative, in regard to the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty. Given his close ties with the regime of Maurice, Evagrius's account of the emperor is geared towards flattery. But as regards Justin II, his account is highly critical on account of the emperor's failure to recognise the merits of Gregory of Antioch.[39]

Theophylact Simocatta was an early seventh-century Greek classicising historian during the reign of Heraclius. He wrote the *History* which is considered the last classicising history in the styles of Herodotus and Thucydides. It continued the works of Procopius, Agathias, and Menander Protector covering the period between 565 and 602 with mentions of the events surrounding the early wars of Heraclius. His primary focus, then, appears to be the military and political history of the later sixth century as a whole, but a focused interest in the wars conducted by the emperor Maurice is evident throughout. He records the conflicts in the Balkans and the war between the eastern Roman empire and Persia. Although he provides a detailed narrative, his exaggerated style of rhetoric, combined with the lack of a chronological order and military and geographical knowledge, represents one of the hazards in using the source.[40]

Theophylact combines several eastern and western sources in his narrative. These include: John of Epiphania, a hagiography of Maurice, a 'Priscus' and 'Heraclius' source, and the Constantinople Chronicle.[41] The value of the work for this thesis lies in the fact that Theophylact, despite his classicising style, incorporates Christian material into his secular narrative, thus forming a contrast with the *Ecclesiastical History* of Evagrius in which the opposite occurs. Furthermore, his account provides information on contemporary mentalities of the Heraclian regime, while relating events from the reign of Maurice.

In addition to these sources, several other works from authors which have not been extensively treated above are considered for this thesis. These include: the *Histories* of Agathias, the *History* of Menander Protector, the lost history of the office of *magister officiorum* of Peter the Patrician of which extracts survive in the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies* attributed to the emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *On the Magistracies of the Roman State* by John the Lydian, the Syriac history attributed to pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor, the *Life of Saint Sabas* by Cyril of Scythopolis, the *Life of Eutychius* by Eustratius, the

[38] See the introduction to the English translation of the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor by Greatrex, Horn and Phoenix 2011.
[39] Lee 1993: 573; Allen 1981: 221; Cameron 1976a: 10.
[40] Whitby 1992: 46; Whitby 1988: 49-50; Turtledove 1977: 5.
[41] Mary and Michael Whitby 1986: xiii-xxv; cf. Whitby 1992: 50; Whitby 1988: 92-109, 222-242.

anonymous *Dialogue on Political Science*, the *Advice* of Agapetus, the *Kontakia* of Romanos the Melodist, the law codes and *Novels* of Justinian, the anonymous seventh-century *Chronicon Paschale*, and the ninth-century *Chronographia* of Theophanes. These sources provide additional information concerning the political and cultural developments of the sixth century, as well as insights on the regimes and self-portrayal of the sixth-century emperors. Once again, they will be discussed on a case-by-case basis as they appear throughout the thesis.

2. The Growth of Christian Cults of Veneration between c.350-602

Introduction:

This chapter traces the evolution of Christian mentalities surrounding the concept of the holy and the veneration of the holy in Late Antiquity, with a particular focus on the sixth-century. This chapter aims to contextualise the sixth-century emperors within a wider process of sacralisation of holy Christian individuals and their veneration through holy relics and icons. The sacralisation and self or hyper-sacralisation of imperial power during the sixth century can only be fully understood when perceived within the full context of previous religious developments during the early centuries of Late Antiquity. Therefore, this chapter constitutes a preliminary analysis surrounding the concept of sacralisation of certain individuals in this period. The first part of this chapter will treat the elements surrounding the growth of the cult of saints and the involvement of the emperors, bishops, and the people in the veneration of relics during the fourth to seventh centuries. This will shape our analysis of the rise of icon veneration, to which the greater portion of this chapter is dedicated.

We will focus on the sacralisation of Christian individuals as well as the development and growth of cults dedicated to their relics and icons. Indeed the growth of the cults of relics and icons during Late Antiquity demonstrates that eastern Roman society underwent a process of Christianisation. But the acknowledgment that eastern Roman society became increasingly Christianised partly through the development of holy cults and the veneration of holy people does not bring any precision as to how certain individuals came to be regarded as holy by society. Therefore, in this chapter, we ask when relics and icons came to be venerated, what were the foundations behind this change in mentalities, and how Christian mentalities transcended the notions of idolatry to finally accept the veneration of holy people and objects. The foundation of this analysis is grounded in the debate surrounding the growth of icon veneration during Late Antiquity. Below we will bring precision to the debate surrounding this cultural development and firmly establish the emperors of the sixth century within its context.

2.1 The growth of the cult of the saints and their relics

To fully appreciate the process of sacralisation of the imperial figure in the sixth century, one must begin earlier with the evolution of people's perceptions and mentalities in

regard to 'special' Christian individuals, particularly their relics. This section aims to provide a suitable starting point for the study of the sacralisation of the imperial figure by looking at the elements which encouraged the development of the cult of saints during Late Antiquity. The cult of the saints is a broad term encompassing the acts of veneration offered to Christian holy individuals, or their relics.[42] This cultural development began as early as the second century in specific areas of the empire, but expanded following the persecution of Christians under the reigns of pagan emperors during the late third century.[43]

The evolution of Christian mentalities towards holy relics allowed Christians to reevaluate their relationship with the dead. The remains, or relics, of deceased holy individuals became revered as sacred items by Christians as they were believed to possess the saint's essence.[44] Relics, typically a fragment of a whole such as bones, cloth or other objects can be separated into two categories: primary relics, and contact or secondary relics.[45] Most relics consisted of organic material, and so to protect them Christians developed reliquaries to house and embellish them. They were made from a variety of materials and were not obliged to conform to a particular size. No expense was spared in the making of reliquaries as precious metals became the preferred material for housing relics. In this form of representation, relics became powerful tools of religious communication.

People began to gather around the shrines and burial sites of saints to venerate their relics. They flocked to these sites in order to communicate with the divine through the intercessory abilities of the saints' relics. The journey is known as pilgrimage. Pilgrimage

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[42] For a select bibliography on the development and spread of the cult of saints in Late Antiquity, see David L. Eastman's *Early Christian Martyr Cults* published in 2020; David L. Eastman's *The Cult of the Saints* published in 2018; Matthew Dal Santo's *Debating the Saints' Cult in the Age of Gregory the Great* published in 2012; Peter Sarris, Matthew Dal Santo and Phil Booth's *An Age of Saints? Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity* published in 2011; Éric Rebillard's *The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity* published in 2009; Claire Sotinel's *Les Lieux de Culte Chrétiens et le Sacré dans l'Antiquité Tardive* published in 2005; Éric Rebillard's *The Cult of the Dead in Late Antiquity: Towards a New Definition of the Relationship between the Living and the Dead* published in 2003; Peter Brown's *The Cults of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* published in 1981.

[43] The earliest reference to a cult dedicated to a saint dates to the middle of the second century. During that time, bishop Polycarp of Smyrna was executed by the Romans for refusing to sacrifice in honour of the emperor and to recant. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 8, 9. After the bishop's death, Christians gathered his remains and buried them in a place where they gathered to display a hitherto unusual level of veneration. After the burial, Christians continued to celebrate the date of his martyrdom. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 18. The text recounting the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp represents perhaps the earliest account of the veneration of a martyr. The text remains an important source since it shows Christians venerating the remains of the 'special dead', a focus on a martyr's tomb as a shrine, liturgical celebrations of the saint's martyrdom on the anniversary of his execution, and the production of hagiographic literature commemorating the event.

[44] Thuno 2018: 151-152; Eastman 2018: 679.

[45] Primary relics refer to the corporeal remains of the saint, while contact relics refer to objects that have come into contact with the saint, alive or deceased, such as a personal object, or objects involved in the saint's death. Contact relics were thought to have absorbed the likeness or the intercessory powers of the saint itself, thus serving the same function in veneration. Eastman 2018: 680.

began, according to Noel Lenski, with a series of voyages to the Holy Land by empresses who built new spaces of worship that would make it a central feature of Christian piety.[46] During the fourth century, pilgrimage became increasingly associated with travel to Christian shrines and churches for veneration following the revitalisation of the Holy Land as a Christian site.[47] Around the time of Ambrose, by the end of the century, ritual pilgrimage to designated holy sites containing the relics of saints was well established. The development of holy sites was possible due to a concentrated effort by the imperial regime and the people to honour their 'special' dead.

As the cult of the saints continued to grow, local bishops began integrating holy relics into the urban area, a practice that challenged traditional attitudes about the urban landscape. The integration of relics in urban spaces not only went against Roman burial custom, which prohibited the removal of the remains of a deceased individual, but also broke the barriers between the urban centres of the living and the cemeteries beyond the walls where the deceased lay. The act of bringing the remains of a deceased individual within an urban area 'could still raise fears of pollution and rouse a pagan mob to fury'.[48] Furthermore, the placement of relics under the altar and use in public worship of God, also raised fears of idolatry among Christians.[49] Yet by the sixth century, relics had become an integral part of the urban life of the eastern empire. Thus, a significant shift in Roman mentalities surrounding the dead took place.

The subsequent struggle for control of holiness that arose between emperors and bishops represents an important development of Late Antiquity as it reflects changes in eastern Roman mentalities surrounding holiness and brought about changes in the cultural landscape of eastern Roman cities on account of the spiritual authority of the saints.[50] Bishops, since the mid fourth century, sought to unite local churches around their authority by acquiring and collecting relics.[51] Bishops by then had adopted the already established imperial ceremony of the *adventus* to celebrate the entry of holy relics in their city (figure

[46] Lenski 2004: 114-118. For narratives surrounding the discovery of the True Cross by Empress Helena in the sources, see Euseb. *VC*, 3.25-28; Sozomen, *HE*, 2.1-2; Theodoret, *HE*, 1.18; Socrates, *HE*, 1.17.
[47] Dietz 2004: 126.
[48] Markus 1990: 146-148. See also, Maas 2010: 145; *Cod. Theod*, 9.17.7.
[49] Markus 1990: 145.
[50] Leppin 2020: 69.
[51] Duffy 2018: 155; Rapp 2007: 558. Kritzinger 2011: 43. The translation of relics had been practiced since the reign of Constantius II in the 350s with the translation of the relics of the saints Babylas, Timothy, Luke and Andrew. For a discussion on the dates of the translation of the relics of the saints Luke and Andrew to Constantinople and afterwards to their final resting place in the church of the Holy Apostles, see David Woods' "The Date of the Translation of the Relics of SS. Luke and Andrew to Constantinople" published in 1991.

1).[52] This change in the use of an imperial ceremonial practice was later adopted by the emperor Theodosius I suggesting a growing rivalry between the Church and the imperial office in matters of religious authority.[53] The adoption of the imperial *adventus* as the ceremony for relic translation shows how connected the political and ecclesiastical spheres were to each other. Even though the main argument remains that the cult of the saints had influenced imperial power in the process of the *longue durée*, we must also acknowledge that this influence was reciprocal in certain instances. The episodes relating a struggle for control of holiness shows that imperial and ecclesiastical views in regard to holy relics had become politicised as early as the fourth century.

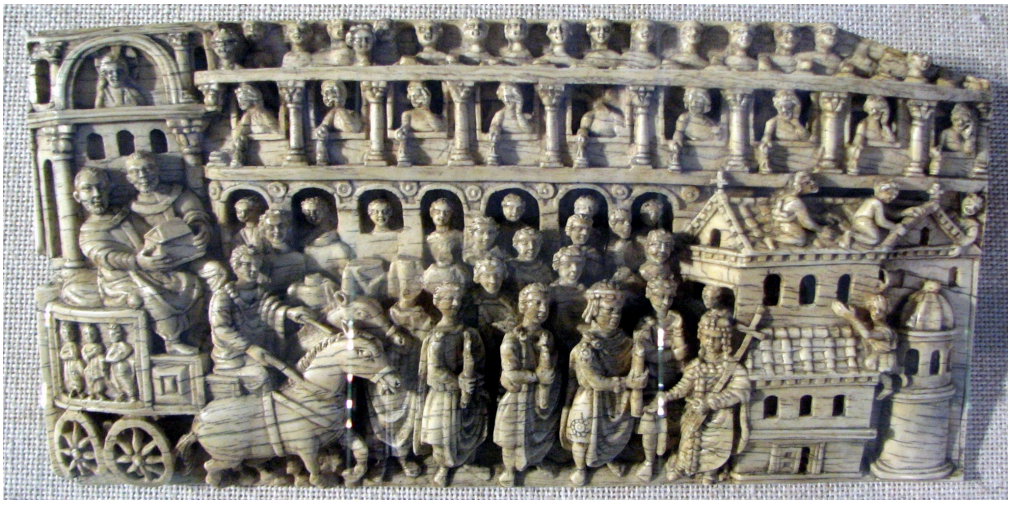

Figure 1: The Translation of Relics, Ivory, Trier Cathedral Treasury.
(Image © thebyzantinelegacy)

To commemorate and preserve the memory of their 'special' dead Christians developed hagiographic works. These narratives provided additional support in legitimising the pious lives and miraculous deeds of the saints. The earliest example of the new Christian

[52] Kritzinger 2011: 45; MacCormack 1981: 64-65. The bishop Ambrose, for example, sent relics to Victricius, the bishop of Rouen, who commemorated their ceremonial arrival in a sermon in which he eulogises their ceremonious arrival into the city. Clark 1999: 378.

[53] The emperor Theodosius I fashioned the arrival of the relics of the former Constantinopolitan bishop Paul into the capital in the style of an imperial *adventus*. Elm 2014: 175. An ivory plaque from Trier, possibly stemming from a reliquary casket, also depicts what is believed to be a ceremonial procession involving relics in the form of an *adventus*. Thuno 2018: 155; Kritzinger 2011: 44-47. The scene on the plaque shows the emperor leading a procession of two bishops seated in a carriage through the gate of a city, while holding what appears to be a casket possibly containing relics. The date and the figures depicted on the ivory are debated. But a sixth century date has been attributed based on stylistic representation. The provenance remains obscure. Thuno 2018: 155; Spain 1977: 279-305. Compare also the passage in the *Chronicle* of John Malalas describing the ceremonial deposition of relics involving the patriarch Menas of Constantinople. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.109. The sermon of Victricius, the bishop of Rouen, commemorating the arrival of relics provides another example of the ceremony of *adventus* used in this context. Clark 1999: 378..The relics were sent by the bishop Ambrose of Milan.

biography of a holy person concerns the life of the desert father and first ascetic Anthony of Egypt written in the fourth century.[54] As hagiography continuously developed during the following two centuries, those authors adhering to the literary genre produced biographies dedicated to a wide range of Christian holy people, such as monks, bishops, and churchmen, who adhered to the various 'Christianities' of the eastern Roman empire. Through the presentation of inspirational stories and legends of particular holy individuals, the *Lives* virtually created a Christian 'mythology' in which the praise of particular saints, bishops or other Christian holy figures accompanied the various cults dedicated to them.[55]

The development of the cult of the saints during Late Antiquity demonstrates how certain Christian individuals, whom the people believed to possess a special relationship with God, were deemed as holy and became subject to veneration by Christians. The cult of the saints developed due to a gradual evolution in mentalities and behaviour surrounding the concept of the holy, and an evolution of Roman perspectives in regard to the 'special' dead. Christians not only honoured and venerated holy people through pilgrimage to sanctuaries and shrines, public celebrations, and the progressive integration of the 'special' dead within the civic cultures and ecclesiastical sphere in urban areas, but also the development of hagiographic literature to commemorate their deeds. Finally, the development of the cult of saints and the veneration of their relics inevitably involved patronage from the imperial regimes. Thus as we will see in the following section, it soon became an instrument to promote the religious agenda of the Church, and a political instrument for displaying the religious ideology of an imperial regime, particularly those of Justinian and his successors.

2.2 The politicisation of the cult of saints

We continue with a brief analysis of the relationship between the cult of saints, their relics, and imperial ideology by examining their integration within the political sphere of the empire. As the cult of the saints gradually developed during Late Antiquity, its growing popularity within the eastern Roman cultural landscape inevitably attracted the attention and patronage from the imperial regimes. The veneration of saints and their relics became an integral part of Christian veneration practices. But for the imperial regimes, the cults of the saints and their relics contributed to securing the sixth-century emperors' religious authority

[54] For more recent studies on Saint Anthony, the desert fathers, and the beginning of monasticism, see Peter H. Görg's *The Desert Fathers: Saint Anthony and the Beginnings of Monasticism* published in 2022, and Peter Anthony Mena's *Place and Identity in the Lives of Antony, Paul, and Mary of Egypt: Desert as Borderland* published in 2019.

[55] For a detailed discussion on the story-telling aspect of Christian literature, see Rapp 1998: 431-448; Cameron 1991: 89-119; Delehaye 1907.

and their portrayal as pious Christians. This section demonstrates this relationship through imperial church building activities dedicated to specific saints.

Church building programmes represented an active way in which emperors lent their patronage of the growth of the cult of saints during the sixth century. Throughout the sixth century, Justinian and his successors embellished the eastern Roman landscape with numerous religious buildings dedicated to the virgin Mary and various saints as a way to elevate their religious and political prestige. The emperor Justinian initiated a hitherto unprecedented religious building programme across the empire with the construction of churches dedicated to numerous saints and to the holy wisdom of God.[56] His successor Justin II also proved to be an avid builder of churches dedicated to the virgin Mary and specific saints.[57] As an example, Justinian rebuilt the church of the saints Cosmas and Damian in the capital as a gesture of gratitude after he was miraculously cured by them.[58] This event was commemorated by Procopius in his panegyric dedicated to Justinian and so reflects the emperor's ideological desire to forge closer connection with the saints. Soon after its restoration by Justinian, his successor Justin II continued to provide his patronage for the cult of the saints Cosmas and Damian.[59]

Church building was also a way in which the imperial regime could distinguish itself from other political rivals on account of their pious works. Early in his reign, Justinian built a church dedicated to the martyrs and military saints, Sergius and Bacchus, in the capital, which according to Procopius stood alongside the church of saints Peter and Paul.[60] This church, according to Anthony Kaldellis, was built as a riposte to the church of saint Polyeuctus, built by the patrician Anicia Juliana, a member of the previous Theodosian and Valentinian dynasties.[61] The church itself was reportedly built to accommodate the liturgical needs of Miaphysite Christians housed in the Palace of Hormisdas fleeing the persecutions.[62]

[56] Constantinople alone saw the construction of more than thirty churches, shrines, and sanctuaries, among which the Hagia Sophia stood as the largest and most influential. In the Holy Land, Justinian built a church to the Theotokos on Mount Zion, the highest point of the city, connected to the church of Holy Sepulchre by a newly enlarged road. Proc. *De Aed*, 5.6.1; Cyr. Scyth. *Lives*, 71-72. At the foot of Mount Sinai, he built a monastery which supposedly enclosed the burning bush seen by Moses. Cormack 2000: 49; Proc. *De Aed*, 5.8.1-9.

[57] In the capital, Justin II embellished the church of Saint Mary at Blachernae by adding two arches giving the church a cruciform shape. *Anth. Gr*, 1.2-3. In addition, he built the church of the holy Apostles Paul and Peter in the orphanage. Furthermore, he provided his patronage to the construction of a new patriarchate next to the Hagia Sophia. Cameron 1979: 8. He also rebuilt the church of the Apostles in the Triconch near the Capitol. Theoph. *Chron*, AM 6064.

[58] Booth 2011: 115; Cameron 1985: 88; Proc. *De Aed*, 1.6.6-7.

[59] Booth 2011: 115, 117; *Anth. Gr*, 1.11; Theoph. *Chron*, AM 6062.

[60] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.4.1-8.

[61] Kaldellis 2024: 259; Croke 2006: 53-62; Bardill 2000: 1-11. For a contemporary description of the church of saint Polyeuctus, see *Anth. Gr*, 1.10.

[62] Croke 2006: 32-46.

Thus, its construction had both political and religious motives; it functioned as a safe location for persecuted Christians, and served to bolster Justinian and Theodora's reputations against potential political rivals.

Church building activity was also a way through which the emperor Justinian and the empress Theodora enlisted the favour of specific saints for protection. The church of the saints Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople featured an inscription detailing the special relationship between the imperial regime and the saints. The inscription reads:

> Other sovereigns have honoured dead men whose labour was unprofitable, but our sceptered Justinian, fostering piety, honours with a splendid abode the Servant of Christ, Begetter of all things, Sergius; whom not the burning breath of fire, nor the sword, nor any other constraint of torments disturbed; but who endured to be slain for the sake of Christ, the God, gaining by his blood heaven as his home. May he in all things guard the rule of the sleepless sovereign and increase the power of the God-crowned Theodora whose mind is adorned with piety, whose constant toil lies in unsparing efforts to nourish the destitute.[63]

The inscription demonstrates that the imperial couple were keen on creating a link between them and holy figures on account of their close connection to 'Christ, the God'. It appears to be calling on the saints Sergius and Bacchus to guard the rule of the 'sceptred' emperor and the 'God-crowned' empress. According to Jonathan Bardill, the dedication to Justinian and Theodora carved around the nave of the church is reminiscent of Anicia Julian's invocation for the saints to protect her own family.[64] The inscription shows that the imperial couple provided active patronage to specific saints with whom they wished to associate their regime for either ideological purposes or religious prestige; in this particular case, the empress Theodora provided her support for the construction of the church as she was a patron of the Miaphysite Christian community in the east.

Likewise, according to Brian Croke, although devotion to the Archangel Michael began in the fourth century, it only became firmly entrenched in imperial ideology during the reign of the emperor Justinian.[65] During this time, the Archangel Michael 'came to prominence as *archistratēgos* the emperor's special heavenly protector and defender against enemies internal and external.'[66] Through church building programmes dedicated to Michael,

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[63] Inscription translated by Cyril Mango in "The Church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus at Constantinople and the Alleged Tradition of Octagonal Palatine Churches" published in 1972. For both the Greek script and translation, see also Croke 2006. On the manuscript tradition of the inscription in the church of saints Sergius and Bachus, see Silvio Giuseppe Mercatti's *Epigraphica (1-4), Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia 3*, pp. 197-205, published in 1925.
[64] Bardill 2000: 2-4.
[65] Croke 2024: 493.
[66] Croke 2024: 494.

military oaths sworn to the emperor invoking the Archangel, nomenclature, and liturgical celebrations and feast in the ecclesiastical calendar commemorating the Archangel Michael directly and indirectly promoted the cult.[67] Together, Brian Croke write, 'these disparate elements illustrate how, as the all-powerful *archistratēgos*, the Archangel Michael came to represent the heavenly guarantor of Justinian's imperial power, his victoriousness, and his personal security, as well as his doctrinal orthodoxy.'[68] The cult of the Archangel Michael was consolidated during the reign of Justinian, and the emperor subsequently exploited the sacred prestige of the Archangel and his prominence in the holy hierarchy to secure his authority in both political and religious affairs.

From the sixth century onwards, the eastern Roman emperors established themselves as the safekeepers, defenders, and distributors of holy relics.[69] The emperors of the Justinianic dynasty became more involved in the acquisition of relics of saints. As an example, according to the *Miracles of Demetrius*, the emperor Maurice attempted to obtain the relics of Demetrius from Thessalonica.[70] It appears that there was a growing consciousness of the imperial family in regard to the possession of relics in the second half of the sixth century. According to Phil Booth, there was a clear attempt under Justinian's successors to fashion the capital as a veritable *hagiopolis*, a city of saints, in which the emperor occupied the centre position.[71] The possession of relics provided additional spiritual prestige to the secular imperial office.[72] They provided a clear demonstration of the emperor's ties with divine powers so often communicated in imperial propaganda.[73]

By the sixth century, under the reigns of Justinian and his successors, the cult of the saints had expanded beyond its original purpose of paying homage to holy figures. The cult of saints now featured prominently within the political agendas of the imperial regimes. Church construction, for instance, had become an instrument for the imperial regimes to

[67] Croke 2024: 496-509.
[68] Croke 2024: 496.
[69] Klein 2004: 284; Mergiali-Sahas 2001: 46-47.
[70] In addition, the empress Constantina corresponded with Pope Gregory in Rome to have the head of saint Paul transferred to the imperial palace in Constantinople. Maas 2010: 145; Pope Gregory the Great, *Letter*, 30. Also, the later *History* of Pseudo-Sebeos reports that the emperor obtained the relics of Daniel from Susa. A piece of the True Cross was also transferred to the capital from Apamea by Justin II. The translation occurred decades after the fragment of the cross had performed a miracle during the Persian attack on the city during the reign of Justinian. Men. Proc. *Hist*, fr.17; Evagr. *HE*, 4.26; cf. Proc. *Wars*, 2.11.16-20.
[71] Booth 2018: 143-144.
[72] According to Procopius, the relics of the Apostles Andrew, Luke, and Timothy had been revealed to Justinian in a dream while he was rebuilding the Church of the Holy Apostles. Cameron 1985: 88; Proc. *De Aed*, 1.4.20-22. Likewise, the relics of the forty martyrs of Sebaste, held in Hagia Irene, were miraculously revealed to the emperor when the foundations of the church were dug. Cameron 1985: 88; Proc. *De Aed*, 1.7.3-6. Justin II is also said to have buried the relics of several monastic saints in the church of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul in the orphanage. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, 217.24-29.
[73] Klein 2004: 284.

display their connection with the divine. Finally, the gradual association of the cult of saints with the political institutions of the eastern Roman empire inevitably expanded its popularity and with that it integrated new elements, some of which originate in the traditions of prior pagan cults such as the veneration of images. Thus, as we will see in the following sections, the likeness of holy figures soon became a prominent feature in Christian veneration practices, and with that a cult dedicated to holy images and icons developed.

2.3 The rise of icon veneration

One of the greatest challenges for academics studying the rise of icon veneration in the eastern Roman empire is the question of when eastern Romans began to venerate Christian holy images as a widespread practice and when a cult dedicated to holy icons was firmly established. In light of this challenge, this portion of the chapter traces the evolution of early Christian iconography and their subsequent veneration between the fourth and early seventh centuries. The following sections examine several circumstances, including changes in religious mentalities, artistic developments, and changes in the cultural context that influenced this cultural development.

The earliest testimony attesting to the veneration of Christian icons dates back as early as the second and third centuries, but evidence supporting a more widespread practice of icon veneration across the eastern Roman empire dates to the late fifth and sixth centuries. Evidence also points to the rise in icon veneration coinciding with a resurgence of imperial themes and motifs in imperial art during the sixth century that possessed previous connections with imperial cult veneration prior to the fifth century. Thus, it is necessary to analyse the rise of icons and their cult before we associate their religious significance and devotional characteristics with sixth-century imperial iconography in the following chapter.

Since Christianity developed within a classical pagan context, Greco-Roman or pagan religion will naturally have influenced the development of Christian icons. Therefore, it is imperative to take into account while studying the evolution of early Christian art and the veneration of icons the fact that Christianity adopted and adapted many features and characteristics of classical and pagan art to serve a new purpose. Christian Rome was a continuation of pagan Rome and previous mentalities and practices continued to influence, in different capacities, the cultural landscape of the eastern Roman empire.

