

Maria Cristina Carile

Imperial Icons in Late Antiquity and Byzantium: the Iconic Image of the Emperor between Representation and Presence

In Late Antiquity and Byzantium the imperial image was characterized by a strong iconic character that determined the immediate recognition of the emperor as well as of the state authority in his images by the observer. More than the emperor's physiognomic or the iconography of the image were the insignia of power to make the emperor easily recognizable in any kind of representation. Although these changed with the passing of time, their repetition across different kinds of images and on a wide range of media qualifies them as the strongest iconic attributes of the imperial image. In the above discussion, it appears that the iconicity of the imperial image entails that the imperial representation bears determined elements, constantly repeated in any kind of representation - the insignia of power - and the pervasive reproduction of the imperial representation. Although in semiotic, the word "iconicity" applies above all to written communication, the iconicity is perhaps the strongest characteristic of the imperial image. In fact, the word implies that the form of the representation (in this case, the iconography of the scene and the attributes of the imperial figure) and its meaning (being a representation of the emperor, the head of the empire) coincide. In other words, every representation of the emperor resembles the emperor himself for it reproduces a human figure with the elements qualifying his power (the insignia), if not the physiognomic of the emperor in charge. Also in this sense, the imperial image can be properly defined an icon - even in the contemporary understanding of the term - but at the same time it is also a symbol of the state. Besides, in the historiographical discourse on icon theory, scholars have defined the imperial image as a particular kind of icon: one that, although acting or being perceived as an icon, represented a man, not a saint. For the Byzantines, however, the imperial image was apparently regarded as an icon, since it constituted the basic term of comparison for the development of the theology of icons. What is more, in the imperial image the representation of the emperor implied the presence of the state, as the emperor was the symbol of the state. Thus, the imperial image can be regarded as a special kind of icon, possessing a strong power: one of legitimization through the authority of the emperor, which was also present in his image. Its pervasive diffusion implied that the state if not the emperor himself was effectively present everywhere in the empire, even when in fact he was absent in a determined time and place. In this sense it partake the major characteristic of holy icons - making the saint represented present through its image - but in a symbolic way: the state was *present* through the *representation* of the emperor.