2.3.1 Religious mentalities:

We begin our analysis of the rise of icon veneration with an evaluation of eastern Roman religious mentalities and behaviour during a period of recurring disasters. This section aims to trace changing social patterns in regards to religious belief and devotion in the context of several disasters throughout the sixth century, particularly major earthquakes and recurring bouts of plague.[74] The devastation left behind by earthquakes in Antioch and Constantinople captured the minds of contemporary authors who provide detailed analyses of people's reactions and behaviour. But the advent of the plague, sweeping across the empire at regular intervals of about fifteen years, left perhaps the biggest mark on contemporary minds.[75] The sources reported much destruction and many deaths on account of these disasters.[76] Their detailed records of the events enable the modern historian to trace social patterns in eastern Roman society during these times.

The disasters of the sixth century impacted religious mentalities, thoughts and expressions, across the empire in two main directions. On the one hand, several sources attest to an increase in religious expression and social welfare. Agathias, for instance, reported that while people were in a state of fear and terror, prayers and hymns of supplications were heard across the city. Prominent citizens also distributed free blankets and food to those in need and numerous donations were brought to the churches.[77] But, according to the same sources, the extreme religious behaviour lasted as long as the terrors were still in the minds of the people,

[74] Other disasters such as famine, floods, and insect infestations occurred across the eastern Roman empire and beyond which affected contemporary mentalities and behaviour. *Iust. Nov*, 32, 33, 34, for instance, attest to a widespread famine across the Balkans during the sixth century. On this, see also Dionysios Stathakopoulos' *Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: a Systematic Survey of Subsistence Crises and Epidemics* published in 2004. In the eastern provinces, a locust infestation ruined crop fields to the extent that small yields caused bread prices to soar. Bell 2013: 61-62.

[75] Evagrius calculated the cycle of the plague according to the indictions. Evagr. *HE*, 4.29.

[76] Procopius and John Malalas estimated the death toll for the 526 earthquake in Antioch to be between 250,000 and 300,000. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 17.16; Proc. *Wars*, 2.14.7. However recent studies have been sceptical of the number of casualties recorded in the sources. For debates on the casualties of the earthquake in Antioch, see Borsch 2023: 237; Mordechai 2019: 30; Meier 2003: 347-348. The second earthquake in Antioch in 528 supposedly killed 5000 people. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.27; Evagr. *HE*, 4.6. Theophanes provides a precise number of 4870 deaths. Theoph. *Chron*, AM 6021. Meanwhile, the approximate death toll of the earthquake in Constantinople in 557 is unknown, but according to Agathias a large number of people perished, among them one man of senatorial rank. Agath. *Hist*, 5.3.10. The total death toll of the Justinian plague has been hotly debated in academia. Drawing on the model of the Black Death, estimates for the mortality of the Justinian plague range between 30% and 60% of the total Mediterranean population in the sixth and seventh centuries. For debates surrounding the scale of mortality of the Justinian plague, see Mordechai and Eisenberg 2019: 6; Meier 2016b: 271; Evans 1996: 160; Allen 1979: 11. For an in-depth discussion on the contribution of scholars over the past two decades in regard to the short and long-term effects of the plague of Justinian, see Sarris 2021.

[77] Agath. *Hist*, 5.5.4-6. John Malalas also reported that people from various cities responded to the earthquakes by holding processions of prayers in mourning, particularly in Constantinople in which prayers lasted for several days. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.27, 18.124. Procopius reported that many received visions or dreams of demons or entities taking human forms while being sick from the plague. Those who met these creatures attempted to invoke holy names to exorcise them, while others took refuge in churches, or in their rooms fearing that the demons would take them. Proc., *Wars*, 2.22.10-14.

and once those had passed, they reverted to their old ways.[78] At the imperial level, religious mentalities also intensified and were expressed particularly through ceremonial and building projects.[79] We can conclude from the sources that the sixth-century emperors were consistent in their Christian sentiments and expressions throughout the century. But we may also conclude that the intensification of religious expression amongst their subjects may have been a temporary solution for them to gain salvation during hard times.

On the other hand, the sources also attest to some people expressing non-Christian behaviour and thought. John of Ephesus, for instance, reported that residents in a Palestinian village reverted briefly back to the veneration of pagan images.[80] Using this evidence, Mischa Meier argued that there was presumably a trend towards repaganisation during these times.[81] It is doubtful that such a trend occurred, but the evidence does indeed demonstrate that Christianity was not yet secured in the Roman east. Some Christians, the sources recorded, had even questioned their belief in God during these times. The ecclesiastical historian Evagrius, for example, described how the loss of his family to the plague over the years led him to question whether God was just.[82] Reactions to the disasters that hit the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century were thus multiple. But we can nonetheless determine two main directions of religious mentalities and behaviour. Some either intensified their religious convictions, while the religious beliefs of others faltered.

The majority of eastern Romans, particularly the imperial regimes, during this period believed that God played a fundamental role in everyday life. Several sources reported that many held the belief that God was exacting vengeance on them for their sins and transgressions.[83] This belief becomes particularly evident in the imperial legislation of

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[78] Proc. *Wars*, 2.23.14-16.

[79] John Malalas recorded that Justin I showed his sympathy for the people of Antioch during Pentecost after an earthquake by entering "the church without his crown, weeping and wearing a purple cloak" along with all the senators. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 17.16. Translation by Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys and Roger Scott. A similar response is seen following the major earthquake in Constantinople. Justinian did not wear the imperial diadem for thirty days, and after the dome of the Hagia Sophia collapsed because of a crack in the structure, the emperor commissioned its reconstruction almost immediately, and celebrated its completion five years later with a ceremonial inauguration during the week of Christmas in 562. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.124. See in particular the celebratory poem delivered by Paul the Silentiary on the occasion of the inauguration ceremony. Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*. Justin I and his nephew Justinian made considerable efforts to rebuild the city of Antioch. During this process, Justinian commissioned the construction of several new churches including the church of the Theotokos, that of Archangel Michael, and that of the saints Cosmas and Damian. De Giorgi and Eger 2021: 203. Justinian later renamed the city of Antioch Theoupolis, city of God. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.29.

[80] Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, *Chronicle of Zuqnin Part III*, 85-86 (pp. 79-80).

[81] Meier 2016b: 283.

[82] Evagr. *HE*, 4.29. Saint Symeon the Younger reportedly sent Evagrius a letter asking him to abstain from such thoughts. Evagr. *HE*, 6.23. According to the *Life of Symeon*, Evagrius held these blasphemous thoughts because another man who was a pagan did not lose his children. Parker 2022: 151; *V. Sym. Iun*, 233.

[83] John Malalas speaks of the wrath of God, or his compassion with regard to the plague. Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.92, 18.112. The *Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* speaks of the power of God in reference to the plague. Maas

Justinian in regard to the topics of natural disasters and the plague. One Novel, for example, speaks of the anger of God for the people's licentiousness, and behaviour contrary to nature itself, a reference to homosexuals, whose behaviour was believed to be attributed to the workings of the devil, thus angering God.[84] The imperial regime, it seems, feared retribution from God on account of their subjects' behaviour. The belief that God was the source of these calamities also influenced contemporary authors to write about the events from an apocalyptic lens.[85] Contemporary sources reflected the widespread belief that God was a central figure in eastern Roman society by inserting the calamities of the period in a religious framework. Authors perhaps reflected on disasters that had occurred earlier or during their own times and hoped to influence the religious behaviour of their contemporaries or the next generation.

In contrast with this belief, Procopius carefully argued in his *Secret History* that God's punishment came not from the wickedness of the people, but from the emperor's own demonic nature or his loss of favour from God.[86] This statement by Procopius went against the ideological framework of Justinian's reign, that the emperor was chosen by God to rule and collaborated with Him to the benefit of the empire. Even if the *Secret History* was never published, Procopius nonetheless reflected eschatological beliefs when it comes to the idea that God withdrew his support of the emperor.[87] Procopius also mentioned in the *Wars* that the emperor fell ill from the plague. This episode further reinforced Procopius' premise that God no longer supported the emperor. Yet, he stated in his *Wars* that God was the source of the calamities, more particularly in reference to the plague, and not the emperor's wickedness.[88] Despite Procopius' reliance on Thucydides for his description of the plague, it does not diminish the religious framework of the narrative. Although the author's genuine sentiments are difficult to assess in this case, his works nonetheless reflect two common beliefs of the period in regard to natural disasters and the plague.

It is difficult to properly assess how these events in the sixth century affected the religious mentalities of the people during a time of cultural change. Mischa Meier, developing his theory from the perspective of the *longue durée*, argued that the consequences of the plague, for example, on contemporary mentalities was the deciding factor, following a

2010: 309; *Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion*, 52. Agathias recorded that the people of Constantinople attributed the death of a certain member of the senatorial rank during the earthquake of Constantinople to his own wickedness. Agath. *Hist*, 5.4.2-3.

[84] *Iust. Nov*, 77.1.

[85] As did Gregory of Tours, for instance, in reference to the plague. Maas 2010: 309; Greg. Tur. *HF*, 5.34.

[86] Proc. *SH*, 18.36-45.

[87] Proc. *Wars*, 2.23.20.

[88] Proc. *Wars*, 2.22.2.

series of catastrophic events over several decades, in the division between two epochs, the classical period of the Roman empire and Christian Byzantium.[89] He further argued that the series of disasters must be interpreted against the background of very specific eschatological expectations, thus impacting the development of Christian mentalities.[90] The calamities of the sixth century did not in themselves trigger the changes in religious behaviour and mentalities during this period, but they indeed clearly illustrate the effects of Christianity in the eastern Roman empire. The Christianisation process that occurred over the last two centuries becomes more evident during these times of hardship as many turned towards religion for protection. This religious behaviour had an impact on Christian veneration practices, whether they were in the forms of prayer or acts of piety.

The catastrophes of the sixth century exposed several issues in the cultural fabric of eastern Roman society. The myriad of reactions witnessed during these bouts of hardship demonstrate that although a Christian mentality and culture was perhaps dominant in the major cultural centres of the empire and definitely supported by the imperial regime, its supremacy was not yet secure, and in some places, for example, in rural areas, it had the potential to be abandoned or rejected.[91] Pagan worship and classical culture were still present and influential enough to have ecclesiastical men doubt their faith and to make people turn on their church. Meanwhile, however, the recurring disasters also pushed many people towards intensified religious practices. Furthermore, the interpretation of the calamities of the period have largely been inserted within a religious framework. Whether the narrative was predominantly secular or ecclesiastical, God was the primary source of the disasters.[92] Thus, the recurring catastrophes appeared to have also generated severe confusion within the eastern Roman cultural landscape during the sixth century.

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[89] Meier 2016b: 282. For a different view surrounding the effects of the plague on eastern Roman mentalities and culture, see Mordechai and Eisenberg 2022; Mordechai and Eisenberg 2020; Mordechai and Eisenberg 2019; Mordechai and Eisenberg, et al. 2019.

[90] Meier 2020: 187. See also Meier 2003.

[91] Stoclet 2007: 136.

[92] Few exceptions exist. John the Lydian's work *De Ostensis* treats the omens and superstitions taught by Romans and Etruscans of antiquity, but adapted for contemporary times during the sixth century. He treats signs such as astrology, natural disasters and meteorological events, which he seems to accept, and presents the origins and the progress of the art of divination from antiquity until his time. Bandy 1982: xxix. The art of divination attempts to obtain 'clairvoyance' from methods of the 'occult' (occult for the Christians). Thus, John the Lydian attempts, with his work, to present another way of explaining events rooted in antiquity, instead of attributing them to God like his contemporaries, who seem to have readily accepted that God was the source of all calamities. Finally though, he does not attempt to explain the cause of the disasters or meteorological events themselves.

2.3.2 Early Christian art:

We continue our analysis of the rise of icon veneration with a survey of some developments in early Christian art throughout Late Antiquity. This section aims to trace the evolution of the Christian sacred icon in the context of the pluralistic and complex artistic tradition of the Roman empire.[93] It will become clear by the end of this section that the development of the Christian sacred icon was intrinsically connected to earlier artistic developments across the Roman empire. Since the development of iconography linked Roman emperors and citizens across different periods and of varying beliefs, classical or Christian, to a shared cultural heritage, it is therefore essential to understand the development of Christian iconography in its two contexts, classical and Christian, before attempting to analyse their place in the context of devotion.

An icon, or *εἰκών* in Greek, as it appears in the context of Christianity, refers to a religious work of art. Icons typically consist of paintings, frescoes or mosaics portraying one or two individuals, or narrative scenes. For Christians, those represented in icons were typically holy figures, symbolic animals such as the lamb, or symbols associated with Christian worship.[94] According to Katherine Marsengill, two types of icon proliferated during Late Antiquity: powerful icons and miraculous icons.[95] The former were images that were produced and used in veneration. In this category, we may also include images of the cross since they were produced and identified as a source of salvation and protection.[96] The latter were images thought to be made miraculously 'without human hands' and venerated as authentic images of Christ and Mary. In sum, Christian icons refer to images capturing the likeness of holy figures for whom Christians showed great respect.

Christian iconography in Late Antiquity shared many thematic and stylistic similarities with earlier and contemporary cultural traditions. Roman funerary images, for instance, had a significant stylistic, thematic, and psychological impact on the development of Christian iconography. Funerary images, Katie Rask argues, addressed both the heroic or divine status of living and deceased humans and the transition and transformation from one state to another.[97] These images reflected religious sentiments and were crucial for the memorialisation of an individual following their death. They facilitated the creation of self-identity and linked the deceased to a particular religious community allowing people to

[93] Roman art was pluralistic and complex as Roman identity was shared by peoples of multiple communities with different beliefs. Leatherbury 2021: 464; Elsner 2018: 20-26; Elsner 2006: 271. See also Couzin 2018.
[94] Marsengill 2011: 58.
[95] Marsengill 2018: 202-205.
[96] Greatrex and Mitchell 2023: 440.
[97] Rask 2021: 506-507.

celebrate their virtues. Roman funerary images, particularly those in Egypt, may have also influenced the development of the holy icon.[98] A few sixth to seventh-century encaustic Christian icons on wooden panels located in the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai testify to the adaptation of stylistic and thematic characteristics of earlier funerary images found in tombs in Egypt for Christian religious needs (figure 2).[99]

Figure 2: Encaustic icons on panel of Christ Pantocrator, The All-Holy Theotokos and the Christ child flanked by the saints George and Theodore, and saint Peter, Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai, Egypt. (Image @ Centre on religion and culture at Fordham University)

The panel icons in the monastery of Saint Catherine show continuity between classical artistic motifs as well as an adaptation of earlier traditions for Christian use.[100] According to André Grabar, the stylistic representation of the Sinai icons of Christ, and the enthroned icon of Mary surrounded by the saints, derive from official imperial portraits and dignitaries.[101] Furthermore, he argues that the icon of saint Peter reproduces the shape of consular diptychs. Above the image, three medallions featuring Mary, Christ and an Apostle mimic the medallions above the diptychs.[102] Here, Christ replaces the emperor, Mary replaces the empress, and the Apostle, the consul of the year. Grabar concludes that evidence of

[98] Marsengill 2018: 191; Marsengill 2011: 56.
[99] In terms of style, the sixth and seventh-century encaustic icons of Christ Pantocrator, Mary, Saint Peter, and the saints Sergius and Bacchus located in the monastery of Saint Catherine in Egypt (figure 2), were produced using hot wax, a similar technique as Roman portraits and masks used for veneration purposes in the cult of ancestors. Trilling 1983: 301; Grabar 1967: 185. They remain the earliest instances of icons from which researchers can reconstruct the origins and development of earlier panel icon painting techniques.
[100] Robin Jensen points out that artists working for Christians began to develop new traditions and styles from earlier Roman iconography to suit their artistic and religious needs. See Jensen 2015.
[101] Grabar 1967: 186.
[102] Grabar 1967: 186.

transposition practices allows for the possibility that Christian icon makers adapted pagan or secular images to Christian themes.[103] Yet it remains a challenge to trace the origins and developments of the early Christian icon with complete accuracy based on the limited surviving evidence.

As church construction intensified across the empire, mosaics, paintings, and textile materials depicting Christian narrative scenes and holy figures gradually decorated their interior. As an example, Paul the Silentiary described how by the second half of the sixth century, the Hagia Sophia was adorned with images of Christ, Mary, the angels, and the apostles.[104] Unlike pagan temples, churches were places for Christians to gather and celebrate the liturgy in the house of God. Christian iconography proved useful in assisting illiterate worshipers who could still participate in the liturgy by following the images depicting scenes from the life of Christ (figures 3-4).[105] Biblical narrative scenes, much like the earlier pagan mythological cycles, functioned in a similar manner to Roman rhetoric. Their arrangement in Churches in combination with the liturgy allowed bishops and priests to transmit religious ideas and beliefs to Christian audiences across the Mediterranean.[106]

[103] Grabar 1967: 186. Sean Leatherbury also argues that artistic similarities between multiple eastern Roman communities in Late Antiquity draw deeply on the client-based production practices of certain types of art which adapted various themes, motifs and subject matter for a plethora of clients including pagans, Jews, and Christians. Leatherbury 2021: 464-467. An often cited example is the production of sarcophagi. Sarcophagi were not Christian by nature, but by the fourth century, workshops began to include biblical narratives scenes for Christian clients. Likewise, glass and stone-carving workshops began to include Christian narratives and figures. The British museum preserves two glasses from the fourth century, one depicting a couple with the figure of Hercules hovering in front of them in the centre, the other depicting the saints Paul and Peter with the figure of Christ hovering in the centre dressed as a Roman. Leatherbury 2021: 465-466.
[104] Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 682-720, 755-806.
[105] Leatherbury 2021: 471.
[106] Leatherbury 2021: 472. See also Meyer and Elsner 2014.

Figure 3: Early sixth century, Nave mosaic, Trial before the Sanhedrin, Church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. (Image © thebyzantinelegacy)

Figure 4: Early sixth century, Nave mosaic, The kiss of Judas, Church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. (Image © thebyzantinelegacy)

The gradual prominence of the Archangel Michael in imperial ideology during the sixth century made it difficult to avoid a human representation of the angel. Until the reign of Justinian, Christians, according to Brian Croke, wrestled 'with the place of angels and how to visualize them, above all how to represent them as purely spiritual beings.'[107] During this time the Archangel Michael gradually took an anthropomorphic appearance in iconographic representations. He was depicted as a winged male holding in his right hand the globe

[107] Croke 2024: 509.

surmounted by the cross, and in his left hand, the angel holding a long sceptre or staff.[108] This manner of depiction resembled eastern Roman imperial iconographic representations as the globe surmounted by the cross and the sceptre were symbols of imperial power.[109] Images of the Archangel Michael presented in imperial fashion adorned several churches across the empire. Along with the angel Gabriel, Michael was represented in imperial costume and as a guardian of the virgin Mary either as a guardsman or court official (figure 5).[110] The representation of the Archangel Michael in the imperial costume further cemented the connection between him and the emperor, and his role as the imperial legitimiser. It was also not uncommon during this period for the virgin Mary to be depicted wearing purple robes, as well as the purple imperial robes (figure 6).

Figure 5: Early sixth century, Apse mosaic, The Archangel Michael, Church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy. (Image @ alto_basso_medioevo)

[108] Croke 2024: 509-510. This type of depiction of the angels replaced the traditional winged *Victoria* on coins.
[109] More on this concept in Chapter 3 section, 4.
[110] Croke 2024: 510.

Figure 6: Early-sixth century, mosaic, Enthroned Mary with the Christ Child flanked by the Angels, Church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy

Before the end of the sixth century, it appears that there was no uniform way of depicting Christ. Two forms of depiction were preferred during Late Antiquity: a youthful feminine Christ, depicted with short curly hair, characteristic of the youthful saviour gods such as Apollo and Hermes (figure 7), and an enthroned, robed, and bearded Christ modelled on the images of Zeus, the father and king of the gods.[111] Theodore Lector in his sixth century *Ecclesiastical History*, of which excerpts are preserved in the works of John of Damascus, relates that a pagan's hands withered after he chose to depict Christ in his bearded form rather than the more 'authentic' youthful form.[112] The anecdote testifies to the creation of more than one version of Christ's likeness, and demonstrates also that debates surrounding correct representation were already taking place. By the sixth century, however, despite the anecdote of Theodore favouring the youthful depiction of Christ, the bearded icon of Christ had become the standard practice in Eastern Christianity.[113] Yet both depictions 'emphasised the

[111] Marsengill 2011: 56; Jensen 2010: 500.
[112] Theodorus Lector, *HE*, 1.15.
[113] Jensen 2010: 501.

wonder of the incarnation and the salvation wrought by God in His human form'.[114] This was a firm statement to Christ's role as an intercessor between heaven and earth.

Figure 7: Mid-sixth century, Apse mosaic, youthful Christ handing the martyr's crown to Saint Vitalis, Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. (Image @ ravennamosaici)

The frontal pose was a commonly used technique to depict Christian holy figures. The bearded Jesus, for instance, appeared in a frontal pose making direct eye contact with the viewer. According to Robin Jensen, this new composition in Christian iconography invited veneration in the same manner as the images of the earlier Greco-Roman gods.[115] As a result, there was room for potential veneration of the images of the Christian saints. The emperor Justinian also changed the way in which the imperial regime portrayed their image in iconography as he adopted the frontal pose to depict himself and his wife, particularly on coins.[116] Until his reign, imperial images on coins typically depicted a side profile of the emperor or a three-quarter facing bust. As a result, Justinian adapted what appears to be a Christian artistic tradition for a secular function. But the intent behind may perhaps have been religious as the emperor displayed his image in the same manner as Christian holy figures. It

[114] Herrin 2021: 311. By the late seventh century, the correct depiction of Christ in iconography was officially determined. Christ had long been represented as the *Agnus Dei* (lamb of God), who according to the gospel of John, took away the sins of the world. John 1.29, 36. During the fifth and sixth centuries, for instance, Italian churches in Ravenna and Rome featured large scale mosaics of natural and lively motifs, often displaying Christian symbolism such as the Lamb of God. Nearly two centuries later, during the Quinisext council, or the council of Trullo, convened in 692 by the emperor Justinian II, the 82nd canon set the seal of ecclesiastical approval in regards to the trend of depicting holy figures in portraiture. In its decisions, it prohibited the depiction of Christ as a lamb, whilst giving the approval to depict Christ in images. It declares that: "the perfect may be portrayed before the eyes of all even in painting, we decree that the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, Christ our God, is from now on to be represented, even in images, in human form in place of the lamb of old." *The Canons of the Quinisext Council (691/2)*, Canon 82. Translation by R.M Price.

[115] Jensen 2010: 500.

[116] Sarris 2023: 177.

appears that the sixth-century emperors consciously began to feature certain characteristics of Christian icons within their own imperial iconography as they further associate their image with the saints.[117]

Not all iconographic features identified with early Christian art were explicitly Christian from the start. According to Katie Rask: "Religious iconography is now understood to be influenced by a complex interplay of artistic, social, cultural, rhetorical, and historical factors."[118] The halo, for instance, a symbol of holiness typically depicted in icons of Christ, Mary and the saints, also featured in earlier pagan iconography, such as representation of the sun god Helios or Sol Invictus.[119] Likewise, earlier Roman imperial iconography aimed at associating an emperor with the sun gods also featured haloes. Christian emperors later adopted the halo as a symbol of their holiness and piety. Thus, once again, certain characteristics of Greco-Roman iconographic tradition survived well into the sixth century, but were adapted for Christian use. As a result, classical iconography, imperial iconography, and Christian iconography share much in terms of characteristics and artistic tradition. The shared cultural heritage between Greco-Roman and Christian iconography allowed Christians of the eastern Roman empire to display their art in familiar ways so as Christian themes and styles became recognisable by almost every eastern Roman person.

The analysis above shows the development of several basic characteristics and features of early Christian art between the fourth and sixth centuries. During this period, holy icons emerged as a popular medium of cultural expression and identity.[120] Christians adapted earlier Roman iconographic themes, motifs and styles to portray holy figures in familiar ways. Furthermore, this section has demonstrated that there is an inherent idea of veneration associated with the depiction of holy figures since the artistic tradition of Christian icons is closely related to Roman funerary images, Roman imperial portraits, and images of pagan deities. Such images invited veneration by the very nature of their purpose which was to honour a figure to whom the people gave their respect and reverence. Finally, the use and incorporation of holy images within the larger context of Christian worship, particularly in ecclesiastical settings, as visual representations of the narratives spoken during the liturgy, further engages the mind and elevates it to a higher state of contemplation. Through icons, the presence of holy figures could be truly felt by worshippers.

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[117] At the end of the seventh century, the emperor Justinian II further innovated on this stylistic change by displaying his own image in juxtaposition to that of Christ on coins. Both images mirrored each other, as they are shown in the frontal pose style of Christian icons.
[118] Rask 2021; 489.
[119] Leatherbury 2021: 467.
[120] Cormack 2000: 66.

2.3.3 Context of icon veneration:

It is generally believed in academia that a notable increase in icon veneration occurred during the second half of the sixth century. By examining several testimonies involving icons contained in the sources during the age of Justinian and his successors, Ernst Kitzinger has distinguished four categories of references in regard to icons: images as objects of veneration, images which have performed a miracle on behalf of a faithful devotee or on their own in response to an assault, images that protect the collective mass such as entire cities or armies known as *palladia*, and *acheiropoieta* images, or images 'not made by human hands'.[121] According to Kitzinger, the collection of narratives involving the use of icons in the sixth century, taken together, demonstrates 'a tremendous increase and intensification of the cult of images.'[122] This significant growth in cultic behaviour towards icons appears to have lasted until the outbreak of iconoclasm.

Developments in regard to Christian veneration in the eastern Roman landscape occurred from the mid-sixth century onwards as a collateral consequence of the times of hardship. There is an increasing amount of evidence of cult behaviour related to icons in the years following the plague of 541-543, but the majority of this evidence, stemming from textual references, occurs in the context of war.[123] Yet one example points towards the use of icons as a source of healing during the plague as well. The Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon, for instance, relates that an icon of Christ hanging under a cross at the entrance of a shrine of saint John the Baptist cured him of the disease.[124] The sources also incorporate the use and veneration of icons by eastern Romans in matters concerning fertility. For example, the author of the *Life of Eutychius*, Eustratius, records that the oils flowing from the picture of Mary of Sozopolis assisted in blessing a married couple with a new born son.[125]

By looking at the testimonies surrounding the 'appearance' of miraculous icons, Meier further concluded that the insecurities of the period drove eastern Roman society to fundamentally restructure itself for continued survival.[126] The emergence of the miraculous icons, for instance, in the mid-sixth century represents the beginning of a more widespread concept of icon veneration in Late Antiquity. The earliest recorded miraculous icons 'not made by human hands' or *acheiropoietoi*, falls squarely in this period. Two well-known examples include the miraculous image of Christ from Edessa and the image of Christ from

[121] Kitzinger 1954: 95-115.
[122] Kitzinger 1954: 115.
[123] Leppin 2020: 74.
[124] *V. Theodori. Sykeot*, 8.
[125] *V. Eutych*, 1246-1300 (V. 45-46). Also *V. Theodori. Sykeot*, 106, 108.
[126] Meier 2020: 192.

Camuliana. Both images 'appeared' in different contexts, but they were nevertheless sought after for their protective abilities during periods of conflict.

The image of Edessa supposedly captured the true likeness of Christ on a piece of cloth. According to Evagrius, the miraculous image of Christ in the city of Edessa, assisted in the protection of the city during the Persian invasion in 544 by creating a protective shield around it, thus acting as a *palladium*.[127] The existence of the miraculous image of Edessa was carefully integrated within previous narratives as to provide legitimacy for its appearance during the context of war in the mid-sixth century. Prior to Evagrius' account, a few testimonies attest to correspondence, involving letters and in some cases an image, between Christ and Abgar, the king of Edessa during the first century. The first record of the letter from Jesus appears in the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century. Abgar supposedly sent a letter to Jesus requesting his aid to cure his illness.[128] In his reply, Jesus promised to send one of his disciples Thaddaeus of Edessa to cure the king in his place. The late fourth or early fifth-century *Doctrine of Addai* recorded instead that an image of Christ was painted and brought to Edessa to cure the king's illness.[129]

While writing his account on the siege of Edessa, however, Procopius evoked the story of the letter from Jesus, but makes no mention of an image of Christ. Procopius instead attributed the city's safety to the letter, which was afterwards inscribed on the city gate, adding that Jesus had promised Abgar that no Barbarian would take the city.[130] But unlike Procopius, Evagrius evokes the image as the source of protection of the city. This evocation of the miraculous icon of Christ shows the change of attitude in the intervening time between the siege itself and the account of Evagrius. Owing to its origin story, the image of Edessa appears to have become closely tied to the civic life of the city. It occupied an intermediary position between man and God and provided its protection to the city through a miracle during the siege of Edessa. Since miracles represented one of the clearest signs of God's intervention, the episode, then, demonstrates that like relics, God intervened in earthly affairs through holy images.

The image of Christ Camuliana miraculously 'appeared' in a different manner. According to Pseudo-Zachariah, a woman named Hypatia found an image of Christ painted on linen cloth in a garden fountain in the town of Camuliana. She reportedly concealed the

[127] Evagr. *HE*, 4.27. He refers to it as the 'παναγίαν εἰκόνα'.
[128] Euseb. *HE*, 1.13.5, 1.22.
[129] Cameron 1983: 81-83; *Doctrine of Addai*, 13.
[130] Proc. *Wars*, 2.12.20-30. See also Greatrex 2022: 485-492.

image in her veil to show to her instructor.[131] The image was then miraculously imprinted on the veil.[132] One image reportedly made its way to Caesarea in Cappadocia, while the other stayed in the town. One of the two images was afterwards taken in procession around (unspecified) cities in the east during the later years of Justinian's reign to protect them from barbarian attacks.[133] The image of Camuliana, like the image of Edessa, also served as an instrument of protection during times of war by way of ceremonial procession. Thus, the sources attest to a growing awareness of miracles occurring on account of icons and their active participation in civic life.

The emergence or appearance of miraculous images, as well as the basic elements of cultic behaviour in regard to holy images in general, perhaps developed in reaction to the increasingly Christianising mentalities during the hardships of the first half of the sixth century. People from the provinces during these times had seemingly developed sentiments of distrust towards the imperial authorities as they felt abandoned. Precisely in accordance with this view, John Haldon writes that:

> Late Roman culture demonstrates at this time a loss of confidence or trust in the traditional symbols of authority and the establishment, a drift away from the symbolism of the heaven-endowed earthly empire—the imperial cult and hierarchies of state and Church— towards embodiments of heavenly power of a less fallible nature: the cults of saints, the cult of the Virgin, the icon symbols, in short, of heavenly intercession.[134]

Thus Christian cults of veneration, in part, developed as a result of changes in mentalities from the eastern Roman people.

During the mid-sixth century, amidst further conflicts with Persia, and renewed conflicts under Justin II lasting until the end of the reign of Maurice, spiritual objects such as relics and miraculous icons gradually started to creep into the narratives alongside the accounts of increased prayer, hymns and Christian charity during periods of hardship. It appears that when imperial authorities failed to prevent additional hardship on their people or lessen the impacts of these situations, Christian holy objects acted as further sources of comfort.[135] Finally, it appears that Christian icons were born out of a necessity for spiritual

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[131] Stephenson 2022: 335; Mango 1986: 114; Ps-. Zach. *HE*, 12.4.
[132] Ps-. Zach. *HE*, 12.4.
[133] During the reign of Maurice, the icon of Christ from Camuliana was also paraded in front of the troops by Philippicus and Priscus, once against the Persians to boost troop morale before battle, and once in the Balkans to appease the mutiny initiated by the troops at the news of the pay decrease around the time of Easter. Leppin 2020: 75; Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 2.3.4-7, 3.1.10-12. In addition, the image was paraded in Constantinople around the Theodosian walls during the Avar siege of 626 alongside the relics of the virgin Mary. George of Pisidia praised the image as a cause for the victory in a poem. Geo. Pisid. *Bell. avar*, 1-9.
[134] Haldon 1997: 37-38; cf. Haldon 1997: 58-59, 355-364.
[135] See Herrin 2021: 307-308.

protection and guidance during the turbulent events of the sixth century. Following a miracle, these images were often given veneration even if in its most basic form. Thus, in the following section, we will demonstrate the evolution of veneration practices during the sixth century in regard to images and special individuals.

2.3.4 Acts of veneration:

This section establishes a continuous link of veneration acts offered to images of deities and 'special' individuals between antiquity and Late Antiquity with the aim of affirming that the second half of the sixth century marks the beginning of a wider cult mentality and practice towards Christian icons. To establish continuity between religious mentalities and practices in regard to iconography, it is necessary to examine earlier cult practices in tandem with newly developing Christian cult practices. By the end of this section, it will become clear that the concepts of veneration surrounding Christian icons had been established for centuries prior to Late Antiquity.

Iconography, whether pagan or Christian, was an integral part of religious worship and veneration. People across the Roman empire had, since antiquity, offered their respect to the likeness of deities and the emperor through specific acts of worship and veneration. Under the 'pagan' Roman empire, it was customary to honour the images of the gods and the emperor with a wide range of rituals including libations, processions, divination, sacrifices, banquets.[136] Images, depicting common pagan veneration motifs involving ritual items such as garlands, wreaths, and crowns, also decorated numerous Roman shrines and artifacts. At its earliest form of development, Christian icons appear to have been treated and venerated in the same manner as pagan images. Sources dating back to the second and third centuries attest to the veneration of Christian images with crowns and garlands.[137] Although the sources condemn the acts, they nonetheless represent the earliest references of Christian icon veneration.[138] In the following two to three centuries, pagan and Christian images appear to have been included and venerated alongside each other in household shrines.[139]

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[136] Rask 2021: 489.

[137] The second-century non-canonical *Acts of John*, for example, criticised the veneration of icons. In this text, the Apostle John reportedly discovered that one of his followers Lycomedes had produced a portrait of him and offered veneration to it with crowns and garlands. John condemned the act as pagan. *Acts of John*, 27. Likewise, Saint Irenaeus, in his work *Against Heresies*, condemned a sect of Gnostic devotees for venerating an image of Christ, supposedly made by Pontius Pilate, with crowns and other pagan rituals alongside images of philosophers. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.25.6.

[138] Marsengill 2018: 202; Brubaker 2010: 325.

[139] The *Life of Alexander Severus*, in the fourth or fifth-century *Historia Augusta*, recorded that the pagan emperor Severus Alexander had kept an image of Christ and Abraham for the purpose of veneration in his sanctuary to the Lares alongside images of deified emperors, philosophers, and other classical figures. Historia

Certain elements typically associated with the veneration or worship of idols in Greco-Roman antiquity continued well into the sixth century. Garlands, for instance, remained an important part of imperial ceremonial. As an example, Corippus recounts in detail that garlands decorated the buildings of Constantinople, and reeds decorated the thresholds and doorways.[140] The act of *proskynesis*, which had been an act of adoration associated with the imperial cult in classical times, was also reinstated by Justinian and Theodora. The act was reintroduced as a way to force the elites to show submission in front of the imperial couple. The reintroduction of *proskynesis* was also a demonstration of the overarching dominance of the imperial regime. For instance, when Belisarius entered the hippodrome during his triumph, the general fell on his knees to 'kiss the emperor's feet in the royal box'.[141] There is also perhaps a possibility that Justinian and Theodora reintroduced this tradition as a way to, as Peter Sarris argued, blur the lines between the heavenly court of God and the earthly court of the emperor.[142]

Like relics, some images played important roles in various rituals, as they were thought to hold greater sacrality, and possessed divine powers and agency.[143] Katie Rask argued that "quite often, visual symbols were meant to instill powerful responses in viewers, causing emotional and physiological reactions. For some ancient communities, and in certain religious situations, images were ontologically linked to their referents. They also encompassed supernatural forces, divine power, and other special auras."[144] During Late Antiquity, particularly during the sixth century, eastern Romans gradually began to show their respect to Christ, Mary, and the saints through collective acts of veneration performed with or in front of their likeness in the form of holy icons. The veneration of holy Christian figures through their likeness captured in icons became a debated topic among the clergy and the imperial regimes of Late Antiquity. Some saw images as a hindrance to developing a deeper relationship with God and others saw them as part of the sensory experience, capable of visually narrating biblical episodes and eliciting compassion especially when placed near holy relics.[145]

Augusta, *Life of Alexander Severu*s, 29. Although very little is known about the *Historia Augusta* and many issues arise in its use as historical source, it does at the limit testify to what a fourth and fifth century household shrine may have plausibly included. On the lararium of Alexander Severus, see Cécil Bertrand-Dagenbach's "Alexandre Sévère, ses héros et ses saints ou quelques pieuses impiétés d'un bon empereur" published in 1997.

[140] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 3.62-69.

[141] Heather 2018: 142.

[142] Sarris 2023: 298.

[143] On the divine agency of Greco-Roman iconography in classical antiquity, see Jan Bremmer's "The Agency of Greek and Roman Statues: From Homer to Constantine" published in 2013.

[144] Rask 2021: 490.

[145] Marsengill 2011 : 54.

Despite debates surrounding worship and acts of veneration including icons, the belief of the sacrality and powers of religious iconography continued into Late Antiquity. According to Judith Herrin, as early as the mid-to-late fourth century, the Cappadocian fathers enshrined the notion that images captured the essence of the holy person depicted, and through the icon, communication was established.[146] The honour paid to the icon passed to the prototype as it did, for example, with images of the emperor. Despite the evidence presented above demonstrating an early development of icon veneration practices, in her study on icon veneration, Brubaker argues that texts preserved from the fourth century give no indication that sacred portraits were venerated in any special way, perhaps responding to previous fears of 'acting pagan' as outlined by several theologians of the second to fourth centuries.[147]

Likewise, Brubaker and Haldon argue that there is little evidence to support a 'cult of sacred images' before the Iconoclastic period.[148] They agree that icons existed, but argue that they did not receive special veneration in any consistent way before the late seventh century. However, the evidence shows otherwise. References in sixth-century literature point to evidence of icon veneration during this period. Several epigrams compiled in the *Cycle* of Agathias, now preserved in the *Greek Anthology*, clearly attest that by the late sixth century, individuals paid homage to and communicated with images of holy figures. The epigrams of Nilus and Agathias, for instance, attest to homage being paid to the icon of the Archangel Michael.[149]

Brubaker and Haldon also point out that sacred images in texts dating before 680 are 'identified and described; they are present but passive when saints perform miracles; and they allow people to identify saints whom they have seen in dreams or visions.'[150] They conclude that portraits before Iconoclasm were rather intended to preserve the memory of the person represented, provide a model for imitation, or honour the figure portrayed. Indeed a main function of the holy icon was to allow Christians to identify the saints.[151] But by the mid-sixth century, the role and use of holy icons expanded due to the increasing necessity of protection driven by the circumstances of the period. According to Judith Herrin, icons commanded particular devotion due to their role as intercessors between man and God.[152] Also, icons were

[146] Herrin 2007: 101.
[147] Brubaker 2010: 325.
[148] Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 62.
[149] *Anth. Gr*, 1.33-36.
[150] Brubaker and Haldon 2011: 62.
[151] Herrin 2021: 307.
[152] Herrin 2021: 308.

by no means passive as demonstrated above by Evagrius' account of the role of the miraculous image of Christ during the siege of Edessa in 544.[153]

According to Marie-France Auzépy, it was only by the end of the seventh century that the cults of images included 'gestures, kneeling with one's forehead to the ground (*proskynesis*), and kissing, as well as other practices like burning incense and lighting candles.'[154] However, this statement downplays the innovations of the sixth century in regard to veneration as a whole. Burning incense and lighting candles, for instance, had already become regular devotional practices during liturgy, prayer and religious ceremonies. The sixth-century poet Corippus tells us that candles and incense were part of Justin II's praying ritual to Christ in the church of the Archangel.[155] The same author also shows that these devotional practices extended to holy images. Corippus tells us that the empress Sophia lit candles in honour of the virgin Mary following her prayer for a prosperous reign for her husband.[156] She did so reportedly 'before the pious face', which can be taken as the likeness of the virgin mother of God.[157]

Brubaker and Haldon additionally argue that the veneration of icons seems to have been completely assimilated into the already well established cult of relics by the end of the seventh century.[158] Only during this period, they argue, can a cult of icons be distinguished. But the veneration of Christian icons had already started to take shape as early as the fourth century, and subsequently flourished during the second half of the sixth century following the continuation and innovation of certain veneration practices under the reigns of Justinian and his successors. Acts of devotion such as burning incense, lighting candles, *proskynesis*, and ceremonial decorations were already in use during the sixth century in regard to relic veneration and imperial ceremonial. We can then argue, given that the evidence clearly attests the extension of such acts of devotion to holy icons, that a cult of icons began to develop during the sixth century, particularly during the second half of the sixth century.

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[153] Evagrius and John of Ephesus also recorded another event which demonstrates that the veneration of icons was prevalent in the sixth century. Evagrius recorded that a man named Anatolius rushed to an icon of Mary hanging in the prison and declared that he was a suppliant and petitioner. But the icon is said to have turned in loathing, representing her denunciation of Anatolius as a God-hating man. Evagr. *HE*, 5.18. John of Ephesus recorded that the same Anatolius brought the people to his house, where he displayed an icon of Christ to convince them of his Christian convictions, but it turned itself to the wall three times. The icon reportedly hid an image of Apollo inside of it. Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.29.
[154] Auzépy 2021: 372-373.
[155] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.5-10.
[156] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.70.
[157] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.46-49.
[158] Brubaker and Haldon 2001: 55.

Key elements during the sixth and early seventh centuries concerning veneration point to a gradual increase of cultic behaviour towards Christian images. Despite the gradual Christianisation of the eastern Roman cultural landscape during the sixth century, acts of veneration that developed in the classical period nevertheless survived. Along with those traditions classical mentalities also survived. Thus the cultural landscape was at a crossroads between two different traditions and mentalities during this period. In addition, the circumstances of the sixth century play a major part in the development of icon veneration and supporting discourse. These circumstances bridged the gap between two different mentalities in regard to the veneration of images by Christians. As a result, it is possible that from the fourth to sixth centuries, Christians venerating the icons of holy people sought inspiration for their modes of veneration in the specific acts and offerings present in the context of the imperial cult, and those typically attributed to the veneration of pagan images, or idols as referred to by Christians.

The analysis above has demonstrated that several acts of veneration offered to or in front of religious iconography have a long-standing tradition that stretches back from classical antiquity to Late Antiquity and beyond. Gestures, such as the use of decorative elements, rituals of bowing or lighting candles, transcend the religious divisions marked by Greco-Roman pagans and Christians. The innovations made under the Justinianic dynasty enabled several past devotional practices to survive and even thrive in the sixth century in the context of imperial ceremonial and in prayer. There is no reason to believe, then, that these acts of devotion did not extend to images of holy figures, as demonstrated by some examples above.

We may conclude that the ideas and practices of pagan and imperial veneration were adopted by Christians and integrated within Christianity to fit their devotional needs. This process occurred over time throughout Late Antiquity, but the sixth century nevertheless represents a crucial period during this process of cultural evolution. Finally, the devotional acts that became increasingly associated with icon veneration during the mid-sixth century possess a link with certain developments surrounding the imperial ideology of the regime of Justinian, particularly during imperial ceremonial. Therefore, in the following section, we will see how the emperors of the sixth century looked to enlist these holy objects as a way to not only promote the religious prestige of the imperial regime, but also as a way to bolster their own sacred authority.

2.3.5 Politicisation of Christian icons:

We conclude with a short analysis of the relationship between icons and imperial ideology by examining their integration within the political sphere of the empire. As powerful and miraculous Christian icons proliferated across the empire during the sixth century, their growing popularity within the eastern Roman cultural landscape inevitably captured the attention and support of the imperial regimes. For numerous Christians, icons became an integral part of everyday worship and veneration. For the imperial regime, holy images gradually became instrumental components in imperial propaganda between the sixth and seventh centuries.

As icons gained legitimacy as objects of power and devotion during the sixth century, they increasingly entered the political and ideological spheres. Averil Cameron argued that Justinian's successors integrated contemporary artistic style and mentalities with their rule to allow a stronger sense of imperial identity.[159] Christian icons during this period became instruments to which the emperor had recourse for demonstrating their and the empire's continued religious favour from God. For instance, the image of Christ located above the new imperial throne during the reign of Justin II presented the throne room as a microcosm of Heaven.[160] Furthermore, it was probably during the reign of the emperor Maurice that an image of Christ 'in his human form' was erected above the emperor's statue in the Chalke gate.[161] The icon, which is reminiscent of that above the throne room, became an important 'talisman' for the capital and was intimately connected with the well-being of the imperial palace and the entirety of Constantinople.[162] Christian icons, then, gradually became instruments for the emperors to display their religious ideology and favour from God.

During this period, miraculous icons also gradually developed their own discourse. Averil Cameron's study on the rise of icons clearly demonstrates the formation of a link between images and discourse during the late sixth century.[163] The narratives surrounding miraculous icons provided details on their origins, and further legitimised the existence of holy images. For instance, Evagrius innovated on the previous legends surrounding religious 'artefacts' used as protective barriers for the city of Edessa to legitimise the 'appearance' of the Mandylion. Accordingly, Christian discourse of the period further assisted in spreading the belief in the miraculous powers of Christian icons. Finally, the relationship between

[159] Cameron 1979: 6-8.
[160] Cameron 1979: 4.
[161] Herrin 2021: 310.
[162] Herrin 2021: 310.
[163] Cameron 1991: 209.

Christian icons and political ideology is such that icons had the potential to enhance the sacrality of the emperor as they were associated with divine power. In addition, icons represented God's favour for the emperors through images. As a result, the growth and development of Christian icons during the sixth century had far-reaching impacts on the imperial ideologies of Justinian and his successors.

2.4 Concluding remarks:

The trajectory for the growth of icon veneration during Late Antiquity resembled that of the cult of the saints. Just as the cult of saints and their relics developed throughout the fourth century, before being securely established in eastern Roman society during the fifth century, and subsequently sponsored by the imperial regimes of the sixth century, so too did the cult of icons develop during the sixth century under similar circumstances. The cultural developments between the classical period and Late Antiquity provided the necessary circumstance for the proliferation of Christian images. By the mid-sixth century, imperial patronage of icons enabled the gradual development of cults dedicated to the veneration of holy images, some of which were instrumental in the safeguarding of several cities across the eastern empire, including the capital. Although icon veneration was not yet universally adopted, the second half of the sixth century nevertheless represented the period during which the first general practice of icon veneration emerged.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated that the fourth to eighth centuries represents a period during which Christian cults of veneration, namely those of the saints and their relics, and the cult of icons, steadily developed. It has also argued that the sixth century represents an important period in the growth of these cults. The sixth century was a period during which changes in mentalities and behaviour can be observed in regard to icon production and veneration. More significantly, it is a period during which the imperial regimes of the Justinianic dynasty provided increasing support to the development of early Christian art, the growth of the cult of the saints and relic veneration. In the following chapter, we will see how the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty exploited this cultural development, which progressed in part as a result of active patronage from the imperial regimes themselves, to provide further sacral authority to their regime and image.

3. The Hyper-Sacralisation of Imperial Power under Justinian and his Successors

Introduction:

This chapter examines the increasing sacralisation and self or hyper-sacralisation of Christian emperors specifically during the sixth century. It aims to determine the impact of Christian cults of veneration, and all elements associated with them, on imperial power and its representation. We examine how the imperial regimes of the sixth century exploited Christian cults of veneration and how they integrated them within the spheres of imperial ideology and its representation. Roman emperors and eastern Roman emperors, since the reign of Augustus, always had a religious dimension to their rule. Whether emperors adhered to classical pagan religions prior to the reign of Constantine or to Christianity afterwards, their position was invested with religious authority or imbued with religious significance. Some pagan emperors also believed themselves to be living gods, portrayed themselves as almost divine, or adopted divine-like or sacral characteristics. Christian emperors, however, could not lay claim to divinity. But the association with the divine and the self-endowment with religious characteristics, so far as it was possible for a mortal person, was similar for Christian emperors during Late Antiquity.

This chapter argues that the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty carried on a process of self-sacralisation to an unprecedented degree in which they increasingly associate themselves with Christian holy figures, their relics and icons. This process can only be viewed as the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power. The emperor Justinian, as we will see below, sowed the seeds for the evolution in the very concept and perception of imperial power for the rest of Roman Late Antiquity, and medieval Europe. For this reason, the first part of the chapter is devoted to the examination of the empire's political organisation during this period and the imperial ideology of Justinian. This serves as context to the rest of the chapter which offers a different approach on how to examine the process of sacralisation of the emperor Justinian, and the hyper-sacralisation of the emperors Justin II, Tiberius II, and Maurice.

3.1 Political ideology: secular and religious authority under Justinian[164]

This section examines the changes brought by the emperor Justinian to the political system of the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century. It aims to demonstrate how the emperor Justinian fundamentally changed the concept and perception of eastern Roman imperial power. Throughout his reign, Justinian sought to establish the office of the emperor as an intermediary between God and His kingdom on earth, the eastern Roman empire. But the imperial office remained a secular institution whose foundations date from classical times. Since political ideology was at the heart of the cultural evolution of the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century, an analysis of its constituents is imperative in order to better understand the topics of analysis in the following sections. By the end of this section we will see that Justinian had developed a concept of imperial power that integrated aspects of Christian and classical Roman ideology to achieve and justify change.

The political system of the eastern Roman empire during the reign of Justinian was complex. It featured a multi-levelled political system in which the electoral process founded during the Roman Republic survived and functioned alongside the eastern concept of the divine monarchy.[165] When studying the political system of the eastern Roman empire, three factors are important to consider: ideology, legitimacy, and authority. Each factor will be discussed below to ascertain the political environment which subsequently influenced the manner by which the sixth-century emperor integrated Christian cults of veneration within the sphere of imperial power and how these cults impacted the portrayal of their image.

The governing regimes of Late Antiquity asserted that God endowed the eastern Roman emperor with imperial power. The formula was established by Eusebius of Caesarea in the early fourth century, and was itself an adaptation of the classical political ideology of the Hellenistic kings and several classical Roman emperors.[166] The concept held that the emperor became God's viceregent on earth, chosen by Him to rule His earthly kingdom.[167]

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[164] The terms political ideology and imperial ideology will be used according to context. For example, political ideology will refer to the regimes' ideologies surrounding the state, and imperial ideology will refer to the regimes' ideologies surrounding their personal authority and image. However, the image and authority of the emperor as well as the image and political structure of the eastern Roman state often overlap.

[165] Kaldellis 2015: 178-179.

[166] Peter Bell demonstrated the similarities in the Greek and Christian political ideologies in his analysis of the sources for Agapetus' *Advice* for Justinian. These attributes of a model (pagan) ruler were adopted by the bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, and applied to the rule of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, in his *Tricennial Oration* dedicated to the emperor. Bell 2009: 28-30. See also the volume from Jonathan Bardill *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* published in 2012. In this volume, Bardill studied the evolution of Constantinian ideology and imperial image from a classical Roman and Hellenistic representation to increasingly Christian representation by associating the Roman solar deity with Christ. In doing so, Constantine reconciled the long-standing tradition of imperial divinity with the monotheistic nature of Christianity by assimilating his image with Christ.

[167] Euseb. *VC*, 1.4, 24. Also, Euseb. *Speech*, 1.1-6.

Christian political ideology, according to Eusebius' formula, ascribed to a top-down model of rule wherein God delegated power to the eastern Roman emperor.

On this basis, many scholars argued that the political system of the eastern Roman empire was theocratic, or at the very least theocentric.[168] Peter Heather argued that all 'pretences of republicanism had vanished'.[169] He further argued that Hellenistic concepts of rulership came to define the imperial image and that the emperor 'became a sacred ruler, communing with the Divinity, and ordinary human beings had to act with due deference.'[170] Further elaborating on this concept of imperial power, Averil Cameron argued that the empire was the microcosm of heaven and the emperor was placed there by God to ensure the maintenance of true religion.[171] Indeed, sources of the period provide some credibility to this concept. The sixth-century deacon Agapetus, for instance, clearly and concisely articulated the role of the Christian emperor.[172] He explicitly emphasised the emperor Justinian's relationship with God, for it was 'in the likeness of the Heavenly Kingdom that He gave [Justinian] the sceptre of earthly rule'.[173] The religious authority of eastern Roman emperors thus intensified during Late Antiquity on the basis of their ideological connection with God, a connection rendered explicit in imperial propaganda and other sources.

Religious authority became a point of discord between the State (the emperor) and the Church (bishops). The Church regarded spiritual authority as superior to the temporal power of the imperial office. During the late fifth century Pope Gelasius I developed, in a letter to emperor Anastasius I, a theory opposing the spiritual authority of the Pope and the secular power of the emperor.[174] Claire Sotinel discusses the problem with the relationship between temporal (imperial) and spiritual (papal) power, *i.e*, who rules in the name of God?[175] The issue lay in whether it was the Pope who was subject to the emperor as a Roman citizen, or if the emperor was subject to the Pope as a Christian. But, from the concept of rulership developed by Eusebius of Caesarea also developed the notion of the emperor priest, known in academia under the term caesaropapism. For instance, from the mid-fifth century onwards,

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[168] Magdalino 1992: 206; Runciman 1977. For a debate on terminology surrounding the use of theocracy or theocentric, see Heather 2005: 23.
[169] Heather 2005: 23.
[170] Heather 2005: 23.
[171] Cameron 2006: 97.
[172] Stephenson 2022: 331.
[173] Agapetus, *Advice*, 1. The concept of imitation of God's rule is also present throughout the *Dialogue on political science*, but it differs from the *Advice* of Agapetus. Rather than obtaining imperial status from God or even attaining His likeness on earth, kingship or emperorship is inspired by the ruler's initiation into the nature of the *logos*, which he earns through philosophical ascent to higher intelligible realms. Bell 2009: 50.
[174] Dagron 1996: 303-315.
[175] Sotinel 1992: 439-441.

the patriarch of Constantinople typically performed imperial coronations. In doing so, as Gilbert Dagron argued, the emperor received the prestige of divine investiture, thus reinforcing imperial claims to religious authority.[176]

Although God featured prominently in eastern Roman political ideology as a source of legitimacy and power for the emperor, in the manner established by Eusebius of Caesarea, the political system and the ideology surrounding imperial power was more complex. Eastern Roman political ideology integrated both the theocratic or theocentric concepts with the republican concepts of power that defined the Roman political system since classical times. Peter Sarris argued that Justinian himself in one of his Novels recast his empire as an 'Orthodox Republic' as the emperor combined republican political ideology with Orthodox Christianity.[177] It appears that even Justinian himself acknowledged the dual concepts which influenced eastern Roman political ideology during the sixth century.

The process by which the emperor came to power during the sixth century was rooted in the classical Roman tradition that legitimised a ruler through an election process by means of various constituents.[178] The election process included the traditional triad of aristocracy, army, and the people, which had been decisive since the early empire. According to Peter Bell, although the army had lost much of its former influence, imperial 'legitimacy rested on the *traditional* authority of a (militarily) successful Roman emperor.'[179] However, between the reign of Arcadius (395-408) and the early years of Heraclius (610-641), the emperor resided almost permanently in the capital.[180] This imperial 'withdrawal' to Constantinople meant that the emperor increasingly depended on the support of the people as well as various secular and religious factions and institutions. The constituents of the eastern Roman

[176] Dagron 1996: 79-90, 141-169.
[177] Sarris 2023: 5, 283; *Iust. Nov*, 45.
[178] The fifth book of the anonymous *Dialogue on Political Science* conceived legitimacy in terms of both lawful and just rule. *Dialogue*, 5.45-5.48. According to Peter Bell, the *Dialogue* includes five laws or principles of imperial rule. They cover the selection of the emperor, the constitution of a ruling elite of senators, the choice of ecclesiastical authorities and the higher officials of the state, and the protection of the laws. Bell 2009: 60-61. But, despite presenting a model of government in which power is divided between several tiers of officials, the design surrounding the concept of rule remains monarchical and theocentric.
[179] Bell 2013: 268; cf. Heather 2018: 67-68.
[180] Pfeilschifter 2013: 41-75, 211-251.

electoral process remain topics of debate in academia.[181] Yet it is evident that the eastern Roman political system retained the model of a republic through to the sixth century.[182]

Despite being elected to the throne, the eastern Roman emperor during the sixth century was a monarch who increasingly exercised autocratic authority over all his constituents. According to Peter Heather, the eastern Roman emperor was nothing more than a legitimate autocratic monarch divinely inspired and chosen by God.[183] During the reign of Justinian all aspects of government gradually fell under the control of the emperor, while imperial authority broadened.[184] For instance, Justinian officially established the imperial office as the only legitimate source of law, or 'living law' (*nomos empsychos*).[185] In accordance with this view, the *Advice* of Agapetus imposed no (such) limits on the legal powers of the emperor.[186] By formally establishing the imperial office as the only source of legitimate law, Justinian cemented the notion that his office possessed a supra-human air.[187] It

[181] Rene Pfeilschifter argued that every emperor was required to secure his power from four *Akzeptanzgruppen* or interest groups during the imperial election process. Pfeilschifter 2013. See also Greatrex 2020. Anthony Kaldellis instead argued that there were no formal rules or constitution to the election and legitimacy of an emperor, and that the people represented the closest thing to a legitimising entity for a new emperor. Kaldellis 2015: 104. Expanding on the models presented by Pfeilschifter and Egon Flaig, however, JaShong King demonstrated that several constituents, of varying importance depending on the period, whether popular, executive, military, administrative, religious, and even non-Roman, were crucial components to the election process of a new emperor. King 2017.

[182] Kaldellis 2015: 3, 53-61. Kaldellis 2015: 190-198. The work *On the Magistracies of the Roman State* by the eastern Roman administrator John the Lydian, according to Charles Pazdernik and Anthony Kaldellis, sought reconciliation between the republican origins of Roman 'freedom' and the consolidation of power under the emperors, while offering arguments in favour of the Republican model of government. Pazdernik 2005: 194; Kaldellis 2005: 1. Kaldellis even placed John in the circle of political dissenters against the absolutist ideology of the emperor. Kaldellis 2004b: 1-17.

[183] Heather 2005: 97.

[184] In his *Advice*, Agapetus avoids any notion of delegation of power to the aristocracy. Instead he strongly advised Justinian to concern himself with every detail of the administration, furthering the divide between the emperor and the aristocracy. Agapetus, *Advice*, 40. For a contrasting, or more limited role, of the emperor, see *Dialogue* 5.189, 5.58. According to Matthew Ryan Hassall, the work of John the Lydian shows that with time the traditional political structures of the magistracies eroded and the only counterbalance was the emperor's virtue. Hassall 2022: 178. He argued that John explicitly articulated a theory of imperial restoration in which the emperor was the agent. He concluded that John may have been more genuinely committed to the idea of the monarchy or may have simply made a practical assessment of the lack of alternatives. Hassall 2022: 178.

[185] Stephenson 2022: 201; *Iust. Nov*, 105.4; cf. *Institutes*. 12.17.8, in which he justifies the ruling, stating that the emperor was not bound by laws, citing the rulings of Antoninus and Severus who attempted to counter accusations of tyranny as evidence.

[186] In fact, Agapetus wrote that no one on earth could compel the emperor to follow the law, and therefore he should willingly submit to it. By doing so, the emperor will be able to display the legitimacy of his rule. Agapetus, *Advice*, 27.

[187] The work of John the Lydian, according to Dmitriev Sviatoslav, displayed a traditional meritocratic approach to the emperor, 'who was judged by his personal and political qualities against the image of the ideal ruler'. Sviatoslav 2022: 19-38; Sviatoslav 2015: 1-24. He argues that the political authors of the period constructed the image of the emperor by combining senatorial assumptions and the precepts of Greek philosophy, which held the ruler as animate law because of his virtues, thus allowing the emperor to organise the state in the likeness of the divine model. Sviatoslav 2022: 29.

legitimised the autocratic rule of the emperor and promoted a conception of imperial rule in which the emperor operated between heaven and earth.[188]

The political ideology of the eastern Roman empire operated on several different levels representing two models of power: a top-down model and a bottom-up model. The top-down model of imperial power concerned the theocratic or theocentric idea whence God endowed the emperor with imperial power. The emperor then reflected the divine prestige of his office to his people. The bottom-up model concerned the various constituents on whose authority the emperor relied to legitimise his rule by way of election. Therefore, in practice the eastern Roman empire remained a monarchical republic, but ideologically it was theocratic or theocentric. Either way, as we will see in the following sections, the fusion of both political models influenced the manner in which the eastern Roman emperors of the sixth century displayed their image to their subjects.

The complexity of eastern Roman political ideology during the sixth century remains a point of debate in academia as it involved the fusion of several elements which appear at odds with each other. Averil Cameron has gone as far as to argue that the sixth century, especially the age of Justinian, was 'a period of cultural contradiction', where the application of Christian and classical Roman political ideologies in tandem represented 'the last and confusing manifestation of cultural diversity in Byzantium for a long time to come'.[189] But this does not adequately explain the political system of the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century. Justinian's political ideology fused a multi-levelled political system based on the eastern concept of divine monarchy and the secular concept of imperial election inherited from the classical Roman period. He also sought to integrate Christian political ideology within this system and imbued the secular and legal tradition of the empire with Christian significance. But even so, the formulation of eastern Roman political ideology during this period lay in the classical past. Meanwhile, religious authority became a source of contention between the secular emperor and the patriarchs.

During this time, Christianity became an increasingly influential component in the political ideology of Justinian. The emperor, as reflected in contemporary sources, explicitly placed himself as an intercessory figure between God and his people within the political structure of the empire. As God's representative on earth, the emperor, whose task it was to ensure the maintenance of true religion, cast his empire as an 'Orthodox Republic' in the likeness of the divine model. Its ruler, according to the sources, must also imitate the divine

[188] Agapetus, *Advice*, 3, 8, 21, 37, 63.
[189] Cameron 1991: 191.

model to further secure his legitimacy. Therefore, as we will see below, the emperor Justinian innovated on existing methods of imperial propaganda to showcase the heightened religious significance of his regime, as well as that of his imperial capital, Constantinople. In this way, the emperor Justinian provided the necessary impetus for imperial power to undergo a process of increasing self-sacralisation from the mid-sixth century onwards.

3.2 Saint Justinian?

The emperor Justinian had a strong desire to portray himself as a pious Christian ruler, who not only possessed the favour of God, but also interacted with Him. This section examines the emperor Justinian's official self-portrait through the lens of sources accepted by or written at the behest of the imperial regime, and those favourable to the regime. Since the emperor was thought to be God's viceregent on earth, chosen to build a model of God's Heavenly kingdom on earth, it was necessary to represent his rule as such in official propaganda. By the end of this section we will see that not only did Justinian portray a close relationship with God, according to his own propaganda, but he had also displayed characteristics similar to those of the saints, thus reinforcing the sacred prestige of the imperial office.

As the imperial ideology of the emperor Justinian put emphasis on the association between the divine and rulership, panegyrics and poems dedicated to him additionally stressed the close relationship between him and the divine. God was now portrayed as a collaborator or a colleague of the emperor in many aspects of the latter's policies and programmes.[190] It was the will of God, for example, that the old Hagia Sophia should be destroyed to make place for an even greater church.[191] God is said to have supplied Justinian with the best craftsmen to accomplish its reconstruction.[192] It was also during the reign of Justinian that the idea of celestial protection over the emperor and his capital was clearly established. Justinian, for instance, reportedly enjoyed the protection of God against conspirators by holding steady in his faith and piety.[193] Likewise, in the Hagia Sophia, the

[190] Agapetus also emphasises that Justinian and Theodora not only had a close relationship with God, but also with Christ, another member of the Trinity. Agapetus, *Advice*, 72.
[191] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.1.21.
[192] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.1.25-26. God also revealed to the emperor a special kind of stone in a nearby location to be used to support the columns of the Nea church of the virgin Mary in Jerusalem. Proc. *De Aed*, 5.6.19. It was also thanks to God, who miraculously revealed the exact plans, that Justinian was able to rebuild the city of Dara. Proc. *De Aed*, 2.3.8-15. In addition, God has been portrayed as the collaborator in Justinian's completion of the law code and victories in war. Leppin 2009: 155-164; Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 5-10. For the military protection provided by the prayers of monks, see *Iust. Nov*, 133. See also the preface to the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* completed in 534.
[193] Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 20-23.

golden dome built by Justinian featured an image of the cross which acted as the 'protector of the city'.[194] The relationship between God and the emperor became well defined during the reign of Justinian.

In a similar manner as hagiographers writing about the intercessory role of the Christian saints with God, the imperial panegyrists of Justinian's reign evoke the same characteristics for the emperor and his wife Theodora. Agapetus, for instance, emphasised the intermediary position of the emperor within the divine and mortal hierarchy. On this, the deacon wrote that:

> In his bodily essence, the emperor is the equal of every man, but in the power of his rank he is like God over all men. He has no one on earth who is higher than he. Like a man, therefore, he must not be puffed up; like God, he must not be angry. For if he is honoured for his divine image, he is nevertheless bound to his earthly image through which he is taught his equality with other men.[195]

Here Agapetus stressed the superiority of the emperor to his subjects on account of his quasi-divine status, yet he is reminded of his humanity.[196] The deacon advised Justinian to portray himself in a Christ-like relationship to God and his people.[197] The emperor made recurring use of this parallel in his propaganda. Several sources also ascribed an intercessory role, typically attributed to Mary or the saints, to the empress Theodora following her death. Paul the Silentiary wrote: "This, Mighty Master, makes the soul of the empress, she who is blessed, all-excellent, lovely and all-wise, to intercede with God on your behalf, she who was your pious collaborator when alive."[198] The late empress is depicted here as a conduit between God and the emperor Justinian, further stressing the partnership between them, and also between the imperial couple.

Part of the saints' characteristics was their renouncement of the worldly pleasures and leading an exemplary life by overcoming personal trials, and the adoption of a rigorous, disciplined, and typically ascetic lifestyle in their mission to completely devote themselves to God. Some of these characteristics, according to Procopius, defined the lifestyle of the emperor Justinian. The emperor reportedly slept and ate very little, and often fasted,

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[194] Mango 1986: 83; Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 489-506.
[195] Agapetus, *Advice*, 21. Translation by Peter Bell.
[196] For the development of the intersection between political ideology and theology, see also Brown 1992: 152-158.
[197] The hymn of Romanos the Melodist *On Earthquakes and Fires* also stresses the intercessory powers of the imperial couple. Romanos praises the emperor and empress for their role in ending the sufferings of their subjects from the 'pretend' wrath of God, who had destroyed half the city during the Nika riot, by interceding with Him on their behalf through prayer. For a detailed analysis of the hymn, see Topping 1998: 29-30.
[198] Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 58-62.

especially during religious holidays.[199] Thus, in this way, Procopius presented Justinian as almost reaching sainthood.[200] According to Brian Croke, Justinian's sleeplessness was 'deliberately cast as an imperial virtue'.[201] Additionally, Justinian cast himself as a prayerful emperor due to his all-night vigils and liturgical ceremonies, as well as being vigilant since he was able to keep watch over the empire's affairs even at night.[202]

The sources ascribed Justinian with characteristics similar to holy people through a demonstration of the emperor's religious piety. For example, during the visit of the Palestinian monk Sabas to Constantinople, Cyril of Scythopolis recounted that the emperor prostrated himself before the monk, thus reversing the expected roles between emperor and citizen.[203] The interaction itself does not, according to Hartmut Leppin, constitute a reliable source for the behaviour of the historical Justinian.[204] But on account of Leppin's argument, we may conclude that the scene aimed to portray the piety and humility of the emperor before the revered Chalcedonian Christian ascetic. Additionally, the scene portrays the emperor venerating holy people by performing *proskynesis*, a gesture typically reserved for the veneration of Christian holy objects and people, but also officially imposed by Justinian and Theodora on subjects who interacted with the imperial couple.

Justinian demonstrated his piety by establishing a link between him and holy relics. Imperial panegyrists displayed Justinian's connection with relics by creating stories of miracles and embellishing several details about the emperor's interactions with certain relics.[205] The reliquary of the forty martyrs, for instance, cured Justinian when he became ill. The purple tunic worn by Justinian, onto which the oils from the relics poured, was kept in the palace as a source of healing for those who had fallen ill due to disease.[206] Therefore,

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[199] Proc. *SH*, 13.28-30; Proc. *De Aed*, 12.27.
[200] Meier 2016a: 84-84; Cameron 1985: 87-88
[201] Croke 2021: 103. Croke also presents evidence that connects Justinian's sleeplessness to the 'sleepless' monks from the monastery of Saint John the Baptist. Somehow, he argues, the deacon Agapetus, who in his advice to Justinian wrote that the emperor should oversee everything in his empire, had a connection to the monastery and that these monks were supporters of imperial orthodoxy. The emperor, then, would benefit from this association. However, Croke also argues that Justinian came to oppose the 'sleepless' monks over time. Croke 2021: 106; Agapetus, *Advice*, 26.
[202] Croke 2021: 107.
[203] Cyr. Scyth. *Lives*, 71.
[204] Leppin 2009: 156-157.
[205] Procopius reported that the relics of the Apostles Andrew, Luke, and Timothy had been revealed to Justinian in a dream while he was rebuilding the Church of the Holy Apostles. Cameron 1985: 88; Proc. *De Aed*, 1.4.20-22. Likewise, the relics of the forty martyrs of Sebaste, held in Hagia Irene, were miraculously revealed to the emperor when the foundations of the church were dug. Cameron 1985: 88; Proc. *De Aed*, 1.7.3-6. Justin II was also said to have buried the relics of several monastic saints in the church of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul in the orphanage. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, 217.24-29.
[206] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.7.16.

imbued with the essence of the saints, Justinian's tunic became itself a contact relic.[207] As a result, the emperor could be regarded as a saint himself.

The emperor Justinian embellished the sacred landscape of his empire with numerous religious buildings dedicated to various saints and the virgin Mary as a way to further elevate his religious prestige.[208] The embellishment of the sacred landscape of the capital, and ultimately the empire as a whole, reflected the belief expressed by Justinian, and ultimately his successors, that the empire was a microcosm of heaven. As Eva Catafygiotu Topping argued, in her analysis of Romanos' hymns *On Earthquakes and Fires*, which praises the emperor for rebuilding the Hagia Sophia, there is an implicit parallel that exists within the imperial propaganda of Justinian between God who created the world, and the emperor who rebuilt it.[209] As an example, the construction of the Hagia Sophia, according to contemporary panegyrists and poets, not only demonstrated the close connection between God and the emperor, but also encapsulated the qualities of heaven on earth.[210] Through its sheer size, as the largest church across the Mediterranean, its location in the capital, the primacy of its patriarch in the east, and its proximity to the eastern Roman emperor, the Hagia Sophia expressed the ideological sentiment that Constantinople was the centre of all of Christendom.[211]

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[207] Meier 2016a: 86.

[208] Justinian initiated a hitherto unprecedented religious building programme across the empire. In the Holy Land, he built a church to the Theotokos on Mount Zion, the highest point of the city, connected to the church of Holy Sepulchre by a newly enlarged road. Proc. *De Aed*, 5.6.1; Cyr. Scyth. *Lives*, 71-72. At the foot of Mount Sinai, he built a monastery which supposedly enclosed the burning bush seen by Moses. Cormack 2000: 49; Proc. *De Aed*, 5.8.1-9. To honour his home region in Illyricum, Justinian built a new city, which he named Justiniana Prima. Within all three levels, numerous churches adorned the city, and an episcopal complex, including a church, baptistery was built on the acropolis. Proc. *De Aed*, 4.1.15-27. For a select bibliography on the layout of the archaeological site of Justiniana Prima at Caričin Grad in Serbia, see Vujadin Ivanišević, Ivan Bugarski, and Aleksandar Stamenković's "The Outer Forts of Caričin Grad: Visualisation of Digital Terrain Models and Interpretation" published in 2019; Vujadin Ivanišević's "Caričin Grad (Justiniana Prima): A New-Discovered City for a 'New' Society" published in 2016; Vujadin Ivanišević and Sonja Stamenković's "Late Roman Fortifications in the Leskovac Basin in Relation to Urban Centres" published in 2014. For Justinian's church policy concerning Justiniana Prima, see Stanislaw Turlej's *Justiniana Prima: An Underestimated Aspect of Justinian's Church Policy* published in 2017. The emperor Justin II was also an avid builder of religious buildings. For instance, in the capital, he embellished the church of Saint Mary at Blachernae by adding two arches giving the church a cruciform shape. *Anth. Gr*, 1.2-3. In addition, he built the church of the holy Apostles Paul and Peter in the orphanage. Furthermore, he provided his patronage to the construction of a new patriarchate next to the Hagia Sophia. Cameron 1979: 8. He also rebuilt the church of the Apostles in the Triconch near the Capitol. Theoph. *Chron*, AM 6064.

[209] Topping 1998: 22-35. Procopius calls Justinian 'builder of the world'. Proc. *De Aed*, 4.1.17.

[210] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.1.21-78; Romanos the Melodist, *On Earthquakes and Fires*; Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 55-56, 135-354; Coripp. *In Laudem*, 4.290-325. Compare also the inauguration anthem for the Hagia Sophia in Edessa. Palmer and Rodley 1988: 117-168. See also Koder 2008.

[211] Churches, such as the Holy Apostles, where Justinian and his wife Theodora were buried, the churches of saint Mary of Blachernae and saint Mary of Chalkoprateia, two of the three Marian foundations in Constantinople, and the Hagia Irene, the first church built in the capital city, were also significant contributors to the sacred landscape of the capital, and tokens of imperial ideological expression alongside the Hagia Sophia.

Churches during the reign of Justinian also gradually became integral components in imperial propaganda. Paul the Silentiary, for instance, framed his panegyrical address to Justinian in a context which displayed Christianity's victory over the old Roman ways. He stated that Hagia Sophia surpassed the Roman Capitol.[212] By Justinian's reign, churches increasingly featured in imperial ceremonial, forming an instrument for displaying the Christian public image of the emperor. The excerpts of the lost history of Peter the Patrician that survive in the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies* attributed to the emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus, and the panegyric of Corippus show that churches became key stops for offering prayer and thanks to God during ceremonial processions.[213] By incorporating churches within the course of public ceremonies, emperors were able to further display their piety. As a result, religious structures were crucial components in the sacralisation process of imperial identity during the sixth century, particularly in the age of Justinian.

3.3 Imperial iconography: Justinian and Justin II

The emperors of the Justinianic dynasty portrayed themselves as restorers of the Roman empire, and keepers of the True faith. This section will examine the self-portrayal of the emperors Justinian and Justin II in imperial iconography with the aim of demonstrating how emperors of the sixth century gradually associated their own image with Christian themes and figures, while still promoting classical imperial motifs in official imagery. For this section we are particularly interested in 'official' imperial images, and images associated with official imperial images. Unofficial, or unfavourable representations of the imperial regimes of Justinian and Justin II will be discussed in two separate sections below. We will mainly discuss mosaics, panels, and images 'painted' in words that depict the emperor in his role as ruler or expressing imperial ideology. In this capacity, imperial statues are also considered as part of official imagery capable of expressing imperial ideology.

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[212] Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 150-155.

[213] Maas 2005b: 76-80. For the coronation processions of the emperors Leo I, Anastasius, and Justin I, see *De. Cer*, 414-415, 425, 430. For the consular procession of Justin II, see Coripp. *In Laudem*, 4.264-325. Triumphal processions from the mid-sixth century onwards, following the revival of the classical triumph by Justinian in 534, also took on a distinct Christian character by involving prayers, all-night vigils and other pious rituals in the capital's churches. During his 559 triumphal procession following a victory over the Kutrigur Huns, Justinian stopped at the church of the Holy Apostles to light candles in honour of his late wife Theodora. Stein 1949: 818-819; *De. Cer*, 497. Brian Croke begins his chapter in the CCAJ with a description of Justinian's triumph. Croke 2005: 60. He argues that the ceremony was the first time a church had been included in the triumph ceremony. Croke 2005: 78. The emperor Maurice celebrated a victory in 592 with liturgical services in the form of all-night vigils in the church of Hagia Sophia. Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.24; Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 6.8.3-8; Theoph. *Chron*, AM 6085. By the seventh century, coronation ceremonies also regularly took place within the church of Hagia Sophia, representing a switch in tradition as they previously took place in secular locations. Cameron 1979: 11.

The emperors of the Justinian dynasty left behind a great deal of artistic representations of their reigns. To display the successes in the wars that made up parts of his imperial *renovatio*, Justinian erected statues, and commissioned the installation of mosaics featuring his victories in the east and the west. Two such displays of imperial grandeur included the mosaics on the Chalke, and the equestrian statue of Justinian. The Chalke mosaics, according to Procopius, depicted Justinian and his wife flanked by the senate, and Belisarius returning in triumph bearing the spoils of his victories, the defeated Vandal and Gothic kings and kingdoms.[214] The equestrian statue of Justinian, according to Procopius, depicted the emperor on horse wearing classical style armour, and holding a globe surmounted by a cross.[215] The emperor erected the statue on a column in the Augusteum to commemorate a victory against the Persians. Both these images represent classical portrayals of imperial victory. They symbolise Justinian's 'renewal' of imperial prosperity, and the restoration of the empire.

Corippus provides another testimony of imperial iconography from Justinian's reign. The author provides a detailed description of Justinian's funerary vestment on which the emperor is depicted as victor amidst his court. The description of Justinian's funerary vestment closely resembles the description of the mosaics featured on the Chalke. The emperor is said to be trampling on the neck of the Vandal ruler, while Libya personified applauds, and personified Rome 'the ancient parent of empire and liberty' displays her bosom.[216] Libya also bears fruit and laurels, the classical symbols of prosperity. The notion of imperial prosperity following the reconquest of the west was further cemented by Procopius who wrote in his panegyric that Justinian 'wedded the whole State to a life of prosperity'.[217] Classical motifs in official imagery were thus crucial to Justinian's portrayal as a restorer.

Several images portraying 'classical' style victory also integrated the current Christian ideology of imperial power. For instance, the early sixth-century Barberini ivory diptych combines classical and Christian motifs within a display of imperial victory (figure 8). The central panel presents an emperor, possibly Justinian, on horseback trampling on the conquered barbarians, while above, Christ in the Heavens, from whom victory comes, reigns above the emperor on earth.[218]

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[214] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.10.15-20.
[215] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.2.7-13. For a detailed analysis of the equestrian statue of Justinian and its surrounding narratives, see Boeck 2021.
[216] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 1.274-293.
[217] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.1.11.
[218] For a more in-depth study of the barberini ivory, see Cristini 2019: 489-520. Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 30-33. "So you (Justinian) remained steadfast and had faith in Him alone who is your champion – I mean God – through whom you are victorious in all things." Translation by Peter Bell.

Figure 8: Ivory Diptych of an emperor on horseback (Centre panel), trampling on eastern and western 'barbarians' (Lower panel), with Christ in Heaven flanked by winged victories or angels (Top panel), and a soldier carrying a statuette of Victory (Left panel), Barberini Ivory, Louvre Museum, Paris, France. (Image © thebyzantinelegacy)

In addition, although the Chalke mosaics themselves did not possess any association with Christian ideology, the context surrounding the description of Justinian's victories, as presented on the funerary vestment, presents a conscious evolution in imperial mentality in regard to the integration of Christian themes and expression surrounding imperial imagery. Justinian's funeral itself, as described by Corippus, consisted of a ceremonial procession to the imperial mausoleum in the church of the Holy Apostles where he would be buried alongside his wife.[219] Sophia reportedly had the vestment made so that Justinian would be adorned with his own triumphs while being carried to his tomb.[220] The funeral itself is also reminiscent of the ceremonial deposition (*adventus*) of a relic in the church of the Holy Apostles as discussed in the first section of the second chapter.[221] Therefore, by the mid-sixth century, there appears to be a conscious crossover between classical and Christian themes, and imperial victory and religious piety in the form of literary imagery by panegyrists.

Procopius also attributed a similar context to the equestrian statue of Justinian. According to Procopius, the emperor on horseback bore no weapons. Instead, the cross

[219] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 3.1-61.
[220] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 1.291-293.
[221] Cameron 1979: 10. Cf. the description of the ceremonial *adventus* involving relics at p.19-20.

surmounted on the globe represented the sole emblem by which Justinian 'has obtained both his empire and his victory in war.'[222] The symbol of the cross in association with war was also used in the description of Constantine's victory at the Milvian bridge and the war against Licinius. Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius described how Constantine received a sign or vision of the cross with the phrase 'by this conquer' attached to it.[223] According to the same authors, Constantine had marked the shields of his soldiers with the Staurogram, the Latin cross, and later used a new military standard, the *labarum*, shaped in the form of a cross showing the Chi-Rho sign.[224] The cross, then, since the time of Constantine, represented the emblem of the Christian emperor, the emblem by which the eastern Roman emperor acquired his empire and victory in war.

Imperial art during the reign of Justinian became further integrated within the ecclesiastical setting. For instance, the mosaics of Justinian and Theodora located in the church of San Vitale in Ravenna showcase the combination of imperial and religious motifs, while associating the imperial couple with holy figures. The mosaics depict Justinian and Theodora surrounded by members of their court and the clergy of Ravenna (figures 9-10).[225] Both the emperor and empress are haloed, thus appearing to be portrayed in the same light as the holy figures adorning the church. In addition, the imperial couple are depicted in similar light to the image of the youthful Christ above the panels on account of their purple cloak, the symbol of imperial status. Furthermore, the hem of empress Theodora's imperial cloak depicts the images of the three magi bringing their gifts to the Christ child.[226] The emperor and empress appear to be performing liturgy or presenting their gifts to the saints under the watch of Christ whose image stands above on the dome.[227] The combination of the haloes, crowns, jewellery, and the imperial costumes presented in similar fashion to a narrative scene further gives the sentiment of sacral majesty rather than a human air. It appears as though the Ravenna mosaics of the imperial couple are equated with holy icons.

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[222] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.2.11-12.
[223] Barnes 2014: 77. See also Rajiv Kumar Bhola's 2015 doctoral thesis entitled "A Man of Visions: A New Examination of the Vision(s) of Constantine (Panegyric VI, Lactantius' De mortibus persecutorum, and Eusebius' De vita Constantini)", who examines the narratives that surround the vision of Constantine.
[224] Barnes 2014: 78.
[225] It remains unclear who commissioned the mosaics of the imperial couple. Justinian and Theodora never went to Ravenna. But since Justinian adorned numerous churches, the imperial couple may have financed the final parts of the construction and decoration of San Vitale. There are also speculations that the silver merchant Julian, or the bishop Maximianus insisted on the mosaics of the imperial pairs as a celebration of the return of Ravenna to orthodoxy. Herrin 2007: 61-69.
[226] Herrin 2007: 66-67.
[227] Herrin 2007: 66.

Figure 9: Mid-sixth century wall mosaic of the emperor Justinian flanked by members of his court and members of the clergy, Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. (Image © thebyzantinelegacy)

Figure 10: Mid-sixth century wall mosaic of the empress Theodora flanked by members of her court, Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy. (Image © thebyzantinelegacy)

The mid-sixth century author Corippus integrated contemporary Christian mentalities within his description of Justin II's consular inauguration in addition to the abundant themes of victory, prosperity and renewal associated with the consulship. According to his description of the consular banquet, the image of Justinian had been depicted everywhere as it pleased the imperial couple.[228] They even rejoiced at it. In his description, the author

[228] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 4.114.

ascribes a holiness to the likeness of Justinian as if his image equated to that of an icon.[229] He further wrote that it was as though Justinian's image was real and standing there alive.[230] Such a description provides insights into the mentalities of people paying their respects or venerating both holy figures and emperors through images. Justinian is portrayed in this scene as a holy icon, and appears to receive great respect and almost reverence from his successor as though he was truly present in the room.

Just as the imperial ideology of the Christian emperors was manifested in imperial ceremonial and in imperial iconography, so too was the representation of the emperor as the *imago Christi* manifested in the same contexts. Under Justin II, and subsequently Tiberius II and Maurice, the association between the likeness of Christ and the emperor in juxtaposition to each other becomes further articulated. Above the golden imperial throne, within the *Chrysotriklinos*, *i.e*, the ceremonial golden chamber, was an image of Christ.[231] Thus, upon entering the throne room, eastern Roman subjects and foreigners alike would see the emperor on his throne as the 'living embodiment on earth of Christ in Heaven'.[232] According to André Grabar, the throne of the emperor even came to carry the association of the throne of Christ as during certain religious days, holy items, such as the Gospels, the Mandylion or the True Cross were placed on it.[233] Also, according to Averil Cameron, the closest architectural parallel of the throne room was the centralised churches, since the room itself appeared to have been modelled on 'Byzantine' ecclesiastical architecture.[234] Pictorial scenes of the life of Christ further decorated the room itself.[235] As a result, the conception and decor of the golden chamber expressed the idea that the enthroned emperor under the image of Christ represented a microcosm of God in Heaven.

The association of imperial imagery with religious motifs and ideology was not a new phenomenon in the Roman world. Pagan emperors had long associated their images with the gods and heroes of the Greco-Roman religion. The practice itself was no different during Late Antiquity. But during this period, the emperors gradually shifted towards Christian themes to portray their image. The association between imperial imagery and Christian themes is increasingly evident during the reign of Justinian and his successors. Yet classical motifs were nonetheless present. The emperors depicted themselves using, at the same time,

[229] Cf. Agapetus, *Advice*, 5: "Know, you divinely crafted image of piety, that the more you are thought worthy of great gifts from God, the greater is the return you owe Him." Translation by Peter Bell 2009.
[230] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 4.115.
[231] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.425.
[232] Cameron 1979: 17.
[233] Grabar 1984: 34.
[234] Cameron 1979: 17.
[235] Mango 1986: 128.

the motifs adopted from the longstanding classical Roman tradition, and the Christian themes of the newly emerging tradition of their times. The combination of such traditions within imperial depictions presented not only a familiar appearance to the image of the emperor, as the imperial image was increasingly linked with Christian icons, but also an antiquarian touch in order to drive home the idea that the sixth-century emperors were the true heirs to Augustus. In the end, however, the classical motifs were integrated within the wider framework that saw the increasing Christianisation of imperial power and the sacralisation of the imperial figure.

3.4 Justinian and Justin II's Christ-like attributes

Since the sixth-century emperors strove to imitate God's rule in Heaven, they inevitably began to portray themselves as possessing similar characteristics. This section examines the image of Justinian and Justin II as portrayed by official propaganda with the aim of drawing parallels between sacral characteristics attributed to the emperor and those attributed to Christ. It aims to evaluate the increased sacralisation, or rather the self or hyper-sacralisation, of imperial power. As seen in the first section above, the political discourse of the sixth century surrounding the imperial ideology of the Christian emperors held that the emperor was God's viceregent on earth, as was elaborated by Eusebius of Caesarea. When further examining the content of contemporary panegyrics and mirror of princes, it is hard not to observe, in addition to the saints, the association of the emperor with Christ himself by the nature of his position, his image, and his character.[236] Therefore, imitation, under Justinian and his successors, takes on a new form.[237]

Since the Heavenly kingdom was the model for the emperor's kingdom on earth, it also represented the goal which the emperor strove to attain. The eastern Roman empire, which constitutes the earthly kingdom in political ideology, becomes the ladder for the ascent to Heaven. On this Agapetus writes: "Use fittingly your kingdom here below so that it may become a ladder for you to the glory above."[238] It is in this context that the emperor's virtues, such as Christian piety, philanthropy (sometimes referred to as the 'love for mankind' of Justinian), temperance, and justice, repeatedly invoked by the sources, come to define the method by which the emperor ascended the ladder.[239]

[236] On this, see also the introduction of Bell 2009.
[237] Meier 2016a: 86.
[238] Agapetus, *Advice*, 59. Translation by Peter Bell.
[239] Koder 2008: 280-282; Henry 1967: 298-299, 306-307; Agapetus, *Advice*, 6, 40, 50, 53.

According to Agapetus, good deeds to the poor, temperance and mercy represent the qualities through which the emperor should imitate Christ.[240] Although it had been a ruler's virtue long before Christianity during the classical period, philanthropy had become a cornerstone of the early Christian emperors' official discourse owing to its integration into the panegyric tradition by Eusebius of Caesarea. As a virtue now adopted by Christian rulers, it displayed the emperor's generosity towards his subjects and his care-taking abilities for the less fortunate as a pious Christian. It is well known that Justinian cared for his subjects by building orphanages, hospices and hospitals, deeds that should be interpreted as acts of philanthropy. Justinian's church building programme could also be interpreted as the 'greater return' owed to God or the manner by which the emperor repays his 'debt of gratitude' to his 'benefactor' as was written by Agapetus.[241]

The emperor must also be temperate and show mercy. He must forgive so that he can be forgiven. On this virtue ascribed to Justinian, Paul the Silentiary echoes the lines of the Lord's Prayer: "With compassion for the errors of life, you have groaned often at our transgressions, Best of Men. Often you moisten your kindly eye with tears, as kings will, grieving on our behalf. Especially when on seeing lack of self-control, life's housemate, you release everyone from their evil debts, like God, and hasten to forgive."[242] The elaboration of these specific characteristics or attributes to Justinian demonstrates the idealised view of the emperor as a representation of Christ on earth for his subjects.

Early in the reign of Justin II, the association of the emperor with the figure of Christ takes on additional significance. According to Averil Cameron, the coronation ceremony of Justin II marks the exact turning-point in the shift from secular inauguration rituals to their fully Christian interpretation.[243] This shift requires more clarifications. Corippus appears to fundamentally change the perception of the image of the emperor itself in his description. Not only does the ceremony include Christian motifs and themes, but the emperor himself assumes a (similar) likeness to that of Christ. Upon being raised on his military shield during

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[240] The deacon Agapetus believed that attention to the poor provided the emperor with an alternative form of legitimacy from that provided by his election to the throne. Through good work and philanthropy, Agapetus wrote that the emperor became 'loveable to his subjects'. Agapetus, *Advice*, 48. Translation by Peter Bell. In addition, Justinian's own policies showed that the emperor appears to have been well aware of the political advantages of 'welfare'. Bell 2009: 46. See also Rapp 2005. But these policies naturally provoked resentment from those better off. High taxation, for example, as a result of social welfare to the poor mostly fell on the traditional landowning elites. Therefore, many of the elites of Constantinople grew resentful and became ill-disposed to the emperor.

[241] Agapetus, *Advice*, 5. Translation by Peter Bell.

[242] Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 40-47. Translation by Peter Bell. Compare the passage of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew, 6.12.

[243] Cameron 1979: 11.

the coronation, Justin II is said to rise like a second sun, meaning Christ.[244] The author uses the same analogy when the emperor is raised in his curule chair.[245] The emperor, according to Averil Cameron, then emerges in his new role as God's representative on earth, *i.e*, the true *imago Christi*. The (pagan) tradition of raising the emperor on a shield is now given a new Christian interpretation.[246]

In addition, Corippus employs light in his description of the emperor's robing ceremony as a metaphor to symbolise the emperor's holiness as the light of his limbs and royal costume disperses the darkness even without the light of the sun.[247] Furthermore, the poet wrote that Justin, 'came out amid his own light, and touched his serene brow, making the sign of the holy Tree' before greeting the crowd in the hippodrome.[248] This passage comes close to portraying Justin as the second coming of Christ who will bring peace, prosperity, and true orthodoxy to the Roman Christian realm. Up until then, the emperor had been associated with holy people and Christ only in terms of social characteristics, and in images that provided an additional visual component of imperial ideology to that displayed by the patriarch's performance during imperial coronation ceremonies. But by the mid-sixth century, as seen in the work of Corippus, for example, the likeness of the emperor itself is presented in similar terminology to that of Christ. As a result, the emperors achieve a more complete representation of their image as an imitation of that of Christ in Heaven.

3.5 The 'Prince of Demons'

If the image of the emperor could be associated with the saints and Christ by favourable sources, either as an idealised conception of a Christian imperial figure or from the emperor's genuine desire to be viewed as a holy figure himself, then it was also possible to associate his image with the devil or the anti-Christ. This section specifically examines Procopius' depiction of Justinian and Theodora's images and imperial regime in his *Secret History* with the aim of demonstrating the manipulation of the regime's imperial ideology by a hostile source. By the end of this section, it will be apparent that the demonisation of the imperial figure also constituted a significant part of the sacralisation process of imperial power, as the association with the devil, though not holy, involves Christian themes and

[244] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.148.
[245] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 4.99, 250.
[246] The shield raising ritual is originally of Germanic origins. The first Roman emperor to be raised on a shield as Augustus was the emperor Julian while on campaign in Gaul. For a detailed analysis of the shield raising ceremony, see Hans Teitler's *Raising on a Shield: Origin and Afterlife of a Coronation Ceremony* published in 2002.
[247] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.83-103.
[248] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.298-299.

motifs, and allows for a greater perspective on what represented the holy during the sixth century.

Unfavourable sources to the Justinianic regime demonised the imperial couple and their rule. According to Ryan Denson, many demonological characteristics attributed to the emperor Justinian by Procopius are related to contemporary beliefs picked up by the author to dress up the imperial figure as an Antichrist-like figure in power.[249] These beliefs, Denson argued, reflect the contemporary notions of demons and the undercurrents of apocalyptic sentiments that circulated during the sixth century.[250] Indeed, Procopius expressed these beliefs by touching on various aspects of Justinian's imperial ideology, image, and policies and decisions.

Throughout his work, Procopius inverts the elements concerning the imperial ideology presented by the regime of Justinian and Theodora. Characteristics of the imperial family that have been held as holy in other works are demonised by Procopius in the *Secret History*. If Christian political theory ascribed a close relationship between God and the 'good' emperor, then a 'bad' emperor would be ascribed a distant relationship with God and one closer to the Devil.[251] To drive home the notion of the bad, or unholy, emperor and empress, Procopius elaborated on the low origins of Justinian, who was a peasant from Illyricum, and Theodora, a former theatre actress. He also compared Justinian's physical appearance with the previous pagan emperor, Domitian, who had been associated with the Antichrist on account of his reputation as a persecutor.[252] With these elements, Procopius painted a portrait of an impious emperor who was unfit to take the sceptre of imperial power.

The hagiographic elements concerning Justinian's character and his imperial policies in official propaganda are distorted by Procopius in his invective against the emperor. This is perhaps deliberately done to counter the emperor's own self-sacralisation, but the more likely explanation remains that the themes and thoughts concerning bad emperors were well established within an increasingly Christianising society.[253] Demons offered a readily available explanation for the 'evils' and misfortunes of the times. They were the logical opposite of the providence of God who acted through miracles. The occurrence of extraordinary events in relation to people possessing contact with the supernatural must be

[249] Denson 2022: 499.
[250] Cameron 2018: 16; Denson 2022: 499-518.
[251] Cameron 1985: 56-57.
[252] Proc. *SH*, 8.12-21. Compare Procopius' association of Justinian's achievements to 'great' rulers in the preface to *The Buildings*. The idea that Procopius' Justinian was related to the figure of the Antichrist has already been suggested in previous studies on the works of Procopius, see Cameron 2018: 16, note 27; Börm 2015: 334-35; Meier 2004: 86-89.
[253] Denson 2022: 499-500; Cameron 1985: 57.

explained in comparable terminology. Procopius, then, does not deny the special relationship of the emperor with supernatural forces, whether they are God or the Devil.

Procopius inverted the concept of imitation that saw the emperor as the *imago Christi* on earth by employing the same Christianising imagery and language of the time. The concept of the enthroned emperor under God, for example, becomes the enthroned 'prince of demons'. Such was the term that a monk reportedly uttered upon seeing Justinian on his throne.[254] Additionally, members of the court, according to Procopius, claimed to have witnessed a strange demonic apparition in the place of the emperor, whose head suddenly disappeared from his body, and reported that the emperor's face during one occasion suddenly became shapeless flesh.[255] According to Anthony Kaldellis, the term 'Headless Ones' was used by the emperor for Miaphysite Christians.[256] Furthermore, the ascetic and holy lifestyle of Justinian, praised in official propaganda as saintly, became a source of criticism associated with the emperor's 'ghoulish' appearance.

The manipulation of Justinianic ideology by Procopius appears to come as a reaction to the official political narrative which saw the emperor as a holy or quasi holy figure. Yet, judging by the Christian themes and motifs of both *The Buildings* and the *Secret History*, Procopius' invective was not a rejection of the political ideology of his time that saw the emperor as the viceregent of God on earth.[257] Rather it was a lamentation about the political and even cultural situation in the empire under the regime of Justinian and Theodora from a member of the traditional elite. Thus Procopius' demonisation of Justinian shows a resistance from the traditional elite to the emperor's policies or reforms concerning the scope of imperial power that subsequently affected the cultural landscape of the empire as a whole. The literary 'flourishes' of Procopius' classicising style surrounding the demonic attributes accorded to the emperor does not diminish the author's underlying sentiments behind his accusation of Justinian's destruction of the world.[258] Finally, Procopius indeed portrayed the emperor as a demon who was unfit to rule, but he did not reject the ideological concept that the imperial office represented the will of God on earth.

[254] Denson 2022: 507; Proc. *SH*, 12.24-26.
[255] Proc. *SH*, 12. 20.23.
[256] Kaldellis 2024: 289; Kaldellis 2004a: 156.
[257] Cameron 1985: 65.
[258] Cameron 1985: 58; Proc. *SH*, 18.1.45.

3.6 Dreams, visions, and prophecies

This section seeks to examine the heightened sacralisation of the emperors Justin II, Tiberius II, and Maurice by looking at specific episodes concerning the announcement of imperial successions in contemporary sources. By the second half of the sixth century, the sources increasingly present imperial succession in the context of divine prophecy and messianic arrival. These narratives are biased in favour of the imperial regime as they present the emperor and his relationship with the holy in hagiographic terminology. Just as pagan sources did before, the Christian sources of the second half of the sixth century now begin to portray signs of various kinds that attended imperial succession. Through dreams, visions or prophecies, divine figures or symbolic events announced the succession of an emperor prior to the physical investiture of imperial power.

Since Christian emperors were viewed as God's viceregent on earth, it was natural for literature to develop a divine origin for the emperor's accession to the throne. The poet Corippus displays the concept of divine intervention in the imperial succession of Justin II in the context of a dream. The scene describing the emperor's dream integrates themes surrounding imperial ideology typically found in classical literature. For instance, piety, fate, and divine intervention, are recurring themes in Virgil's *Aeneid*; a poem which makes use of the symbolism of the imperial regime of Augustus.[259] As a Latin poet, Corippus had studied and taken inspiration from western classical sources, such as Virgil's poem, among others.[260] The dream itself goes as follows: a divine figure with the characteristics of the virgin Mary came down from the heavens, stood before Justin, circled his head with the diadem, and clothed him with the imperial robe. The scene foreshadowed Justin's succession to the throne of his deceased uncle.[261] In addition, Corippus reported that, after praying to Christ in the church of the Archangel, the voice of the Holy Spirit assented to his accession to the throne by uttering the words 'Reign' on behalf of God.[262]

Upon careful analysis of the passage of Corippus, Christian imperial ideology and its representations during the mid-sixth century underwent three major developments. First, the

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[259] For detailed studies on the *Aeneid*, see the works published in the edition published in 2014 *A Companion to Vergil's Aeneid and its Tradition* edited by Joseph Farrell and Michael C. J. Putnam.

[260] Cameron 1976a: 8.

[261] "The deepest rest had not yet relaxed and overcome his limbs when the Virgin, gliding down through the upper side of heaven, with merciful expression and happy in her chaste tread, her dusky hair veiled and with kindly eyes, (the image of holy Piety, to judge from these signs) stood before his divine feet and put the crown on him with her right hand, circling his head with the holy diadem, and clothed him gently with the imperial robe." Coripp. *In Laudem*, 1.32-38. Translation by Averil Cameron. For predictions concerning Justin II, as well as the patriarchs Johns Scholasticus and Anastasius of Antioch, see also *V. Sym. Iun*, 202-211.

[262] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.42-45.

author portrays God's support of, collaboration with, and selection of the new emperor in the form of detailed literary imagery. Second, the virgin Mary occupied a growing role in eastern Roman society and imperial ideology. Third, the concept of divine communication is developed to its logical conclusion through the emphasis on the emperor's intercessory abilities. In addition, the use of religious language throughout the scene, such as the description of the emperor's feet as divine, or characterising the diadem as holy, a possible connection to the halo circling the head of holy figures in images, further shows the sacral characteristics of the emperor since he is also described as having divine features. Finally, despite the secular topic of his work, Corippus has successfully reinterpreted, in Christian terminology and imagery, some of the more prominent themes of classical literature related to imperial ideology.

Sources of the late sixth and early seventh centuries virtually created a Christian 'mythology' by presenting late sixth-century imperial succession in the form of a divinely inspired episode. For instance, John of Ephesus wrote that the words spoken by Justin in his speech following the elevation of Tiberius as Caesar were spoken by an angel of God.[263] In addition, he wrote that when images of Justin II and Tiberius II were set up in their honour, an angel was painted standing between them, his mouth to Justin's ear as if he was receiving words from God through an icon.[264] Such episodes created a sacred narrative surrounding imperial identity. The sources by the late sixth century also appeared to have begun drawing parallels between biblical narratives and the rise of new emperors. Evagrius, for instance, described how the emperor Maurice, while serving in the east, saw flames appear in front of him on an altar which Gregory, the bishop of Jerusalem, took as a sign from God that Maurice was destined for greatness.[265] The scene is reminiscent of the story of Moses and the burning bush, to whom God gave the task of leading the Israelites to a new land chosen by Him. In doing so, the sources placed the emperors on equal standing with the saints and thus reflected the imperial propaganda of the period.

Divine intervention was not a new theme surrounding certain exploits of Christian emperors in Christian literature. For instance, God is said to have intervened in Constantine's

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[263] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.5.
[264] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.5.
[265] Evagr. *HE*, 5.21. Eustratius, in his *Life of Eutychius*, recounts how the patriarch received several prophecies from God concerning the accessions of Justin II and Tiberius II, and a vision concerning the accession of Maurice. *V. Eutych*, 1780-1952 (VII. 63- 69). Evagrius also writes that Christ appeared to Maurice in a waking vision, an event which the author interpreted as a sign that Maurice would rule the empire since Christ appears only to those who are most pious in their devotion to Him. Evagr. *HE*, 5.21. For another prediction of Maurice's accession, see also *V. Theodori. Sykeot*, 54. In addition, Theophylact begins his work by stating that Providence personified assisted in choosing Maurice. Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 1.1.12.

battle at the Milvian bridge, and in battle at the Frigidus between the emperor Theodosius I and the usurper Eugenius.[266] But the interpretation of imperial succession situated in the context of divine intervention only began to appear as a norm in literature related to imperial propaganda during the mid-sixth century and early seventh century, as demonstrated by the examples above. The reworking of classical literary themes and their reinterpretation to fit Christian ideology, as well as the inclusion of hagiographic elements surrounding imperial succession follows the evolution of contemporary mentalities which increasingly sees the imperial figure as a sacral figure, one who is capable of communicating with the divine in methods similar to the saints.

3.7 Loss of God's favour? Illness, abdication speeches, and death

If the rise of a Christian emperor could be interpreted in religious terms, through divine intervention from God who assented to the emperor's rise to the throne, then so too could the downfall of an emperor be interpreted in similar language from an opposing perspective. This section examines the process of hyper-sacralisation of the emperors Justin II, Tiberius II, and Maurice by looking at specific episodes concerning the abdication of power or downfall of an emperor. By the second half of the sixth century, the sources increasingly present the downfall or abdication of an emperor in the context of a prediction from a divine or supra-natural source. In a similar manner to the succession of an emperor in the late sixth century, dreams, visions or prophecies, and even dialogue between the emperor and a divine figure, now feature as prominent elements in literature foreshadowing the end of an emperor's rule.

A continuous series of events contributed to the abdication of the emperor Justin II. Following the loss of the fortress of Dara in 572 during the war against the Persian, initiated after Justin's negotiations with the Turkic Khaganate over the silk trade ultimately leading to his refusal to send the peace payment to the Persians, the emperor became afflicted with a severe mental illness.[267] The illness itself, according to John of Ephesus, is the result of God's displeasure with the emperor for his wickedness and for 'using his royal power for things excessive and alien to all piety'.[268] God, according to John, was displeased with Justin II for shedding the 'blood of innocent men' through his wars and persecutions against Christians,

[266] For the religious character of the battle of the Frigidus, see Cameron Al 2011: 93-117.
[267] Kaldellis 2024: 325-326; Greatrex and Lieu 202: 137-142; Men. Proc. *Hist*, fr.16. John of Ephesus describes the various ailments of Justin II's mental illness in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.2.
[268] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.2. Translated by Robert Payne Smith.

and ‘oppressing’ priests and bishops of the Miaphysite belief.[269] In a similar way to Procopius, John of Ephesus attributed the emperor’s illness to his own vices and wickedness. The description of the emperor’s chastisement is reminiscent of contemporary descriptions of the source of the plague of 542.

The account of John of Ephesus surrounding the mental illness of Justin II reflects contemporary religious mentalities surrounding the sources of wickedness. God, according to John, has given His judgment onto the emperor and punished him by sending an ‘evil angel, who suddenly entered into him, and took his form, and domineered over him cruelly and fearfully, making him an example of the terribleness of their malice.’[270] In his description, John of Ephesus introduces a demonological dimension to Justin’s illness. Like Procopius, in his invective against the emperor Justinian, the author inverts certain elements of the emperor’s imperial ideology. For instance, Justin’s goal to seek Church unity resulted in punishment from God. In addition, the Christ-like image of the emperor presented by Corippus is abandoned and replaced by the image of an emperor possessed by the devil. John echoes the words of Procopius by further describing the ailments as ‘being the workings of the prince of darkness.’[271]

Two years later, Justin II, in an instance of clear-mindedness, elevated the count of the excubitors Tiberius to the rank of Caesar at Sophia’s suggestion. Justin’s abdication speech to Tiberius echoes the recurring theme of divine intervention. John of Ephesus writes: “Come, my son, enter upon thy office, and displace him who has set his Creator at nought, that Creator Who gave him the kingdom, from which his own eyes now see him rejected and fallen.”[272] Likewise, the historian Theophylact provides an account of the emperor Tiberius II handing imperial power to Maurice.[273] The speech of Tiberius, read by the patriarch of Constantinople, John Nesteutes (582-595), is similar to Justin II’s speech to Tiberius as presented by John of Ephesus. The content of both abdication speeches is reminiscent of the advice given to Justinian by the deacon Agapetus.[274]

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[269] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.2.
[270] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.2. Translated by Robert Payne Smith.
[271] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.2. Translated by Robert Payne Smith.
[272] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.2. Translated by Robert Payne Smith. Likewise, the author Theophylact has also recorded Justin II’s speech of nomination of Tiberius II as Cesar. Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 3.11.5-12.1. See Chapter 3 of Bruno Bleckmann’s *Die letzte Generation der griechischen Geschichtsschreiber* published in 2022, in which he argued that the speech found in the work of Theophylact should be attributed to the historian Menander Protector.
[273] Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 1.1.1-20.
[274] The speeches of the emperors Justin II and Tiberius as recounted by John of Ephesus and Theophylact put emphasis on the virtues of justice, clemency, temperance, and piety.

According to Theophylact, shortly before Tiberius fell ill, the emperor had a dream that a man 'wearing a likeness of a divine beauty, indescribable in words, yet inimitable in painting' visited him during his sleep announcing to him that Christ relays the message that impious tyranny will not come during his reign.[275] Theophylact describes the passing of the emperor Tiberius with terminology reminiscent of holy figures. Even though a 'king', Theophylact writes, his soul shed the 'burdensome mortal cloak'.[276] The death of the emperor was met with night-long hymns surrounded by illuminated torches, and the body of the emperor was escorted by the people under the rays of the heavenly hemisphere; the place where the emperor's soul has gone to.[277] The passage is reminiscent of Agapetus' *Advice* which had the earthly kingdom be a ladder to the heavenly kingdom. Here Theophylact presents this concept through literary imagery. Furthermore, the hymns and candles are reminiscent of veneration practices performed in front of the relics of saints.

Concerning Maurice, Theophylact links the emperor's death to impious behaviour in regard to relics and a prophecy from the divine foreshadowing the dynasty's downfall. According to Theophylact, Maurice doubted the efficacy of the relics of St Euphemia in Chalcedon in year 12 of his reign.[278] The event was seen, by the author, as the reason for the emperor's death in 602. In addition, the same author recounts that a monk had prophesied the murder of Maurice and his children, a prophecy which, supposedly, a man named Herodian recounted to the emperor.[279] The ninth-century chronicler Theophanes, however, recounts that God asked Maurice to choose between a long reign or death and acceptance into Heaven. The emperor reportedly chose the latter.[280] Finally, by the second half of the sixth century, the sources began to reinterpret the abdication and death of the emperor either to fit within the religious framework of imperial ideology, or to oppose the movement by which the emperor depicted himself or was depicted in the sources as a holy figure, or even a figure of almost divine status, in his own right.

3.8 Concluding remarks:

This chapter has demonstrated that the process of hyper-sacralisation of imperial power was intrinsically linked with relics and icons. It has argued that the emperor Justinian

[275] Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 1.2.1-2. Translated by Michael and Mary Whitby.
[276] Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 1.2.3. Translated by Michael and Mary Whitby.
[277] Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 1.2.4-5.
[278] Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 8.14.1-10.
[279] Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 7.12.10-11.
[280] Theoph. *Chron*, AM 6096. A Syriac version of a similar episode also survives. For a detailed analysis, see Whitby 1988: 21. For a translation of the Syriac text, see Anthony Alcock's *Maurice the Emperor: A Short Syriac Text* published in 2018.

sowed the seeds for an evolution in imperial ideology which manifested during the reigns of his successors through the process by which Justin II, Tiberius II, and Maurice exploited Christian holy objects and holy images, including those 'painted' in words, to provide further sacral significance to their rule and further imbue the imperial position with sacral power. More significantly, we have seen that the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty not only associated themselves with Christ and holy people, but by the mid-sixth century they began to 'imitate' them. We have also seen how Justinian and his successors gradually portrayed their images not only in association with, but also, as holy icons themselves. But the majority of the Christ-like or saint-like qualities attributed to the emperors consist of imperial propaganda from well disposed sources to the emperors or those written at their behest.

Depending on the perspective, the emperors of the sixth century were either equated with Christ or the Devil. The comparisons to the two primary Christian supranatural entities elaborated by the sources present evidence as to the mentalities surrounding the process of sacralisation of the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty. According to sixth-century imperial ideology, it has become evident that Justinian and his successors desired to portray themselves as sacred rulers of the Christian Roman empire, a microcosm of Heaven, by means of associating their rule with the figures of Christ, Mary, and the saints. Therefore, the sources in reaction to the emperors' process of hyper-sacralisation either endorsed or opposed the trend. In the following chapter, we will see in which manner the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty exploited the Christian components of their imperial ideology and heightened sacrality to fashion their empire in the likeness of the divine model.

4. The Christianisation of Eastern Roman Society during the Sixth Century

Introduction:

This chapter broadens the perspective surrounding the self or hyper-sacralisation of Justinian and his successors with an analysis of their imperial policies and decisions. It aims to provide a more complete understanding of the increasing sacralisation of imperial power, and presents a fuller picture of the Christianisation of eastern Roman society from a top-down perspective. This chapter follows the academic tradition arguing that the sixth century represented a period of significant cultural change which saw Christianity gradually encompass all aspects of eastern Roman society. We do, however, demonstrate that this process was nuanced, as classical culture and mentalities had for centuries been ingrained within the cultural fabric of the empire and remained influential even in the sixth century. Therefore we will provide a more sober conclusion in regard to the process itself surrounding this cultural change. By the end of this chapter, it will become apparent that the emperors of the sixth century played a significant role in the Christianisation of eastern Roman society, a process which in turn further assisted in promoting their heightened sacredness.

The process by which Christianity encompassed all aspects of eastern Roman society by the end of the sixth century was gradual and nuanced.[281] Although Christianity had, by the late sixth century, become the primary marker of eastern Roman cultural identity, Justinian and his successors consolidated Christian and classical elements within the sphere of political and imperial ideology to drive home the idea that they were God's chosen representatives on earth as well as the true heirs to Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Accordingly, they founded their policies and decisions on these ideological principles. The guiding question in this chapter thus concerns the manner by which the sixth-century emperors reflected their ideologies on eastern Roman society and how their policies impacted the overall cultural trajectory. The major portion of this chapter will examine the diplomatic, military, religious, and administration policies of the emperors Justinian and Justin II against the backdrop of their imperial ideologies. This will be followed by an analysis of the impact of Christianity on civic identity by the end of the century.

[281] The term nuance in this chapter refers to subtle and elaborate changes not so easily understood and not so clearly perceptible in the meanings or expressions surrounding the cultural evolution between two prominent cultural traditions of the eastern Roman empire during Late Antiquity, Greco-Roman, or the classical traditions, and Christianity in all its forms.

4.1 Christian imperialism

This section aims to demonstrate the role of Christianity in eastern Roman foreign policy by looking at the methods with which Justinian and his successors secured alliances with foreign powers and client kingdoms, while expanding eastern Roman influence and interests in regions beyond the borders on account of shared religious mentalities. Foreign policy was an important factor in building the empire envisioned by the sixth-century emperors. Numerous diplomatic missions sent from Constantinople secured alliances with foreign kingdoms in order to increase the interests and influence of the empire in those regions, as well as gain powerful military, political, and economic allies against potential common enemies. Religion also represented a significant factor in foreign relationships. By the end of this section, we will see that the sixth-century emperors utilised the social qualities of Christianity to push for unity, cooperation and closer relationship between foreign powers and kingdoms, particularly in the east.[282]

According to Geoffrey Greatrex, Justinian was 'the first emperor to perceive the political benefits of missionary activity beyond the frontier.'[283] This is particularly evident on the eastern frontier where Justinian expanded Christian and Roman influence in the Caucasus regions and the eastern steppes by converting and sponsoring the baptisms of several foreign rulers; namely those of Tzath, the ruler of Lazica, Grod, the Hunnic king in the Crimean peninsula, and Grepes, ruler of the Heruli. Tzath, for instance, the ruler of Lazica, a former client state of Persia, rejected Persian customs and asked the Romans to become a Christian. He was baptised, married a Roman woman of aristocratic descent, and returned home with ceremonial robes bearing the image of the emperor Justin I.[284] In addition, the emperor Justinian also sponsored the baptisms of the neighbouring Tzani and Abasgi peoples.[285]

Throughout his reign, Justinian had recourse to a 'religious' diplomacy during conflicts. In the 520s, during the Persian wars, Justinian sought allies in neighbouring kingdoms to assist in the war efforts. He sent an envoy to the Christian kingdom of Axum (in modern Ethiopia) to assist the empire in its efforts to thwart the Persian monopoly in the silk trade from the east. Justinian also attempted to convince the Himyarites (in modern Yemen) to engage in the war against Persia by appealing to the 'like-mindedness in belief' between them and the Romans.[286] Likewise, the emperor Justin II emphasised a common Christianity

[282] For a discussion surrounding the development of a Byzantine Commonwealth, see Fowden 1993.
[283] Greatrex 2005: 491.
[284] Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 17.9.
[285] Greatrex 2005: 496-498; Proc. *Wars*, 1.15.24-25, 8.3.18-21; Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.6, 18.14.
[286] Proc. *Wars*, 1.20.9-13.

between eastern Romans and the Persarmenians as a way to incite rebellion against the Persians during a period of persecution against Christians in the 570s.[287]

Religious diplomacy did not solely involve envoys appealing to the like-minded Christian kingdoms in the attempt to convert and expand the Christian realm, it also involved the exchange of relics to secure alliances. Justin II, for instance, sent a piece of the True cross to Rome. The relic was encased in a reliquary on which an image of himself and Sophia juxtaposed with an image of the lamb in the central medallion are depicted (figure 11).[288] In displaying their images in juxtaposition with the holy Lamb and in using relics and icons as an instrument of diplomacy, the imperial couple provided more credibility to the portrayal of their regime's heightened sacrality. Also, their use as an instrument of religious diplomacy between the emperor and the Pope demonstrates the emperor's display of the nature of his connection with Christ, while attempting to reconcile the Church to the gesture.

Figure 11: sixth century reliquary for a fragment of the True Cross, Crux Vaticana (Vatican Cross), Treasury of St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, Italy. (Image © thebyzantinelegacy)

[287] Justin II's emphasis on a common Christianity had a political dimension. He wished to gain a strategically located and economically valuable territory from which he could defend eastern Roman territory against Persian attack. Justin II, then, continued his uncle's imperialistic agenda by exploiting 'religious' diplomacy. See Main 2019: 125- 138.

[288] Cameron 1979: 17-18. Justin II also sent a fragment of the cross to Poitiers at the demand of the Frankish Queen Radegund where she installed it in the church of Sainte-Croix. Klein 2004: 288-289. The event was commemorated in a series of poems by Venantius Fortunatus. The commemorative poem *Hymnus in Honore Sanctae Crucis* was written by Venantius Fortunatus in honour of the event. Mergiali-Sahas 2001: 46-47.

Like the emperor in the east, the Pope also utilised Christianity as a diplomatic instrument to extend his power and influence in the west. In the 590s, for instance, Pope Gregory (590-604) was able to regain papal authority in Gaul and Spain, and to convert the Lombards, Franks and the Visigoths from Arianism to orthodoxy. He also sent missionaries under his own authority to England to further Christianise the territory.[289] Military pressure from Germanic peoples, lack of assistance from the emperor in Constantinople, and religious conflicts in the second half of the sixth century also empowered the Pope to take on more civic duties such as seeing to the supply of the city.[290] In this way, papal authority during the late sixth and early seventh centuries grew exponentially, and despite the Pope's allegiance to Constantinople, the papacy grew increasingly independent from the influence of the eastern Roman emperor.[291] Thus a widening split between the Papal and imperial offices occurred in the late sixth century.

The awareness of the greater relevance of religion in foreign affairs becomes ever more evident during the reign of Maurice. Despite the supremacy of Zoroastrian ideology under the Sassanian regime, the Persian king Khusro II associated himself with Christianity to an unprecedented degree.[292] The Persian ruler depended on eastern Roman forces to retake the throne, after which he formed an intimate relationship with the empire. As a result of this relationship, he married two Christian women, Maria and Shirin, and also made offerings of a cross to the shrine of Saint Sergius, the patron of the Miaphysite Arabs, in gratitude for the saint's assistance during his exile.[293] According to some circulating narratives of seventh-century Christian historiographers, Khusro II even converted to Christianity through baptism. These accounts, however, are historically baseless.[294] Yet according to Richard Payne, the Persian ruler made use of Christian symbolism combined with Zoroastrianism to promote his reign.[295] This combination demonstrates the ability of Christianity to modify existing religious belief and practices or synthesise various aspects of different religious belief and practice in Late Antiquity.

Christianity was a powerful instrument in the foreign policy of the sixth-century emperors. Missionaries, conversions, gifts and offerings of religious significance, particularly

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[289] *Liber Pontificalis*, 66.
[290] Demacopoulos 2015: 102-112; Pellegrino 2014: 122.
[291] Papal authority grew exponentially when it became clear that the emperor Maurice was unlikely to send troops to Italy to assist against the Lombard threat. Demacopoulos 2015: 94-95.
[292] Payne 2015: 164.
[293] Whitby 1988: 305; Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 5.13-14; Evagr. *HE*, 6.21. For an analysis of the events between the eastern Roman empire and Persia in the East during the sixth century, see Greatrex and Lieu 2002.
[294] Payne 2015: 165.
[295] Payne 2015: 165.

the cross, were not only all prominent features of the diplomatic strategy of Justinian and his successors to promote unity in the Church, secure alliances, and expand eastern Roman influence, but these methods were also used to diffuse and expand Christianity abroad. Finally, Christianisation inevitably involved conflict. Whether it be war or schism, the imperialistic aspirations of Justinian and his successors, the quest for Church unity at all costs, and the forcible conversion of non Christians, conflict was at the heart of the Christianisation process of the eastern Roman empire during the sixth century. Thus as we will see in the following three sections, the process of Christianisation was politicised. Faith and doctrine gradually became instruments to justify eastern Roman imperialism, imperial involvement in Church affairs, and a growing intolerance towards those who did not accept imperial orthodoxy.

4.2 Eastern Roman imperialism: the wars of reconquest

The emperors of the Justinianic dynasty justified their wars on several grounds. Financial necessities, broken treaties, upholding alliances, and even ideological premises were among the many ways that Justinian and his successors pushed their imperialist agendas. Christianity also gradually became a central component within the imperialist ideology of the sixth-century emperors. This section examines the motivations behind the imperialist ideology of Justinian with the aim of demonstrating how, in addition to the classical concept of Roman imperialism, Christianity comes to add a deeper ideological justification for war thereafter. By the end of this section, we will see that the connection between eastern Roman imperialism and religion gradually becomes evident during this period. However, along with Christianity, classical thoughts and expressions remained key factors in the ideological foundation of the sixth-century emperors' military policies. Thus, it will become apparent that Justinian attempted to reconcile two seemingly opposing ideologies within his military policies by combining classical and Christian thoughts and expressions with the political and economic justifications for war.

Military supremacy over the Mediterranean as a whole seems to have been a particular point of interest for Justinian and was an important factor in the westward expansion of eastern Roman power and influence.[296] Although the majority of scholars agree that the conquest of the west was achieved through measures taken under favourable

[296] Peter Sarris believes that the renewal of war with Persia in the early sixth century may have been the driving force for Justinian's western campaigns, adding that the Persian wars rendered it necessary to re-establish Roman supremacy over the Mediterranean to safeguard sea lanes and maximise the resources available in the west, Sarris 2011: 145.

conditions, there is still little doubt that Justinian had imperialistic aspirations. The emperor seized on several opportunities such as dynastic struggles amongst the Vandals and the Goths, in North Africa and Italy, and the request for military assistance in Spain to expand eastern Roman borders and obtain control over major trade routes in the Mediterranean sea.[297] By the end of his western campaign, Justinian had reincorporated North Africa, Italy and a portion of Spain into the empire. As a result, the eastern Roman empire grew exponentially under the emperor Justinian, and the empire's western political influence over neighbouring polities, such as the Franks in the former Roman province of Gaul, also grew.

In addition to economic and political factors, the wars of Justinian also had a religious dimension. Justinian perceived his empire as the centre of Christendom and his regime as the upholder of the true faith, and perceived himself as the person whom God entrusted with the establishment of orthodoxy across the Christian realm. Prior to Justinian's reconquest of North Africa, for instance, the catholic North Africans enjoyed relative peace under king Hilderic as he alleviated the burdens placed upon the Catholic Church by prior Arian kings as a way to improve relations with Constantinople.[298] But when Gelimer deposed his cousin Hilderic, he reversed some of the more tolerant religious policies of his predecessor. As a result, upon hearing the news, Justinian was unsurprisingly displeased, as he saw Hilderic as the protector of his 'co-religionists', the African catholics.[299] These events provided religious grounds for Justinian's decision to invade North Africa to liberate the persecuted catholic Christians. But several of Justinian's advisors opposed the campaign against the Vandals on account of the failure of the emperor Leo's expedition in 468 and the cost that came with it.[300]

The emperor Justinian spread the idea that there was an intrinsic connection between eastern Roman imperialism and Christianity through his imperial propaganda. Justinian's own

[297] The Vandal king Hilderic, had established friendly relations with Constantinople in the 520s, but after he was usurped by his cousin Gelimer, all relations were cut. Successive embassies by Justinian demanded first, the restoration of Hilderic, then his release and dispatch to Constantinople, but all were rejected. Stephenson 2022: 202; Lee 2013; 258-259. The campaign's initial goal was to restore Hilderic to his throne, but his murder spared Justinian the dilemma, and the emperor was able to annex the territory. Heather 2018: 136; Lee 2013: 260-261; Proc. *Wars*, 3.16.13-15. The decisive victory in North Africa may have prompted Justinian to continue his western ambitions. The opportunity presented itself in 534, when Theodahad usurped the Gothic throne and imprisoned the Gothic queen Amalasuintha, daughter of Theodoric. Stephenson 2022: 205. According to Peter Heather; however, the war in Italy started because of miscalculated imperial diplomatic manoeuvres via Peter the Patrician. Heather 2018: 152-154; Proc. *Wars*, 5.4.17-31, mentions that discussions between Theodahad and the diplomatic agent sent from Constantinople concerned the handing over of the kingdom to the empire. See also Parnell 2023: 85-86. The Visigothic usurper Athanagild requested aid from the emperor in 552, Justinian sent a dispatch of troops to southern Spain. Following victories in the southern coast, the emperor formed a new province with the newly acquired territories. Sarris 2023: 383-384; Sarris 2011: 190.

[298] Sarris 2011: 95; Proc. *Wars*, 3.9.3.

[299] Parnell 2023: 60.

[300] Lee 2013: 260.

law code and Novels, for instance, put forward his belief that the western campaigns were part of a divine mission to establish orthodoxy throughout the Christian realm.[301] Reflecting the emperor's beliefs as well as the mentalities of sixth-century eastern Roman society, Procopius recounted that during the discussions between Justinian and his advisors, an eastern bishop visited the emperor and told him about a dream in which God had said that Justinian had no reason to be afraid of defending the Catholics in North Africa, and that he would provide his assistance in making him the 'master of Libya'.[302] The scene frames the western wars of Justinian in the context of a grand military design inspired by God and predestined for success on account of the emperor's piety towards his 'co-religionists'.

The next phase of Justinian's western wars, the Italian campaigns against the Goths, had ideological factors based on antiquarian motives rather than religious. The eastern empire claimed to be the inheritor of the classical empire founded by Augustus. But what was the Roman empire without the city of Rome? Prior to Justinian's reconquest of the west, the empire no longer had possession of the city of Rome itself; the former capital and the location from which Roman civilisation spread.[303] According to Peter Sarris, 'barbarian' rulers, during the fifth century, had carved out autonomous kingdoms and openly contested their claims to 'universal Roman authority'.[304]

This 'antiquarian' motive related Justinian's ideological principle that he was the restorer of the Roman empire. Indeed political motives such as the assassination of the Gothic queen Amalasuintha, provided the official justification for the invasion of Italy, a motive only reinforced by Justinian's own ambitions following the decisive victory of Belisarius in North Africa. But David Allan Parnell argued that it is important not to discount the possibility that Justinian now saw it as his duty to recover the lost Roman territories and in particular the empire's ancient capital, Rome.[305] The final victory in Italy signified that the ancient progenitor of 'civilisation', the city of Rome, was once again firmly back in Roman hands providing further support for the regime's ideological principle of Roman imperial

[301] *Iust. Nov*, 78.4.1; cf. *Iust. Nov*, 30.11.2; *Cod. Iust*. 1.27.1. See also Greatrex and Mitchell 2023: 151-52; Heather 2018: 114-115.
[302] Proc. *Wars*, 3.10.18-20. Victor of Tunnuna, however, recounts that the North African bishop Laetus, who had been made martyr by Hilderic, appeared to Justinian in a dream persuading him to launch the African expedition. Vict. Tunn. *Chronicon*, 534. Cyril of Scythopolis also wrote that Saint Sabas had predicted that God would give North Africa and all of the former western Roman territories to Justinian if the emperor supported the saint's religious works in Palestine. Cyr. Scyth. *Lives*, 175-178.
[303] Sarris 2023: 3.
[304] Sarris 2023: 3.
[305] Parnell 2023: 86.

restoration. In addition, the reintegration of Rome into the empire provided solid grounds for potential religious reconciliation with the Pope and the western Church.

The western campaigns also provided an opportunity for Justinian to display the religious prestige of his regime as through his victories he was able to demonstrate that God had continued to support his reign. Imperial propaganda from the early years of the reign of Justin II also demonstrated the close connection between eastern Roman imperialism and God's support for the imperial regime. The mid-sixth century poet Corippus, for instance, wrote in his panegyric address to Justin II that God had granted the emperor control over all kingdoms, and that foreign kings submitted to imperial rule.[306]

Although many western kingdoms claimed to be the successors of Rome, or adopted a Roman style of rule and administration, as did Theodoric the Goth in the late 400s and early 500s and the later Frankish king Charlemagne in the 800s, the eastern empire that expanded after Justinian's conquests saw itself as the only rightful and legal Roman polity.[307] The survival of the empire was due to its strong capital, Constantinople, often referred to as New Rome, its rich provinces, and control over the eastern trade routes.[308] Finally, orthodoxy and empire appear to be closely intertwined. In addition to military and economic strength, the success and prosperity of the empire were contingent on imperial piety and the concept of unity within the Christian realm. Thus as we will see in the following section, the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty attempted to reconcile the doctrinal divisions between the bishops and unify the Church under one single 'correct' doctrine, *i.e*, the doctrine adhered to by the imperial regimes.

4.3 The imperial Church: the second council of Constantinople

This section examines the social impact of Christian doctrine in the sixth century by looking at the emperor Justinian's attempts at unifying the Church under one single and 'correct' doctrine. The Christianisation of eastern Roman society also included the process of defining orthodoxy itself. Although a monotheistic religion, Christianity itself was not uniform in its doctrines. Christians had varying beliefs and ideas concerning the nature or natures of Christ. These variations caused issues for Justinian, who, like many emperors

[306] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 1-15. Religious ideology became ever more evident during the reign of Heraclius, especially in Heraclian propaganda concerning the seventh-century wars. Howard-Johnston 2021: 39, 214-217.
[307] Herrin 2021: 445-476; Herrin 2020: 101-115.
[308] Herrin 2007: 24-25. Justinian, for instance, capitalised on an economic opportunity during the conflicts with Persia, the silk trade. Monks travelling from India smuggled silkworm eggs, at Justinian's behest, through the trade route that connected China and India with the eastern Roman empire, via the Persian empire. Such a ruse enabled the eastern Romans to learn the secrets of silk production, and thus establish a homegrown silk industry. Sarris 2023: 387-388; Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 129; Proc. *Wars*, 8.16.1, 8.17.1-8.

before him, aimed to unite the Christian Church under a single faith and doctrine. The Christianisation of eastern Roman society, then, is not simply the evolution of the pagan past and secular traditions to Christianised ones, but also the evolution of Christian doctrine and its impact on imperial policies and on society. As God's representative on earth, the emperor Justinian was tasked with keeping orthodoxy, and by doing so kept His favour. However, we will see that despite Justinian's efforts, the Church remained divided, and as a consequence, the religious unity of the empire also.

Because the territorial coverage of the eastern Roman empire was so vast during the sixth century, especially following the reintegration of North Africa, Italy and parts of Spain, gathered within its borders were a variety of peoples with different beliefs. Christianity, during this period, was an important unifying factor across the Mediterranean, as eastern Romans, and some neighbouring peoples, shared a common religious affiliation. But, despite being a monotheistic religion, there was division. Depending on the region and the cultural background, Christians adhered to varying doctrines and theological beliefs.[309] Each Christian 'sect', for example, had its own theology concerning the figures of Christ and the virgin Mary. Although the differences may have been subtle, they nevertheless disrupted the unity within the Church. Thus, we may speak of the existence of several 'Christianities' across the Mediterranean during the sixth century, and during Late Antiquity in general.[310] To unite the diverse Christian groups under a single orthodoxy was, ideologically, of great importance for Justinian's regime. In achieving this, Justinian had the potential to demonstrate his religious authority and the holiness of his regime.

The emperor Justinian and his successors shared their Christian imperial predecessors' beliefs that it was their duty to care for and defend each and every Christian, and guide them to the correct doctrine, including Persian Christians.[311] Differences in beliefs

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[309] For more on the regional developments of Christianity across the Mediterranean, Africa and the East between *c.* 300-600, see the edited volume of Agustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris entitled *The Cambridge History of Christianity: Constantine to c. 600* published in 2008.

[310] Under the Justinianic dynasty, the theological doctrine adopted at the council of Chalcedon, commonly referred to as the Chalcedonian creed in modern scholarship, was held as orthodox. According to Richard Price and Michael Gaddis, the Chalcedonian doctrine acknowledged one Christ in two natures that unite to form a single person. Price 2005: 59. Likewise, the western churches, centred around the authority of the Pope in Rome, were primarily catholic. Thus they adhered to the imperial definition of Christianity. The Goths and Vandals, who settled in Italy and North Africa during the fifth century, adhered primarily to Arian Christianity until their conversions to catholicism. Sarris 2023: 182; Sarris 2011: 91-92, 105. The Lombards settling in Italy in the late sixth century were also primarily Arian Christians. Churches in the east, particularly in Syria and Egypt, possessed a high number of Christians adhering to Miaphysite Christianity. According to Karl-Heinz Uthemann, Miaphysite Christians summarised their confession with the Christological formula of Apollinarius. Uthemann 2008: 471-472. Miaphysites held that Christ had one nature which combined the divine and human elements.

[311] Sarris 2011: 229-230.

often led to theological disputes, schisms, and persecutions of those who did not convert to the official doctrine. For instance, a widening split concerning doctrine ensued between Miaphysite and Chalcedonian Christians during the late fifth century lasting well into the seventh century.[312] Disputes, schisms and persecutions weakened religious unity across the Christian realm. They also disrupted the ideological view held by Justinian's imperial regime that the empire mirrored the Heavenly kingdom. Thus, Justinian and his successors, like many of their imperial predecessors, firmly believed that uniting the Church under a single orthodoxy kept the favour of God. Achieving religious unity would in turn display the heightened sacrality of their imperial regimes.

On numerous occasions, it appears that the emperor Justinian became deeply involved in Church matters combining Christianity with politics by taking part in doctrinal disputes. Christian emperors believed it their duty to find acceptable solutions for reconciliation within the Church. Since the mid-fifth century, there was an imperial tendency to impose Christian doctrine on their subjects as a solution to doctrinal divisions. The emperor Justinian sought to impose doctrine on his subject by codifying several Canon laws as part of the legal tradition of the empire. In his law code, for instance, the emperor included an edict giving concessions to Miaphysite Christology, stating that a member of the Trinity had suffered in the flesh.[313] Justinian also officially codified the creed of Chalcedon in 536 and affirmed the Church's decree of the Trinity adopted during a council held in Constantinople that same year.[314] By codifying Canon law, in an attempt to enforce doctrinal reconciliation, Justinian blurred the lines between imperial politics and ecclesiastical affairs.

But direct involvement from Justinian in the attempts to find a solution to the Miaphysite issues only exacerbated the widening split within the Church, and at the same time, alienated members of the Chalcedonian and Catholic clergy. The events leading up to the second council of Constantinople proved particularly damaging for Church unity. Controversy raged over Justinian's condemnation of the Three Chapters in 544/545.[315]

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[312] Philip Wood argues that the widening split between Chalcedonian Christians and Miaphysite Christians in the Near East led the latter to transform their self-identities and their relationship with their rulers amidst a period of prolonged religious tension. See Wood 2011.

[313] The edict was drafted in 533. Pazdernik 1994: 259; *Cod. Iust*, 1.1.6. Letters exchanged later that same year between Justinian and Pope John II (533-535), asserting the Pope's acceptance of the Theopaschite formula, were also included in the code. Pazdernik 1994: 259; *Cod. Iust*, 1.1.8. The Theopaschite formula holds that a member of the Trinity had suffered in the flesh.

[314] *Cod. Iust*, 1.1.5, 7.

[315] Price 2009: 76. Chapters, particularly those critical of Miaphysitism, in the writings of the mid-fifth century bishops Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ibas of Edessa, and the theologian Theodoret of Cyrrhus were anathemised. Theodore was accused of being a Nestorian Christian before Nestorius, while the latter two's writings were condemned for being critical of Cyril of Alexandria and their (alleged) support of Nestorius. Nestorius promoted a radical form of duophysitism different from Chalcedonian duophysitism. Nestorians held

According to Richard Price, the controversy laid in the fact that the condemnation appeared to undo some of the work achieved by the council of Chalcedon.[316] Advocates of the leonine interpretation of the Chalcedonian creed opposed the condemnation of the Three Chapters.[317] The condemnation also saw opposition from Pope Vigilius (537-555) and the western bishops.[318]

The emperor Justinian convened a council, later deemed ecumenical, to find an acceptable solution to the religious controversies of the first half of the sixth century and bring order to the Church. The council itself, according to Peter Sarris, was 'carefully stage-managed, so as to muffle dissent and browbeat and bully recalcitrant Chalcedonian hardliners'.[319] But its objectives were not achieved despite papal and pontifical ratification. The council proceedings created an inevitable distrust of imperial power due to repeated imperial intervention in ecclesiastical affairs, and also alienated the churches of the west.[320] Justinian's intervention in Church affairs shows that during this period there was little separation between secular imperial power and ecclesiastical power.

By the end of his reign, Justinian appears to have lapsed into heresy himself, possibly seeking a compromise between Chalcedonians and Miaphysites by supporting the doctrine of Aphthartodocetism.[321] This manoeuvre prompted further disputes amongst the bishops, several of whom were exiled by the emperor, such as the patriarch of Constantinople, Eutychius (552-565, 577-582), who had presided over the fifth ecumenical council. Therefore, Justinian's aim for Church unity was ultimately unsuccessful due to extended opposition to its rulings. After his accession to the throne, the emperor Justin II reasserted the

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that Christ had two distinct natures, divine and human. This represents the antithesis of Eutychian Monophysitism. In addition, they rejected the title of God-bearer to designate the virgin Mary. They instead accepted the title Christ-bearer. For an analysis of Nestorianism from the fifth to the thirteenth century, its background and its 'founder', see Robert Merrihew Adams' "Nestorius and Nestorianism" published in 2021.

[316] Price 2009: 76.

[317] As in the interpretation established by Pope Leo I (440-461) in his Tome.

[318] Uthemann 2008: 494. The Three Chapters controversy became a main focus point of the religious disputes between the east and the west. The eastern patriarchs signed the edict condemning the Three Chapters, allegedly under duress, while many western bishops remained unwilling. Facundus Hermiane, *In Defense of the Three Chapters*, 4.4.2-9 (0625B-0628D). The key to winning over the western bishops was compliance from the Pope. Thus, Justinian summoned Pope Vigilius to Constantinople and pressured him to support the imperial edict. But his invitation turned into a form of captivity. The Pope was reminded of the harshness of living under imperial control. Reluctantly, Pope Vigilius supported Justinian's religious policies. This provoked massive protest from the west, and furthered the divide between the eastern and western Church. Sarris 2011: 166. Justinian, however, had not counted on serious opposition from the west, and so in 551 he issued a confession of the true faith (*Expositio rectae fidei*) and two years later convened a council to confirm the edict. Gray 2005: 234.

[319] Sarris 2011: 166.

[320] Herrin 2021: 124.

[321] For a detailed survey and analysis surrounding Justinian and the doctrine of Aphthartodocetism, see the doctoral dissertation of Silvio Benno Roggo 2022.

imperial regime's support for the Chalcedonian doctrine.[322] Justinian's own position on Christian doctrine may have made reconciliation difficult from the start. His support of the doctrine of Aphthartodocetism may also have been a potential source of continuing dispute following the council.[323] Thus, religious unity appeared to have been achieved 'on paper', but was ultimately superficial and subsequently undone due to continuing disputes over theology.

Because of the political nature of Christianity during the sixth century, the emperor Justinian was able to assume a quasi ecclesiastical role on account of his repeated intervention in doctrinal discussions. As the principal architect of religious and church unity within the empire, the emperor ultimately could not be neutral in ecclesiastical affairs.[324] Justinian was perhaps the first theologian among the emperors.[325] For instance, in 535, he issued a liturgical hymn based on a text by Severus of Antioch, which alluded to the Theopaschite formula brought to the capital by monks from Scythia as a compromise on the Miaphysite issue.[326] Justinian appears to have understood theological issues as well as any bishop. Justinian's multiple interventions in Church matters, thus, shows his will to continue on a process of self-sacralisation. But as we will see in the following section, some of Justinian's and his successor Justin II's religious policies also demonstrate a link between Christian doctrine and the increasing 'demonisation' of the emperor.

4.4 The persecutions of pagans and non-Chalcedonian Christians

This section, then, will examine how the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty treated non-orthodox Christians and pagans with the aim of demonstrating the religious intolerance that resulted from the process of Christianisation during the sixth century. As Christianity continued to grow, spread, and diversify, the emperors also grew more intolerant towards those who did not accept imperial orthodoxy. Under the Justinianic dynasty, the intolerance towards non-imperial orthodox Christians reached a new height with measures involving persecutions, exile, laws and other religious policies in the attempt to forcibly unite the empire under a single orthodox faith and doctrine when Church councils could not enforce their rulings. By the end of this section, we will see that the persecutions against pagans and Christians adhering to a theological doctrine that was different from the imperial Church

[322] Evagr. *HE*, 5.4.
[323] For instance, the following year, the Church of the east held a council at Ctesiphon to reaffirm the Nestorian doctrine, and three decades later the eastern bishops of the Persian Church formulated their defence of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Justinian was condemned as a heretic. Herrin 2021: 123-124.
[324] Dagron 1996: 307.
[325] Kaldellis 2024: 311.
[326] Kaldellis 2024: 310-311.

impacted the views of the eastern Roman people surrounding the piety and sacrality of the imperial regimes.

Two centuries following the conversion of Constantine to Christianity and the gradual yet rapid evolution of the religious landscape of the eastern Roman empire, there still remained a significant number of individuals who adhered to the old pagan cults. According to Anthony Kaldellis, the emperor Justinian believed that the Christian empire had been too tolerant of pagans.[327] Pagan worship had been gradually suppressed since the late fourth century, but the emperor Justinian was keen on persecuting all remaining pagans in the empire. The emperor Justinian, for instance, had incorporated into his law code laws aimed at suppressing pagan worship issued by various emperors of the fourth and fifth centuries.[328] The emperor also aimed to outlaw certain activities, such as gambling and sex work, as they were thought to lead to non-Christian or even 'pagan' behaviour.[329]

Justinian also aimed to purge the last remaining adherents of the traditional cults from the cities and provinces. Many of them were landowning elites who with their prestige and influence presented potential obstacles to the Christianisation of the rural parts of the empire.[330] The Miaphysite church leader John of Ephesus is said to have assisted the emperor Justinian in the persecution of pagans in the provinces.[331] He reportedly converted to Christianity nearly eighty thousand pagans in the provinces who still adhered to traditional pagan cults.[332] John's missionary activities were perhaps facilitated by Justinian who provided funds for the construction of churches and monasteries.[333] Furthermore, the emperor Justinian conducted a purge of individuals believed to be pagans in the capital and other major urban centres by expelling, for instance, pagan teachers.[334] He also persecuted Jews, Samaritans, homosexuals, and even heretical Christian sects.

Persecution and exile were not aimed solely at non-Christians. When Church unity did not prevail, the imperial Church also resorted to persecution and exile. The emperors Justin I, Justinian, and Justin II, exiled or initiated persecutions against non-imperial orthodox Christians. According to Anthony Kaldellis, Justin I 'set in motion the largest-scale

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[327] Kaldellis 2024: 272.
[328] Maas 2010: 186-188; *Cod Iust*.1.11.1-2, 4-7, 10. Concerning the prohibition of classical philosophy and teaching from pagan teachers, see Simon Corcoran's "Anastasius, Justinian, and the Pagans: a Tale of Two Codes and a Papyrus" published in 2009.
[329] Kaldellis 2024: 273-274.
[330] Lee 2013: 275-276.
[331] See Menze 2008: 453-458.
[332] Lee 2013: 274.
[333] Leppin 2019: 119.
[334] Joh. Mal. *Chronicle*, 18.136; *V. Sym. Iun*, 161.

persecution of dissident bishops in the empire's history'.[335] Although this statement may perhaps be exaggerated, upon his accession, the staunch Chalcedonian Christian emperor immediately set out to reverse the ecclesiastical politics of his predecessor, the emperor Anastasius, a Miaphysite Christian.[336] One of Justin I's ways of reversing his predecessor's ecclesiastical policies was to bring the imperial church of Constantinople back into communion with Rome. Thus, early in his reign Justin I worked towards ending the Acacian schism by accepting papal terms concerning orthodoxy.[337]

This rapprochement between Constantinople and Rome escalated the persecutions as numerous non-Chalcedonian bishops were forced to sign the *libellus* or else had to resign or leave their see, except in Egypt where resistance to the new religious policy of the emperor was too great a risk.[338] The *libellus* of Pope Hormisdas (514-523) entailed that every bishop must submit to the Pope, accept the doctrine of Chalcedon, which in the Latin west was grounded in leonine christology rather than cyrillian christology, and posthumously condemn the patriarch of Constantinople Acacius (472-489) for imposing the *Henotikon* of emperor Zeno.[339] According to William H.C Frend, 'It became clear within a year of the formal ending of the schism that not even the pro-western monks in the capital were prepared to accept an orthodoxy not grounded in Cyril, nor an ecclesiastical order that took no account of the status of the patriarch of Constantinople.'[340] Thus, not all of the papal conditions were obeyed, particularly in the case of Egypt where Miaphysite Christians were the majority.

Despite Justin I's wish to reunite the Church, the religious policy that would bring Rome back into communion with Constantinople permanently shattered the unity of the Church. Over fifty Miaphysite bishops were expelled from their sees.[341] Miaphysite Christians later began to celebrate the victims of Justin I's persecution from the regions of Edessa and Amida as martyrs.[342] According to Anthony Kaldellis, numerous Miaphysite monks were forced out of monasteries, stylite ascetics were forced down from their pillars, and a priest was reportedly burned alive.[343] These fuelled more narratives of martyrdom. Thus

[335] Kaldellis 2024: 254.
[336] For a detailed survey of the religious policy of emperor Justin I, see Chapter 4 (pp. 132-253) of Alexander A. Vasiliev's *Justin the First, An Introduction to the Epoch of Justinian the Great* published in 1950.
[337] Lee 2013: 177; Frend 1972: 238.
[338] Kaldellis 2024: 255-256; Frend 1972: 236-237.
[339] Frend 1972: 235-236.
[340] Frend 1972: 236.
[341] Vasiliev 1950: 226-227.
[342] Hartmut Leppin has argued that if a ruler wished to punish a holy man for disobedience, he risked creating a new martyr. Leppin 2020: 82.
[343] Kaldellis 2024: 256. Alexander Vasiliev, however, points out that despite some of the harsh persecutory measures of Justin I, particularly against the bishops and monks under the influence of the see of Antioch, the emperor also showed himself to be tolerant in several cases. See Vasiliev 1950: 223-225.

Justin I, as well as his nephew Justinian, who assisted in his uncle's religious policies, set ecclesiastical politics on a precarious new course. But the emperor Justinian, early in his reign, took a conciliatory stance concerning Church matters by giving concessions to Miaphysite Christology, and in doing so undid some of the work that brought the imperial church of Constantinople back into communion with Rome.

The change in policy, during Justinian's early years, most likely happened at Theodora's urging. Even though Theodora was a Miaphysite Christian, the imperial couple were partners in the purple, and Justinian did not make any policy that would go against his wife's actions.[344] Because of her different religious convictions, she also appeared to have had a separate agenda from that of her husband. Theodora also advocated for the safety and freedom of non-Chalcedonian Christians. For instance, she founded a Miaphysite monastery in Sykae, and provided sanctuary to Miaphysite bishops, monks and persecuted Christians in the palace of Hormisdas in the capital. As a result, this prompted accusations of undermining the unity of the Church, so desired by her husband Justinian, in favour of heretical sects.[345] Procopius and Evagrius instead believed that this was merely a ploy between the imperial pair.[346] The empress nevertheless appeared to have played a significant role in the reconciliation attempts of the Church with her husband until her death in 548.[347]

Despite their partnership, Justinian condemned Miaphysite Christians once again in 536 during a council held in Constantinople. Pope Agapitus (535-536) had persuaded the emperor of the dangerous nature of Miaphysite Christians, after which Justinian turned to persecution as his uncle did.[348] But when force did not prevail, the emperor returned to dialogue and further explored the possibility of reunification as he previously did. A resurgence in anti-Nestorian sentiment provided Justinian with the opportunity to reunite the Church.[349] According to Judith Herrin, all parties involved in the Chalcedonian schism agreed on an emphatic condemnation of Nestorianism, a Christian sect that primarily spread across Persia following the council of Ephesus in 431.[350] Furthermore, Justinian had thought that he could win more moderate Miaphysite groups by condemning the Three Chapters as Nestorian in an imperial edict.[351]

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[344] Evans 2005: 33-34; Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis*, 58-62.
[345] Proc. *SH*, 10.14; Evagr. *HE*, 4.10. For a more complete discussion surrounding the 'contradicting' policies and convictions of the imperial couple, see Pazdernik 1994.
[346] Kaldellis 2024: 277-288.
[347] Evans 2005: 41.
[348] Herrin 2021: 119.
[349] Price 2009: 76.
[350] Herrin 2021: 119.
[351] Kaldellis 2024: 312. See page 103 above.

After succeeding to the throne, the emperor Justin II reaffirmed the creed of Chalcedon as orthodoxy and issued a declaration of faith to all Christians.[352] Like his uncle, Justin also sought to find a compromise with the leading Miaphysites. But further disagreements among the anti-Chalcedonians ensued, and consensus could not be reached. On this basis, the patriarch of Constantinople, John Scholasticus (565-577), initiated new persecutions.[353] The persecutions, however, were relaxed during the reign of Tiberius.[354] To some, particularly to sources favourable to the emperors, the policies of persecutions directed against pagans and Christians who did not adhere to the official imperial doctrine were seen as necessary for the religious prosperity and unity of the empire.[355] They associated these imperial measures with the emperor's own pious religious behaviour. In turn, this demonstration of piety further promoted the emperor's sacral characteristics, as in such circumstances, he was carrying out God's will.

Others, however, saw the persecutions, more specifically those directed against Christians who did not adhere to the official imperial doctrine, as the manifestation of the 'anti-Christ' bent on causing the ruin of the empire, a theme discussed in the previous chapter. John of Ephesus, for instance, was a particularly strong voice of opposition to Justin II's persecutions of Miaphysite Christians.[356] He himself was imprisoned in Chalcedon during the persecutions of Miaphysite church leaders initiated by John Scholasticus, which had been sanctioned by the emperor. According to John of Ephesus, the patriarch of Constantinople took down all the images of the 'orthodox fathers' and set up his own in their place.[357] In this episode, John established a link between Christian icons, religious ideology, and orthodoxy. John of Ephesus' narration also provides a glimpse into a potential iconoclastic mentality during the sixth century. After the death of John Scholasticus, the returning patriarch Eutychius ordered the destruction of all images of his predecessor.[358] This, according to the author, was God's will done to John as he had done to the saints.

4.5 The revival of the consulship under Justin II and its implications

This section discusses the evolution of the eastern Roman aristocracy, its role and authority, between the reign of Justinian and his successor Justin II with the aim of

[352] See Coripp. *In Laudem*, 4.290; Evagr. *HE*, 5.4.
[353] Kaldellis 2024: 324.
[354] Kaldellis 2024: 327.
[355] This notion is especially seen in the imperial propaganda of the emperor Justinian.
[356] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.2.17, 3.2.25-30.
[357] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.2.27.
[358] Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.2.27.

demonstrating the differences in governing policies between the two emperors as well as the the differences in the manner in which these two emperors displayed their political ideologies in regard to the concept of the renewal or restoration of the Roman state. Although the sixth-century emperors integrated Christianity to an unprecedented degree within the political ideology of the eastern Roman empire and strove to present the empire as a microcosm of Heaven, Justinian and Justin II both also wished to portray their regimes as the restorers of the Roman state. We have seen above that Justinian effectively 'restored' the Roman empire to its former glory by means of military campaigns. But upon his accession, the emperor Justin II had no claims to military victory. Therefore, following his ascension to the throne, he sought to restore certain offices and powers of the Roman administration that were often neglected for years, and in some cases abandoned, under the reign of Justinian.

The changes or 'innovations' to the political structure of the eastern Roman empire by Justinian subsequently affected the role and status of the traditional elite. Under the reign of Justinian, the roles and powers of the senatorial class gradually diminished.[359] Five years into his reign, Justinian's throne was almost overthrown by Hypatius, the nephew of the emperor Anastasius, with the support of some of the senators.[360] Even though Justinian had revived the 'classical' triumph in honour of Belisarius' victory in North Africa, after which the general, according to Roman tradition, was honoured with the consulship for the following year, approximately a decade after, in 541/542, the emperor discontinued the appointment of consuls and reduced the powers of the senate.[361] This decision effectively ended a political tradition dating back to the Roman Republic.

Justinian's government reform policies drew criticism from the traditional aristocracy who believed them to be corrupt and ill-intentioned.[362] As an example, John the Cappadocian, a man of low origins like the imperial couple, became an even more influential advisor to Justinian following the Nika riot.[363] He assisted in reducing the size of the eastern Roman bureaucracy and developed a rudimentary meritocracy, a development which directly challenged the role of the traditional elites. Further complaints arose following the regime's request to be called 'master' and 'mistress' by members of the aristocracy, as well as

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[360] Heather 2018: 116; Lee 2013: 259.

[361] Proc. *Wars*, 4.9.15-16. For a discussion surrounding the abolition of the consulship by Justinian, see Kruse 2019: 102-147.

[362] Proc. *SH*. On the confiscations, see 12.1-13; concerning the offices, see 20.1-23, 21.1-29; concerning the landowners, see 23,1-24; on the reforms, see 30.1-34.

[363] For a fuller discussion on John the Cappadocian and his role as the Praetorian Prefect of the east, see Laura Mecella's "Giovanni di Cappadocia e la prefettura al pretorio d'Oriente in età giustinianea: tra realtà e rappresentazione" published in 2024.

Theodora's implementation of the ritual of *proskynesis* or *adoratio*, particularly for the senators and Patricians.[364] She appears to have been the first empress to receive the ritual of *adoratio*. The author Corippus also attests to the emperor Justin II and the empress Sophia receiving *adoratio* from the senators.[365]

Although the ceremonial rituals adopted by Justinan and Theodora remained in place under the reign of Justin II, unlike his uncle, Justin made some changes with regard to the relationship between the aristocracy and the imperial regime. Justin II, for instance, allowed the traditional aristocracy a greater voice in local government during his reign.[366] Indeed, it does appear that there is a shift in tone in regards to imperial relationship with the aristocracy during the early years of Justin's reign. Likewise, the emperor Tiberius was popular among the elites and the people for his policies and generosity throughout his reign.[367]

Unlike the emperor Justinian, his nephew Justin II, according to Anthony Kaldellis, 'signaled his Roman conservatism' from the start of his reign by taking on the consulship upon his accession.[368] His election itself has been framed as a virtual senatorial coup d'état.[369] However, a recent study by Sihong Lin argued instead that Justin possessed a greater role in imperial politics before his ascension than had previously been established in scholarship. Lin studied the career of Justin before his accession and effectively demonstrated the connections the future emperor made with members of the aristocracy, as he 'could not have been a man who was simply carried to power on the wave of senatorial reaction against Justinianic policies.'[370] While he was *curopalates* under his uncle, as a member of the eastern Roman nobility charged with the maintenance of the imperial palace, he had allied himself with influential members of the aristocracy in order to secure a smooth transition of power in the face of potential opposition from another political rival, his cousin with the same name, the army general Justin.[371]

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[364] Cameron 1976a: 136; Proc. *SH*, 30.21-23, 30.26.
[365] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 1.155-159.
[366] Sarris 2006: 222-227; Cameron 1976b: 51-67; Cameron 1975: 5-21.
[367] Cameron 1977: 1-17; Evagr. *HE*, 5.13. Joh. Eph. *HE*, 3.3.11, records that Sophia became concerned about the depletion of the public finances that she took away the keys to the treasuries from Tiberius, and fixed an allowance for his spending. Tiberius issued in 574 a law (Novel 161) against the practice of demanding payments from officials for the entry to their posts. In 575, he issued a law (Novel 163) which reduced tax payments in gold by one quarter for each year in a period of four.
[368] Kaldellis 2024: 321.
[369] Cameron 1976a: 156; Cameron 1976b: 51.
[370] Lin 2021: 122.
[371] Lin 2021: 136-141.

According to Averil Cameron, the renewal of the consulship by Justin II marked a renaissance of consular themes in imperial art.[372] In commemoration of the emperor's restoration of the consulship, not only did he celebrate the events with an official ceremony, but the city also erected a statue of the emperor wearing the consular dress with an inscription celebrating the emperor's restoration of the consulship in 566.[373] Several other imperial statues of Justin and Sophia were erected near the harbour of Sophia, the Deuteron palace and the baths of Zeuxippus.[374] In addition, contemporary sources described the renewal of the consulship in triumphant terms and associated it with the themes of victory, renewal, and prosperity. Corippus, for example, elaborated on the triumphant and consular iconography associated with the ceremony such as the golden curule chair complete with jewels on which the emperor sat during the procession.[375]

Averil Cameron has also argued that the emperor's inauguration marked a 'turning point' of imperial ideology.[376] Imperial propaganda, such as the panegyric of Corippus dedicated to Justin II, certainly demonstrates the efforts to present the emperor's accession as a renewal of the Roman state.[377] This projected ideology of the emperor Justin is demonstrated above all by the revival of the consulship in 566 after a hiatus of four decades. The consulship, however, since its renewal by Justin became a position which only the emperor held in addition to his imperial titles, thus elevating his position yet higher above the citizens. Where Justinian had failed to garner the support of the aristocracy, Justin succeeded, at least for the first half of his reign.

Furthermore, consular iconography remained an influential marker of Roman ideology during the seventh century. When the governor of Africa, Heraclius the Elder, and his son and future emperor Heraclius the younger rose in revolt against the emperor Phocas in 608, they claimed to have been appointed consuls by members of the senate and minted coins on which they accorded themselves consular status.[378] Therefore, it is evident that the consulship was ingrained in the political tradition of the empire during the sixth and seventh centuries, and remained a crucial means for emperors to portray imperial renewal and depict themselves as restorers. Finally, although eastern Roman society gradually integrated

[372] Cameron 1976a: 11; Cameron 1975a: 130, 145-147; *Iust. Nov*, 105: The powers of the consul were merged with the imperial office.
[373] See the Greek text and commentary by Averil and Alan Cameron. Cameron 1966: 101-104.
[374] Cameron 1980: 70-71; Cameron 1977: 57-58.
[375] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 3.160, 4.115, 4.206-263.
[376] Cameron 1979: 10-12.
[377] Coripp. *In Laudem*. For a depiction of the emperor as a conqueror, see *Praefatio*; for the restoration of the consulship, see 4.1-263.
[378] Kaegi 2003: 41.

Christianity within every aspect of its cultural landscape, as we saw in the sections above, certain classical Roman traditions and elements of political ideology survived well into the sixth century. Justin II promoted them in order to demonstrate to his people that his reign ushered in a renewal or even a restoration of the Roman state.

4.6 Patron saint of Constantinople

The virgin Mary, during the late sixth and early seventh centuries, took on a more prominent role in the capital as protector and patron saint of the city. This section examines the growing importance given to the virgin Mary in Constantinople between the early fifth and early seventh centuries with the specific aim of showing the development of a civic cult of veneration in the imperial capital. Mischa Meier, who takes into account the prior developments during the early fifth century and analyses them through the perspective of *longue durée*, argues that following the plague of Justinian there is a noticeable increase in Marian devotion in the eastern Roman landscape. Although the plague may perhaps have been a further *impetus* for this increase, the development of the Marian cult itself and its diffusion across the eastern Roman landscape, particularly in Constantinople, occurred mostly as a consequence of ecclesiastical and imperial sponsorship.[379]

Under the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty, the virgin Mary gradually took on a more prominent position in the civic identity of the capital. Prior to the coronation ceremony of her husband Justin II, for instance, Sophia went to pray in the church of the Theotokos. In her prayer, Sophia beseeched and asked for the aid of the virgin Mary for a safe empire and successful rule. Corippus writes: "You, glory of mothers, I beseech, and ask for your aid: may I always worship you and confess you as our Lady and the preserver of Justin's new rule. Honoured one, preserve our head, make safe our empire, rule our lives, complete what has been begun. Grant that all may progress well under our rule."[380] According to Averil Cameron, the ideas behind Sophia's prayer in Corippus' poem contributed to the mainstream

[379] Imperial and ecclesiastical involvements in the development of Marian identity are noticeable since the early fifth century. As an example, the ecumenical council of 431 at Ephesus set the ecclesiastical and imperial seal on the 'official' designation of the virgin Mary, according to the accepted doctrine of Christology. A primary topic of debate of the council concerned the patriarch Nestorius' (428-431) opposition to the use of the epithet *Theotokos* (God-bearer) in favour of *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer) to designate the virgin Mary. This debate arose in light of Christological disputes concerning the divine and human natures of Christ, as Mary could not, according to Nestorius, give birth to the divine Logos, which existed before Christ. Edwards 2007: 377. The proceedings of the council and its debate surrounding the designation of the virgin Mary shows that already in the early fifth century, Marian theology had gathered sufficient momentum in the eastern Roman landscape to spark controversy within the Church.

[380] Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.63-66. Translation by Averil Cameron.

veneration of Mary, and became a model of contemporary address to the *Theotokos*.[381] The passage clearly demonstrates the growing role of the virgin Mary in imperial ideology as a protector of the regime, and of the empire as a whole.[382]

Imperial patronage between the second half of the fifth century and the first half of the sixth century promoted the veneration of the virgin Mary. Ecclesiastical building programmes, particularly that of the emperor Justinian, provided suitable spaces for Marian devotion. Justinian accorded significant importance to the virgin Mary by building numerous churches in her honour across the eastern Roman landscape. As if mirroring the importance attributed to the virgin Mary by the emperor, in his descriptions of the emperor's building programme in the capital, Procopius wrote that one must 'begin with the churches of Mary the Mother of God. For we know that this is the wish of the Emperor himself, and true reason manifestly demands that from God one must proceed to the Mother of God.'[383] From this sentence we can deduce that not only did the virgin Mary gradually gain in importance, especially in the capital, owing to the numerous church constructions dedicated to her, but also that the imperial regime further associated itself with Marian representation. As an example of the latter, according to Paul the Silentiary, certain images in the Hagia Sophia depicted Justinian and Theodora joined together by the hand of Mary.[384]

Marian churches, specifically those in the capital, provided suitable spaces for the safekeeping of the virgin's relics. The relics of the virgin Mary, namely the shroud and girdle, were perhaps the most venerated holy objects in Constantinople throughout eastern Roman history. The shroud was deposited in a chapel built by Justin and Sophia at Blachernae in a gold-inlaid casket where it stayed until the twelfth century, while the girdle was deposited in the church at Chalkoprateia near the Hagia Sophia.[385] The relics of the virgin were thought to have had a role in the dispersion of the Avar siege of 626, the Arab siege of 718, the Rus siege of 860, healed the empress Zoe in 906, and were used by emperor Romanos I during his

[381] Cameron 1975a: 12; Coripp. *In Laudem*, 2.47-83.
[382] It was also during the reign of Justin II that the feast of the Nativity of the virgin Mary was introduced, and during the reign of Maurice the *Koimesis*, a feast commemorating the death and assumption of the virgin Mary, was adopted. Cameron 1979: 18. The church historian Evagrius also recorded several instances during which the virgin Mary appeared to or performed miracles on behalf of certain people in need of help or guidance. During his campaign in Italy, the general Narses is said to have received a command from the virgin as to the time when he was to fight, but to not engage in battle until he received a sign from her. Evagr. *HE*, 4.24. As another example, Evagrius also recounts that an angry father placed his son in a furnace as a punishment for being late. After three days, the boy's mother opened the doors to see her son unharmed. When inquired about it, the boy replied that a woman in purple robes frequently visited him bringing water and food. Evagr. *HE*, 4.36. The two episodes demonstrate how already in the late sixth century, Mary was thought of as a protector, looking after the well-being of eastern Romans, and a guiding figure for the benefit of the empire.
[383] Proc. *De Aed*, 1.3.1. Translation by H.B Dewing.
[384] Paul. Silent. *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia*, 800-805.
[385] Cameron 1978: 84; Theoph. Sim. *Hist*, 8.5.1-4.

negotiations with Tsar Simeon I of Bulgaria. According to the *Book of Ceremonies*, they were also used in certain imperial ceremonies.

By the seventh century, the virgin Mary had taken her place as a patron saint of the capital and of the imperial family. For instance, icons of the virgin Mary are said to have been the source of aid and protection in Heraclius' victory over Phocas in 610.[386] The seventh century poet, George of Pisidia, recounts that Heraclius arrived on ships from Africa with icons and reliquaries of the virgin Mary on the ships' masts.[387] Furthermore, according to the same poet, the miraculous icon of the Virgin Hodegetria, literally 'She who points the way', depicting the virgin Mary holding the child Jesus in front of her, and a crucifixion on the other side, was placed on the city gates and paraded along the walls during the Avar siege of 626 and believed to have contributed to the city's defence.[388] During the period of Iconoclasm, the icon was believed to have been painted by the apostle Luke himself.[389] Finally, the adoption of the virgin Mary as the patron saint of the capital city, following several miracles attributed to her relics and icon, came after a series of cultural developments during the second half of the sixth century under the emperor Justinian and his successors who gradually accorded more importance to the mother of God.

4.7 The ecclesiastical city

This section examines the Christianisation of civic identity from Constantine to Maurice with the aim of demonstrating how the secular city gradually made way for the ecclesiastical or holy city. The cities of the eastern Roman empire underwent many changes during Late Antiquity. The fourth to sixth century marked a period of significant evolution in the cultural trend that saw the landscape of major cities evolve from classical centres to important centres for Christian worship and veneration due to imperial patronage towards the holy city. At the same time, the major secular foundations within these major cities now appear to become secondary to the ecclesiastical institutions, but they were not completely abandoned. By the end of this section, we will see that the Christianisation and even the sacralisation of the eastern Roman urban areas were nuanced.

Christians sought to appropriate for their own religious purpose the cultural environment of the classical city where the visibility and the monumental nature of civic

[386] Theoph. *Chron*, AM 6102.
[387] Geo. Pisid. *Her*, 2.14-15.
[388] Geo. Pisid. *Bell. avar*, 1-9.
[389] Cormack 1997: 58.

structures acted as material symbols of the community.[390] In this way, churches developed into, perhaps, the most tangible expression of Christian ideals during Late Antiquity and the following periods.[391] Church buildings grew more elaborate and larger in design during Late Antiquity. The emperor Constantine, for instance, modified the architectural style of prior church buildings by adopting the classical style of the Roman Basilica, which until then served as a public building. To this architectural style, Constantine added a cruciform shape. In doing so, he repurposed the classical architectural style to serve Christian devotional purposes.[392] By the sixth century, the centralised square floor design was adopted and used thereafter for the construction of numerous churches and mosques in the east.[393]

Churches became the primary centres for devotion, a main setting for communal gathering, in addition to the hippodrome, important sites for communicating ideas, whether religious or political, and they were institutions of wealth and power with varying functions across the city.[394] With the growing number of church buildings, major cities gradually transformed into holy centres.[395] This tendency was further expressed by the integration of Christian cults of veneration into the city, particularly within the ecclesiastical and monastic structures. For instance, when one of the two icons of Christ from Camuliana had been burned during a barbarian raid, Justin II brought the other to the capital for safekeeping. The reasoning behind the move was to protect the icon, but another reason may perhaps, according to Judith Herrin, have been to enhance the number of holy objects in the capital.[396] By the sixth century, civic identity across the empire's urban centres revolved around a public representation of Christianity.

Nearly two centuries of building and artistic evolution in the capital and the provinces demonstrate that starting from the second half of the fifth century, eastern Roman cities witnessed a growth in Christian cultural representation and a decrease in pagan religious centres, thus altering the traditional landscape and civic identity.[397] In addition, slowing

[390] Busine 2015: 3.
[391] Lee 2013: 266.
[392] Few examples of Constantinian churches remain. One of the earliest examples of the Constantinian Basilica is the church of Saint John the Lateran in Rome, which is still used as the main seat of the bishop of Rome, the Pope. Barnes 2014: 86; Holloway 2004: 57-61. In Constantinople and its environs, Constantine also built numerous Christian sites. Bardill 2012: 251-255. Constantine built the structure near the imperial residence, and according to R. Ross Holloway, he appears to have intended to 'keep this newly favored cult and its leader firmly under the imperial thumb.' Holloway 2004: 58.
[393] Herrin 2007: 59-60.
[394] Busine 2015: 9, 11-12.
[395] The city of Rome, during the Papacy of Gregory the Great, also became a holy city and the Christian centre of the west on account of the numerous shrines, churches and relics present in the city. On this, see Demacopoulos 2015: 90-93.
[396] Herrin 2021: 310.
[397] Lee 2016: 116; Jacobs 2012: 132-133. See also Rapp 2014.

intervention in the secular city during this period and the increasing funding redirected to churches from the reign of Theodosius II onwards demonstrates that a greater shift in imperial attitudes towards religious institutions was taking place. Such attitudes from the imperial regimes are also noticeable throughout the reign of Theodosius I. Pagan temples, for instance, already received fewer resources and increasingly fell into decay. Furthermore, growth in active opposition to traditional (pagan) cults and subsequently their abandonment in the late fourth and early fifth centuries made their restoration unlikely.[398]

From the reign of Justinian onwards a visible change in attitude from the imperial regime towards the classical centres of learning still in existence can be observed. The emperor Justinian, for instance, shut down in 529 the school of philosophy in Athens, whose famous teachings of Platonic philosophy dated back to the fourth century B.C, with its founder Plato, the pupil of Socrates. The remaining philosophers of the school took refuge at the court of the Persian king Khusro I in Ctesiphon.[399] It remains uncertain whether or not Justinian issued a specific edict to ban teaching at the Academy or a general ban on teaching philosophy and divination.[400] In addition, Justinian sought to restrict the teaching of law (to certain places) in the empire, and restrict legal education to the law schools of Constantinople and Beirut,with the exception of Rome. The school of Beirut, however, was destroyed in an earthquake in 551 and never rebuilt afterwards.[401] Thus, classical civic identity and the secular institutions gradually fell out of use.[402]

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[398] Jacobs 2012: 125-126. See also Elm 2014: 177-179. The emperor Theodosius I did not officially ban, outlaw or decree the destruction of pagan temples. In fact, he allowed them to remain in use, but more so in a similar way to a museum. Price 2016: 117-118; *Cod. Theod*, 16.10.8. Early in the fifth century, the poem by Paulinus of Nola describes the abandonment of the temples and the transformation of the city of Rome by Christian practices. Maas 2010: 53. According to Robert Markus, once the Church no longer had any competition from traditional cults within the urban landscape, the secular city gradually made way for the sacred. See Markus 1990.

[399] Agath. *Hist*, 2.30.4. They were later allowed to return under the conditions set out in the new peace treaty between Rome and Persia in 532. But there is a debate in academia surrounding this event. Ekaterina Nechaeva argues that the conditions for the philosophers' safe return to the empire were not unilateral. According to Ekaterina it is suggested in the *Martyrdom of Mar Grigor* that a similar promise for the safety of Mar Grigor, a Christian Persian general, returning to Zoroastrian Persia from captivity in the eastern Roman empire was included in the treaty. Nechaeva 2017: 359-380. For a select bibliography, see Edward Watts' "Justinian, Malalas, and the End of Athenian Philosophical Teaching in A.D. 529" published in 2004; Joëlle Beauchamp's "Le philosophe et le joueur. La date de la "fermeture de l'École d'Athènes" (in French) published in 2002, and Alan Cameron's article "The Last Days of the Academy at Athens" revised in 2016.

[400] Watts 2004: 172-173. See also Cameron 2016: 7-29. Cf, *Cod. Iust*, 1.11.10.

[401] Miller and Sarris 2018: 24-26.

[402] The urban landscape of the Late Antique city had undergone a cultural and architectural evolution. Kenneth Holum argued that the classical city transformed during the sixth and seventh centuries due to several factors. These include: a lack of structural and civic maintenance, population decline due to recurring bout of plague, famine and other disasters, war, changes in the political and ideological landscape, economic shifts and struggles, and the migration of various populations into former Roman provinces that had no connection to the ancient classical city. Holum 2005. Despite the transformation of the classical city, the emperor Justinian had nonetheless fortified many cities during this time, and also paid attention to water infrastructure projects in urban areas. On water management during the reign of Justinian, see Jordan Pickett's "Water and empire in the

Despite the gradual cultural and architectural evolution of the Late Antique cities, the familiarity of the old secular architecture, its association with power and dominance, was integrated within the ecclesiastical context. Numerous church complexes in the Roman east and North Africa, for instance, included a number of secular architectural elements such as colonnaded streets, semi-circular entrance courtyards, plazas and arches among others.[403] These elements, according to Ine Jacobs, established 'an undeniable relationship between new ecclesiastical centres and the old, secular city.'[404] Likewise, monastic complexes for pilgrimage also included secular elements often enclosed within fortification walls. Religious structures, then, could function as a bridge between the fading secular elements of the Late Antique urban landscape and its developing Christian identity.

Eastern Roman emperors and bishops sought to impose a new civic identity on their subjects. Religious rites, hymns, prayers and celebrations gradually took over in daily life. Christian cults, for example, gradually fulfilled a number of functions previously accomplished by pagan cults, and the veneration of the saints now determined the rhythm of civic identity as their celebration now took over the role of the traditional calendar.[405] Religious celebrations strengthened the link between Christian institutions and its participants. As a result of the growing presence of Christian ceremonies and festivals, the symbolic outline of the city was redesigned, while the visibility of the new places of worship and the growth of cult practices surrounding the veneration of the saints assisted in the sacral demarcation of the city.

At first glance the Christianisation of the eastern Roman urban landscape implies an overhaul of the traditional culture and identity. But that is not the case. Numerous secular elements of civic identity would have moved into places where the moral behaviour of the people escaped from the direct authority of bishops.[406] According to A.D. Lee, Christianity had 'potential implications for buildings related to public entertainment' such as the circus or hippodrome, theatres and amphitheatres. Lee argued that the Christian bishops and clergy regarded them as antipathetic to Christian values and a distraction from church attendance as they perpetuated familiarity with the deities of classical mythology.[407] The popularity of these spectacles meant that the structures were maintained throughout Late Antiquity despite

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De Aedeficiis of Procopius" published in 2017. Many cities during the reign of Justinian, however, were reduced to being the seat of the bishop, the local garrison and places for refuges. Holum 2005: 92.

[403] Jacobs 2015: 106.

[404] Jacobs 2015: 106.

[405] Busine 2015: 10.

[406] Busine 2015: 5-6.

[407] Lee 2013: 211

ecclesiastical opposition.[408] Finally, although the Late Antique city gradually developed into a holy centre, the secular sphere never completely disappeared from the Christianising landscape of the eastern Roman empire.[409]

4.8 Concluding remarks:

This chapter has broadened the perspective in order to present a fuller picture of the process of Christianisation of eastern Roman society, as well as a more complete understanding of the sacralisation and hyper-sacralisation of imperial power. It has argued that the policies and decisions of the emperor Justinian and his successors were aimed at uniting the empire under one single faith. At the same time, classical modes and thought were employed to justify innovation through the antiquarian idea of restoration. More significantly we have seen how the sixth-century emperors attempted to reconcile classical or secular ideas with Christian ones to effectively drive home the idea that they were the true heirs to Augustus, the first Roman emperor, and, at the same time, the chosen representative of God on earth. But the process of Christianisation was nuanced since the influence of classical culture persisted and because the Christian Church itself remained disjointed as faith and doctrine were primary sources of contention among church leaders. Even so, the twin ideologies of Roman 'restoration' and Christian 'innovation' were recurring themes in the policies of the sixth-century emperors.[410]

Finally, the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty had nonetheless initiated a process of Christianisation of the eastern Roman empire to an unprecedented degree. In doing so they displayed the empire as a microcosm of heaven, and with their religious reforms and policies, they demonstrated the religious authority of the imperial office, which had the duty to enact God's will on earth. Not only did the cultural landscape of the eastern Roman empire 'look' and 'sound' more Christian, but also all aspects of eastern Roman society were imbued with Christian significance, even the remaining secular and classical elements. Yet in the end, several methods by which the sixth-century emperors achieved a near complete process of Christianisation and a higher degree of sacralisation were rooted in the classical past. Therefore, we must view the process as a whole as nuanced since both classical and Christian modes and expressions remained intertwined throughout the cultural evolution of the eastern

[408] Lee 2013: 213-214. For an in-depth study covering all spectacles and games (except athletics) in Late Antiquity, see the volume of Alexander Puk entitled *Das römische Spielewesen in der Spätantike* published in 2014.
[409] On this, see Claire Sotinel's "La sphère profane dans l'espace urbain" published in 2010.
[410] Lee 2013: 256, 264-273; Cameron 1991: 194.

Roman empire. Nevertheless, the sixth century marked an important ‘turning point’ in the Christianisation process.

5. Conclusion: the development of an 'unofficial' holy imperial cult under the Justinianic dynasty

5.1 Synopsis

This thesis has sought to provide a clear explanation of the process of hyper-sacralisation of imperial power. It has established a link between the increasing sacralisation of imperial power and the Christian cults of veneration in the second half of the sixth century. The nature of this link is rooted in the increasing politicisation of relic and icon veneration during the sixth century, the evolution of the imperial ideology of Justinian and his successors, as well as their methods of displaying religious authority, and the impact of the wider process of Christianisation under the imperial regimes of the sixth century. The second half of the sixth century represents a turning-point in this process. It is necessary to explore this turning-point in order to understand the phenomena surrounding imperial power and the cultural evolution that occurred in the following centuries. This thesis has taken a wider perspective on this issue, examining the numerous changes to the cultural and political landscape and mentalities of the eastern Roman empire during a period of cultural transition from a classical culture to an increasingly Christian one during the reign of Justinian and his successors.

The first chapter, which constitutes the introduction, laid out the outline of the entire thesis. It introduces the main theme of the thesis, which is the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power in the second half of the sixth century. Throughout this thesis we have analysed the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power through the lens of its links with the growth of Christian cults of veneration, particularly from the mid- to late sixth century. The first chapter also introduced the subtheme of the thesis, which is the increasing Christianisation of eastern Roman society in the sixth century. These themes are discussed in light of modern academic studies which have shaped our current understanding of the topic at hand. In order to properly examine these themes, we have also selected several primary sources, some contemporary to the sixth century and some that are near the period of study, for our analysis. These are discussed in detail in the introduction. The introduction concludes with a preliminary analysis of the Christianisation of eastern Roman intellectual and literary culture of the sixth century as a way to integrate the analysis of the primary sources into a wider perspective.

The second chapter explores two developments relevant to this study, namely the rise and politicisation of relic and icon veneration during Late Antiquity. The rise of relic and icon

veneration in Late Antiquity and subsequently their increased politicisation, particularly during the sixth century, represent important developments to explore within the overall study of hyper-sacralisation because one must begin with an understanding of their rise to prominence in the eastern Roman cultural landscape prior to engaging in a discussion of their integration into imperial ideology. To this end, the analysis has demonstrated several points which we may link to the process of hyper-sacralisation of imperial power. First, Christianity held certain individuals in higher regard owing to their increased holiness and connection with God. Second, Christians venerated the remains and the images of certain holy individuals around whom basic or elaborate religious cults were formed. Third, the analysis has demonstrated that the rise of relic and icon veneration attracted the attention of the imperial regimes of Late Antiquity, particularly those of Justinian and his successors where we notice an increase in patronage and support for Christian cults of veneration. Finally, the concept of veneration of holy objects and images was rooted in classical mentalities and practices that survived well into the sixth century. Christians adopted and adapted them to fit their own religious needs.

It is no coincidence, then, that a connection can be made between the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power and the rise of relic and icon veneration during the sixth century since the concept of holy or 'special' individuals and their veneration had deep roots in classical and Christian Roman culture. To reiterate, this chapter argued that the sixth century was a period during which we notice a significant growth in the cults of relics and icons and increasing patronage from the imperial regimes of the Justinianic dynasty.

The third chapter explores in detail the central theme of this thesis, which is the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power during the second half of the sixth century. It first discusses the political ideology of the emperor Justinian, particularly the influence and integration of Christianity into the political structure and ideology of the eastern Roman empire. The political ideology of the emperor Justinian is important when attempting to understand the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power during the reign of his successors. To this end, the analysis demonstrates that Justinian sowed the seeds for the evolution of the concept and representation of imperial power. The following sections of the chapter analyses how Justinian and his successors associate their regime and image with holy figures. The analysis has demonstrated several methods by which Justinian and his successors associated themselves with Christ and the saints. First, Justinian and Justin II's religious building projects allowed them to project their religious ideology onto the cultural landscape of the empire and display the heightened piety of their regime. Second, the sixth-century emperors

depicted their images in the likeness of Christ and the saints through iconography. Third, official narratives drive home the idea of the heightened sacred nature of the sixth-century emperors by portraying the emperors as holy or almost divine themselves and as possessing a close connection with God.

The hyper-sacralisation of imperial power during this period also met with resistance from members of the traditional elite and members of the clergy opposed to the official Christian doctrine of the empire. They therefore portrayed the emperors in ways contrary to their official propaganda. Yet these descriptions employed similar language and were nonetheless rooted within the Christian tradition. Therefore, if Justinian and his successors strove to portray themselves as the imitation of Christ on earth, then their opponents strove to portray them as the anti-Christ. This chapter makes evident the connection between Christian imagery, whether through iconography or literary imagery, and the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power. As the sixth century represented the period during which the cult of relics and icons increasingly developed, Justinian and his successors exploited this cultural development and integrated it within the imperial sphere to further display their own religious authority and holiness.

The fourth chapter explores in detail the subtheme of this thesis, which is the process of the Christianisation of eastern Roman society during the sixth century. This chapter proposes a link between the process of Christianisation and the hyper-sacralisation of imperial power. In this intent, the analysis demonstrates several points. First, although the empire had undergone a process of Christianisation since the fourth century, the sixth century nevertheless represents a period during which Christianity gradually encompassed all aspects of eastern Roman society. Second, the process of Christianisation was nuanced, since several elements of classical culture and mentalities survived well into the sixth century to influence political decisions and cultural evolution. But classical modes and thought were increasingly employed to justify Christian innovation through the antiquarian idea of restoration of the Roman state. Third, the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty played a significant role in the process of Christianisation. This involvement, which took the form of eastern Roman imperialism, Christian imperialism, meddling in Church affairs and persecutions, reflected the emperors' own religious ideologies and affected the portrayal of their own religious authority and piety.

The sacralisation, and eventually the hyper-sacralisation, of imperial power during the sixth century gradually developed at a crucial period in eastern Roman history. This phenomenon coincides with the many changes that occurred in the cultural and political

landscape. The reforms, policies and decisions of the sixth-century emperors allowed Christianity to consolidate its place within the empire. By the end of the century, and the start of the next, the character of the eastern Roman empire was quintessentially Christian. Although the essence of Roman identity remained, Christianity had obtained primacy of place in all aspects of life. Meanwhile, the classical (and antiquarian) and secular elements that survived within the eastern Roman cultural and political landscape were integrated within the new Christian model of empire conceived by the emperors of the Justinianic dynasty. Under the reigns of Justinian and his successors, the eastern Roman empire truly began to mirror the Heavenly kingdom and it was only fitting that the representative of God's earthly kingdom also mirrored His rule.

Finally, this thesis had argued that imperial power during the sixth century underwent a process of sacralisation, and following the second half of the sixth century, a process of hyper-sacralisation. This thesis has also proposed that this phenomenon was linked to the rise of Christian cults of veneration and their role within the imperial ideology and representation of the emperor Justinian and his successors. At the same time, this thesis has also argued that eastern Roman society underwent a process of Christianisation to an unprecedented degree under the regimes of the sixth-century emperors. However, the question remains, to what end? What was the purpose for this phenomenon? The question remains debated in modern scholarship. We have outlined some possibilities such as modelling the likeness of imperial power and the empire on the divine model, but such an issue requires more attention and further research. The primary goal of this thesis was to understand the origins of this development and the process itself, which we have linked to the rise of Christian cults of veneration.

5.2 The holy 'imperial cult' of the Justinianic dynasty

To conclude this thesis, given the themes of imperial sacrality and Christianisation in relation to the rise of Christian cults of veneration, it would be pertinent to open a brief discussion on the evolution of imperial veneration and the formation or development of a Christianised version of, even if unofficial, the imperial cult. The product of this phenomenon may be referred to as the holy imperial cult of the Christian Roman emperor. The growing cult of the saints, the veneration of their relics and icons, represented the ideal development in the sphere of Christian veneration, and provided Justinian and his successors with the necessary structure with which they could develop a holy imperial cult.

A steady decline of the imperial cult occurred during the fourth century coinciding with the rise of Christianity as the imperial religion. The emperor Theodosius I reiterated the bans on sacrifices enacted by his Christian predecessors as sacrifices appeared (to imperial eyes) to be connected with divination.[411] Yet the emperor did not 'curtail the traditional rites of the imperial cult', provided that they did not include sacrifices.[412] Nevertheless, the cult is said to have been 'officially' abandoned during the reign of the emperor Gratian when he removed the altar of victory, which had stood in the senate house since the reign of Augustus, and began the disestablishment of the Vestal virgins.[413] The emperor Theodosius I refused to restore the altar, extinguished Vesta's sacred flame and vacated the temple.[414] Furthermore, the emperor Gratian formally rejected the title of *Pontifex Maximus*.[415] The title of *Pontifex Inclitus*, meaning celebrated or renowned, was thereafter adopted by several Christian emperors of Late Antiquity.[416] The state religion was now Christianity, and under Christianity the worship of idols was prohibited as God became the only deity whom eastern Romans were bound to worship.[417]

Despite the 'end' of the imperial cult, at least in its pagan form, several elements surrounding the veneration of the emperor or his *genius* remained as part of eastern Roman political ideology during the reigns of Justinian and his successors.[418] The concept and representation of the *genius* survived throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, albeit with modifications, and were integrated within Christianity. This concept survived during the fifth and sixth centuries, for instance, in the form of the cult of the saints, individuals, as we have seen in this thesis, whom the public believed to possess a special relationship with God on account of their heightened piety.[419] It is no coincidence, then, that the emperors of the sixth

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[411] Lee 2013: 49-53; *Cod Theod*, 16.10.10, 11, 12, 14, 19. For arguments minimising the significance of the imperial measures against pagan worship, see Cameron Al 2011: 59-74. For a detailed study of the Roman traditional cults, rites and rituals, sacrifices, and the art of divination, see Frankfurter 2006.
[412] Williams and Friell 2005: 45.
[413] Lee 2016: 116; Williams and Friell 2005: 46-47.
[414] Williams and Friell 2005: 54.
[415] Lee 2016: 116; Cameron 2007: 341; Williams and Friell 2005: 47.
[416] For a detailed study of the titles of *Pontifex Maximus* and *Pontifex Inclitus* in Late Antiquity, see Alan Cameron 2007.
[417] The cult of the emperor, until Theodosius, was inseparable from those of the empire's official (pagan) deities. The emperor Gratian in 382 disestablished the state cult in Rome. In addition, the emperors Gratian and Theodosius I appear to have refused to wear the pontifical robes, and reinvented the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, choosing instead the epithet *Inclitus* to replace *Maximus* in their nomenclatures to satisfy both the ecclesiastical authorities and the pagan senators. Cameron, Al 2011: 52-56.
[418] The *genius* of the emperor was, in classical times, a mark of his divinity. Following the elevation of Augustus as the emperor of Rome, the senate began cultivating his *genius* rather than his person by offering libations or sacrifices. There began the cult of the emperor. Veneration of the *genius* of other persons of authority and respect also spread across the empire during classical times. But during the late fourth century, the emperor Theodosius I banned by law the veneration of the *genii*. *Cod. Theod*, 16.10.12.
[419] See Chapter 2, section 1.

century exploited the cult of the saints, as well as the veneration of their relics and icons. The close relationship of holy people with God showed that they possessed greater sacrality in the eyes of the people and the sixth-century emperors seized on the opportunity to portray their regimes in the same light. By doing so, they increasingly gained the ability to demonstrate to their subjects that they had God's favour and a heightened sacredness to match, if not surpass, that of the saints.

Between the fourth and sixth centuries, the imperial cult became an implicit part of the Christian empire.[420] Katherine Marsengill has argued that a 'clear separation in the minds of Christian citizens between the domains of veneration, where the emperor occupied the public spaces and Christ remained in his places of worship, helps to explain the phenomenon of Christian imperial cult.'[421] But during the sixth century, the lines between the secular and the holy began to blur in regard to depictions of the emperor and Christ. The emperor is depicted in similar light as Christ and the saints and conversely the figure of Christ also begins to gain more imperial attributes.

By his title *Augustus*, meaning venerable or esteemed one, the eastern Roman emperor invited awe and even veneration from his subjects through official ceremonies, celebrations, and by cultivating his own religious authority. But to officially venerate the emperor in Christian society was supposedly considered idolatrous and pagan.[422] So how do the Christian emperors of the Justinianic dynasty reconcile the gap between imperial celebration and veneration as God's representative on earth and the Christian concept of idolatry? To understand how this phenomenon developed during the sixth century, we must consider the analysis (presented above) surrounding the evolution of Christian mentalities and behaviour, cult practices, and imperial ideology. In addition, we must consider the purpose for the sixth-century emperors' exploitation of Christian cults of veneration. This purpose was to promote an unofficial cult of the emperor similar in appearance and connected with the cult of the saints.

[420] Marsengill 2015: 275
[421] Marsengill 2015: 276.
[422] Marsengill 2015: 275.

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6.3 Websites

The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity. Website address: http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk.