Clothes maketh the emperor? 
Embodying and Performing Imperial Ideology in Byzantium through Dress

The Byzantine emperor’s body was a site of tension in which ‘several different irreducible domains’, to quote Lynn Meskell, came together. It was the biological body of a man who ate, slept, felt pleasure and pain, fell sick, aged, and died. It was a gendered-male body that was shaped by, and needed to conform to, social norms regarding what constituted a man in Byzantium. It was the body of a Christian, whose passions had to be controlled in order to ensure the salvation of the soul. It was a lived body, the locus of the emperor’s identity and individuality, moulded by his inclinations, interests, choices, his relations to others, and, not least, his embodied experiences. It was the physical body of a ruler, who needed to be (or, at least, to appear to be) capable of shouldering the huge day-to-day burdens of administering the state and keeping its enemies at bay. But, it was also the preternatural body of God’s vicar on earth, the brilliantly glowing body of the sun-emperor, the superhuman body of the tireless leader and the triumphant commander, the current incarnation of timeless, ecumenical imperial authority, dignity, and power. It was a political body, constructed and constrained by centuries-old tradition, imperial ideology, and legislation, as well as by current expectations of what a ruler should look like and how he should behave. It was a noble and precious body – perceived, respected, and treated as such – because of the emperor’s special relation to God and the mystique that surrounded the

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3 Ernst Kantorowicz’s conceptualization of the physical and political bodies of the ruler within the framework of medieval statehood, first published in 1957, remains a classic: Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957; repr. 1997).
imperial office. At the same time, it was a surprisingly vulnerable body, under constant scrutiny and subject to criticism, ridicule, physical attack, and destruction, especially at any display of weakness or inappropriate behaviour seen to jeopardize God's favour and thereby to lead the state to disaster.

This paradoxical multiplicity – to take a leaf out of Oliver Harris and John Robb's book – that was the Byzantine emperor's body was created and performed as the emperor moved through and acted in a variety of physical and social spaces by means of postures, gestures, facial expressions, speech, activities, and, not least, his dress.1 In conformity with social custom and prevalent ideas in Byzantium that considered human nakedness shameful,2 the emperor's body was a dressed body. The emperor's attire allowed him not only to be seen and act in public but also to be visually distinctive and, as such, immediately recognizable. However, he was not simply a stunningly dressed mannequin on display nor a passive surface for the inscription of symbolic messages about the imperial office communicated through his dress. The intimate acts of getting and being dressed in the imperial regalia was one of the ways in which he experienced being the emperor in his own body. Moreover, though his sartorial choices were circumscribed by established custom, normative prescriptions, and current expectations, he was not entirely deprived of agency in the way he employed dress to articulate and present the 'collective' that was the imperial body, his body.6

In what follows, I propose to explore how dress was employed to constitute and present the emperor's body, the physical and the politic, the individual and the generic, the temporal and the timeless. Admittedly, studying imperial dress as an embodied practice, especially in its material dimension rather than as a typology of specific forms, is a challenge, given that we have neither the skeletal remains of Byzantine emperors nor their actual imperial dress and insignia. What we do have are representations of Byzantine emperors in word and image, couched in the conventions of Byzantine rhetoric and art.7 Far from straightforward records of reality, these representations are rather perceptions of and reflections on how the emperor should dress and carry himself in different contexts and situations. It is generally through the filter of the gaze of

4 Oliver J. T. Harris and John Robb, 'The Body in History: Constructing a Deep-Time Cultural History', posted on academia.edu 25 April 2015. The article summarizes the main arguments of the monograph by the same authors, The Body in History: Europe from the Paleolithic to the Future (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), which was not available to me at the time of writing.


other men, whether authors or artists, that we garner these glimpses of the Byzantine emperor, how women may have perceived the ruler’s body and how this perception may have differed from that of the men, we cannot really know. Despite these limitations, a critical examination of the available written and visual sources can help us flesh out the dressed imperial body as it was constituted, presented, and perceived both in specific circumstances and within the wider context of Byzantine discourses of imperial power.

Given the vastness of the extant material, here I will focus on one specific emperor, characterized as ‘the most heavily eulogised of all Byzantine emperors.’ This is Manuel I Komnenos, who reigned from 1143 to 1180. Excluding the effigies on his coins, only one securely identified portrait of this emperor survives (Fig. 1). On the other hand, numerous encomia of Manuel in prose and verse have come down to us, as well as a number of epigrams dedicated to now-lost portraits and artefacts associated with him. These, along with historical accounts of his reign by Byzantine and non-Byzantine authors alike, contain multiple references to the emperor’s body and dress. Taking into account the length of his reign (37 years), which ended with his death from natural causes at 62, what was a ripe age for a Byzantine, one could claim that Manuel was successful in ‘pulling off the look’ and, as such, provides a good case study for the issues that concern us here. References to a number of ‘failed appearances’ by some of his successors provide a foil to Manuel’s own performances. The analysis will concentrate on specific attributes of imperial attire and on examining how these attributes were manipulated in different modalities of imperial representation through ritual, literature, and art either to make or unmake the emperor.

Manuel, the youngest son of John II Komnenos (r. 1118-1143), became emperor at the age of 25 by his father’s choice, bypassing his elder surviving brother, Isaak. He was apparently a tall man with a slight stoop, though this was not necessarily perceived as a flaw. In the anonymous fictitious dialogue Timarion (first half of the twelfth century), the epitome of manly beauty, the duke of Thessalonike, is presented as being slightly stooped ‘as though Nature itself.
tried to avoid any potential deviation from due measure. Likewise, according to his eulogists, there was nothing in excess in Manuel’s body but rather balance, grace, and harmony among its constituent parts. They wax epic in their descriptions of his broad shoulders, his mighty torso, his strong arms, his dexterous hands, equally capable in the works of war and peace, his powerful legs, and his superhuman stamina, even to the point of forsaking sleep in the service of the state. Rhetorical exaggerations – including the popular trope of the emperor shedding rivers of sweat for the sake of his subjects – aside, accounts of Manuel’s active participation in campaigns, military displays, and the hunt, in conjunction with his restraint when it came to food and drink, do imply that, at least in his prime, he must have had a well-honed physical body. Combined with his height, he would have cut an impressive figure, made even more distinct by the colour of his skin, his hair, and his eyes. Written sources and the one extant portrait of Manuel (Fig. 1) make clear that he had inherited the dark skin of his father. Michael Italikos and Eustathios of Thessalonike underline that the dark colour of the emperor’s skin proclaimed his manliness, white skin being a sign of effeminacy as it alluded to a sheltered and soft existence. Equally manly, according to Eustathios, was the emperor’s attitude towards his own hair, his manliness, white skin being a sign of effeminacy as it alluded to a sheltered and soft existence. Excessive attention to one’s hair was a practice conventionally associated in the works of male authors with women and, by association, with foppish men. In his single surviving portrait, the dark hair of the then 48-year-old emperor barely touches his shoulders. The colour of his eyes is not discernible in the image, but written sources suggest that they had a violet-blue colour, which must have offered an interesting twist to the traditional rhetorical topos of the sun-emperor’s flashing eyes. Manuel, then, had quite a distinct, striking, and what was perceived at the time as a manly physical appearance. His manliness, however, was not simply a function of his physical strength and his active lifestyle. The trim condition of his body implied a heightened degree of self-discipline and self-control, which in the Byzantine construction of gender distinguished the man from the feminine other as well as from the weak, effeminate man.

16 Δισαποιμωθηκεν ον Πατρες των και απαντησαν θαλαμηταιον, trans. [Modern Greek] Petros Vlachakos (Thessalonike: Εκδόσεις Ζήτρος, 2001), p. 64 (lines 241-43). I owe this translation to Georgios Xenios, whom I here thank.
18 Relevant passages from orations dedicated to the emperor have been collected and discussed by Grammatiki Karla, ‘Das literarische Porträt Kaiser Manuels I. Komnenos in den Kaiserreden des 12. Jh.’, Byzantinische Zeitschrift, 101 (2008), 669-79.
20 Known as ‘the Moor’, according to William, Archbishop of Tyre, II, 129.
22 Eustathios of Thessalonike, Not Composed, pp. 26-27 and p. 145 [commentary].
Fig. 1
Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS gr. 3176, fol. IIr.
Manuel I Komnenos (r. 1143-1180) and his second wife, Maria of Antioch, 1166 (Photo: © 2021 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana)
A man needed to be able to rule his own body first, if he wanted to be able to rule others; a man incapable of this control was not fit to rule. This is assumed tacitly in the pathetic image of the usurper John Komnenos (called ‘the Fat’) conjured by Nicholas Mesarites, who turns on their head some of the traditional tropes of imperial panegyric celebrating the emperor’s physical body. After his failed coup, on July 31, 1200, John tried to escape by climbing to the upper story of one of the halls in the Great Palace of Constantinople. Mesarites presents him seated on the floor, unable to bear the burden of his misfortune, gulping a drink, sweating copiously, and falling asleep despite the direness of his situation. The final touch to this damning portrayal of the usurper is that, though crowned, John was not clad in the imperial garb: his transformation into a ruler had been incomplete, because – this description of his physical condition implies – of his inadequacy.

Imperial dress, then, beyond being a means of exalting the emperor as befitted his majesty, had the power to turn a mortal man into the ruler of the oikoumene. It was this transformative aspect of imperial dress and insignia that made them so important and explains why the first action of any claimant to the throne, legitimate or otherwise, was the assumption of distinctive imperial attire. Manuel’s accession was no different, though it took place far from the capital, where the emperor had been on campaign. When John II, upon his deathbed, announced his decision to raise his youngest son to the throne, Manuel was invested with the imperial crown and the purple imperial state mantle, the chlamys, and thus arrayed was presented to the gathered nobles and troops who acclaimed him as emperor. Given the precipitous nature and the context of these events, we may assume that the regalia that Manuel was invested with were not made specifically for him but were actually those of his father. Manuel literally stepped into his father’s (red) shoes. We know, admittedly from earlier periods, that Byzantine emperors wore the garments of their predecessors. Through peaceful successions or bloody dynastic changes, the imperial garments and insignia passed from one emperor to the next, adding a veneer of normalcy and serving both as visual statement and material proof of an uninterupted continuity with an imperial past that justified the exercise of power in the present. This may have made imperial dress impersonal, but being invested with it was nonetheless an intimate, personal, and emotive act for the new incumbent. In the case of Manuel’s potentially controversial accession, putting on his father’s attire bolstered his claim to legitimacy. At the same time, it placed a great burden on the shoulders of young Manuel, who was called upon to fulfil the expectations raised by his taking on of his father’s mantle literally and metaphorically.

28 In Byzantium, however, for reasons that remain to be explored, this practice did not coalesce into the creation of a specific collection of ‘coronation regalia’ or ‘crown jewels’ with constitutional and mystical significance, as may be observed in other medieval monarchies, East and West, on which see Akira Akiyama, ‘Relic or Icon? The Place and Function of Imperial Regalia’, in The Nomadic Object: The Challenge of World for Early Modern Religious Art, ed. by Christine Görtler and Mia Mochizuki, Intersections, 53 (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), pp. 430-47, with further bibliography.
This material continuity also had an impact on the actual appearance of imperial dress and the designs of individual items, which were disengaged from current sartorial trends. Again, such conservatism, which resulted in endowing imperial dress with a timeless outlook, rather than fortuitous or simply practical, was deliberate, a means to proclaim the venerable antiquity of the Byzantine state. Especially in his capital, where images of his similarly-dressed predecessors were visible all around, the reigning emperor – appearing in his traditional-looking regalia either in person or in image – would have been recognized as the latest in a long line of rulers. This association served, on the one hand, to empower him and, on the other, to reassure his subjects of the longevity and stability of their state.

Conservative did not mean unchanging, however. Old garments were repaired and replaced with new ones, though the persistence of the same basic designs and of the same names ensured that, even if there was nothing physically left of the original garments, the symbolic potency of the imperial vestments remained undiminished and the semblance of continuity ensured. One can also observe concessions to current trends and imported fashions, like Manuel’s shoes with the pointed toes in his portrait of 1166, but these were subtle and limited. More deliberate changes in imperial dress were brought about by emperors who wished to make a statement about their own rule and their style of governance. Such changes are described in terms of ‘renovation’, transforming, rhetorically, innovation into a renewal of the empire’s former glory. In his portrait, Manuel wears the closed-shaped imperial crown that his aunt, Anna Komnene, credited to Alexios I (r. 1081–1118), Manuel’s grandfather. Alexios, the founder of the Komnenian dynasty and a usurper, had apparently adopted this new type of crown in order to distinguish the imperial headdress from those granted as a prerogative to the highest dignitaries of the state, who, following his administrative reforms, were all members of the imperial family. The new crown ensured that the figure of the emperor remained distinct, demonstrating clearly, for all to see, his position at the top of the court hierarchy. Looking more closely at Manuel’s portrait, however, we observe another change, which likewise could be associated with Komnenian perceptions of the role of the emperor as the head of state. While the imperial loros, the bejewelled scarf that the emperor wears around his torso in his guise as God’s chosen vicar on earth, is easily recognizable, having been a regular feature of imperial portraiture since the ninth century, the appearance of the tunic over which it is worn has been modified. When we compare this to portraits of eleventh-century emperors, we notice that,

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31 On the shoes, see Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images*, p. 71.

32 Anna Komnene, *Alexias*, p. 95.


34 See Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images*, figs. 18–19.
though Manuel remains fully covered from neck to toe, his purple tunic is now tightly fitted, revealing the strong physique and straight lines of the male body beneath it, from the broad shoulders to the narrow waist and shapely arms. This is a development already detectable in portraits of John II,\(^{35}\) and one is tempted to associate the emphasis on the powerful physical body of the emperor, also observed in contemporary imperial panegyric, with the militarization of the imperial ideal under the Komnenoi, especially under the two most celebrated soldier-emperors of the dynasty, John II and Manuel I.\(^{36}\) That being said, the written sources do not credit Manuel with any specific change in imperial dress. They do associate him, however, with the use – if not actual creation – of an oversize imperial banner, which was more in keeping with this emperor’s military interests and his self-representation as a formidable, if somewhat flamboyant, warrior. This was a great banner with eight parts or tongues, called the ‘octopus’, which was attached to a long, heavy lance. Manuel is described as manoeuvring this lance and banner with great ease and dexterity in the military games in which he loved to take part, to the great amazement of Byzantine and Western onlookers.\(^{37}\) In actual battle, this banner associated with the emperor would have effectively signalled his presence on the field to both friend and foe, even from afar.\(^{38}\)

Just as the dress transfigured the man into a ruler, so did contact with the imperial body impart some of his aura to the garments – integral to the embodied constitution of his imperial identity – making them, in a sense, a material, tactile extension of his body, his grace, and his power. Indeed, to receive a gift of garments that had been worn on the emperor’s ‘all-noble and most honoured body’ was a singular distinction for extraordinary services rendered. In 1083, Gregory Pakourianos proudly records receiving such a gift from Alexios I Komnenos. Far from presuming to wear them himself, Pakourianos donated these garments for the adornment of the main church of the Monastery of the Virgin Petritzonitissa he had founded at Backovo,\(^{39}\) Niketas Choniates’s description of a comparable gift from Manuel I plays on the familiarity of his prospective audience with this honorific practice in order to create an image that is unsettling and not especially flattering for the emperor.\(^{40}\) The exchange was between Manuel and a certain Gabras, the emissary of the victorious sultan of Konya, in the immediate aftermath of the devastating defeat of the Byzantines at Myriokephalon in 1176. Gabras, seeing Manuel’s surcoat and camouflaging derision as patronizing concern, comments that its yellowish colour is inauspicious and that it ‘militates against good fortune in battle’. Manuel, having already been

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39 Whether this is the imperial banner that Kinnamos refers to in relation to the Battle at the Tara River (1150) is unclear: John Kinnamos, pp. 107-08; trans. Brand, p. 86.
40 The exchange was between Manuel and a certain Gabras, the emissary of the victorious sultan of Konya, in the immediate aftermath of the devastating defeat of the Byzantines at Myriokephalon in 1176. Gabras, seeing Manuel’s surcoat and camouflaging derision as patronizing concern, comments that its yellowish colour is inauspicious and that it ‘militates against good fortune in battle’. Manuel, having already been

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Jeffreys for generously sharing with me their critical edition and English translation of this poem prior to publication.
defeated by the man’s overlord, is forced to overlook the couched insult: he takes off the precious surcoat, adorned with purple and gold, and presents it to Gabras for his service in the negotiations. What the man did with it, Choniates does not say.

In contrast to Choniates’s disconcerting portrayal, where the traditional sartorial hallmarks of imperial power – gold and purple – are undermined by the reality of defeat, the representation of Manuel in his single extant portrait is one of imperial magnificence and authority that allows no room for uncertainty or weakness. We can use this image as the basis on which to explore other aspects of imperial dress that cut across functional divisions between the different types of attire, civilian and military, that the emperor wore at various public functions. As already mentioned, the dress covered the imperial body completely: the only parts left uncovered were the face and the hands, being the principal sites at which the emperor’s mood and will were made manifest through gestures, facial expressions, speech, and, above all else, his gaze. Nakedness, which was deemed not only shameful but also a sign of vulnerability and humiliation, had no place in the articulation of the Byzantine imperial image. However, even in this two-dimensional image, the emperor’s physique is not elided but brought to the fore by his tight-fitting tunic and the ornaments and accessories that draw attention to specific parts of his body, like the face, shoulders, upper arms, and waist.

The near-complete covering of the body was achieved by the length of the tunic and its long sleeves as well as by the multiple sartorial units that constituted any one ‘costume’. Since the Early Byzantine period, the superimposition of sartorial units in a single ensemble was emblematic of great wealth and high social rank, hence it is not surprising to find this as a feature of imperial dress. In the case of the latter, these successive layers were made of rare, expensive materials, the use of which was carefully regulated by the imperial government, such as high-grade silks dyed purple, gold and silver thread, pearls, and precious and semi-precious stones. Sources also speak of the softness and suppleness of these gorgeous imperial garments, other aspects of their luxuriousness. Still, the extensive use of metal threads and jewels made them quite heavy and cumbersome. The consistent representation of the metal chain, which would have been used to manipulate the train of the loros, as also seen in Manuel’s portrait, implies that the heavy weight was an acknowledged, significant attribute of imperial dress.

An equally significant and distinctive feature was colour. As already observed by others, the palette of imperial dress, at least as attested in literature and art, was relatively limited, or rather, exclusive. It included various hues of purple, ranging from violet to blue to purple-red, as well as bright red, green, blue, white, and gold. Other hues appear more rarely, if at all, in textual and pictorial representations of imperial dress. Manuel’s surcoat mentioned above was described as having the colour of bile (χολοβάφινον), to be understood as a shade of yellow. In a description of a painting depicting the emperor jousting – in all probability Manuel I – the garment that he

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41 As made abundantly clear by accounts of the ritual humiliation of Renauld of Châtillon, prince of Antioch, before Manuel in 1158; see, for instance, Elizabeth Jeffreys and Michael Jeffreys, ‘A Constantinopolitan Poet views Frankish Antioch’, Crusades, 14 (2015), 49-151 (pp. 66-83) (Manganeios Prodromos, Poem 9, esp. lines 42-55).


44 Kazhdan and Franklin, Studies on Byzantine Literature, pp. 257-63.
wears beneath a red mantle is designated as tawny orange (κιρρός). This rhetorical description of a painting is also exceptional in that it is the only text known to me in which the decorative motifs adorning Manuel's garments are recorded in detail and their symbolism disambiguated for the reader. In all other extant references to Manuel's dress, the authors focus on its materials, its colours, and, above all else, its scintillating brilliance; indeed, as we shall see also below, light-related vocabulary is quite prominent in descriptions of imperial dress. The patterns that may have adorned the silks from which the emperor's garments were made or the designs in which the precious stones, pearls, and gold embroidery were arranged on the fabrics receive no mention at all, as if, in the eyes of the dazzled beholder, these details were lost among the glittering magnificence of the imperial performance. One should also consider the probability that those who relayed these accounts did not enjoy close enough proximity to the emperor to have observed the decorative details of the dress. Only when the emperor was frozen in an image could one approach him and make out the patterns adorning his dress. In the description of a painting, where we 'see' the emperor twice removed through the gaze first of the painter and then the orator, whether these patterns – in this case, the cross, the eagles, and, possibly, griffins – were indeed realistic or whether they were chosen by the painter and/or the orator as signs, emblematic of the emperor's virtues, is a different matter altogether. In our one extant portrait, Manuel's tunic appears comparatively simply adorned, with a now faded overall oblong loop design executed in bluish grey.

The familiar, traditional designs and the distinctively coloured garments and accessories made of rare, costly, and gleaming materials ensured that the emperor would stand out in his surroundings and be unmistakable, even when seen from a distance while accompanied by the colourfully dressed members of his entourage. At the same time, the sumptuousness of the emperor's dress was a marker of his authority, emblematic of his ability to control vast material and human resources in the fulfilment of his role. It was an eloquent means of advertising the wealth and consequent power of the imperial office, meant to produce an awe-inspiring effect in the beholders and to command their obedience and respect. Judging by our sources, Manuel was quite capable in mobilizing this aspect of imperial dress to impress foreign rulers paying court to him in Constantinople, while also 'teaching them their place' in relation to the Byzantine ruler. The emperor, seated in his elevated, bejewelled throne, handsome and tall, dressed in purple attire that was 'afire' with red precious stones and 'illuminated' with white pearls, and wearing a large red jewel suspended from his neck on a golden chain, must have looked magnificent when he received Kilic Arslan II, the sultan of Konya, in 1161. However, Manuel had the personal charisma, the reputation, and, more importantly, the wealth and military power to add substance to the claims made by the orchestration of this ceremonial performance. In the decades after his death, when the situation had changed dramatically

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45 Jones and Maguire, 'A Description', p. 108.
46 Jones and Maguire, 'A Description', pp. 107-09. For the Greek text with a German translation, see Peter Schreiner, 'Ritterspiele in Byzanz', Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik, 46 (1996), 227-41 (pp. 235-41).
47 See, for example, John Kinnamos, pp. 205-06; trans. Brand, p. 156.
48 For a different interpretation especially of the animal imagery on the emperor's garments featuring in this text, see Jones and Maguire, 'A Description', pp. 128-35.
49 See William, Archbishop of Tyre, II, 380, apropos the visit of King Amalric of Jerusalem to Constantinople (1171).
50 See above, n. 47.
and Byzantium was no longer a leading power on the international scene, a similar imperial display had the opposite effect. On Christmas day 1196, Alexios III Angelos (r. 1183-1185) tried to dazzle the German ambassadors to Constantinople into accepting a peace agreement by arraying himself and his dignitaries in luxurious garments adorned with precious stones and gold thread. The Germans, however, remained unimpressed, dismissing the sartorial styles of the Byzantine court as effeminate. If we are to trust Choniates, writing with the bitter knowledge of what was to follow a few years later in 1204, even the Byzantines themselves found this display ridiculous, as it demonstrated the emperor’s lack of moderation and his failure to appreciate the gravity of the situation faced by the empire at the time.  

Still, it was not just what the emperor wore that was meaningful, but how he wore it. The superimposed layers of heavy garments allowed only limited motility and imposed specific postures and gestures on the bearer; the emperor had to be mindful that his garments not become disarrayed so that his dignity would not suffer as a result. This slowness and stateliness of movement befitted the solemnity of the imperial office. What is more, as Henry Maguire has argued, a stillness and lack of violent motion, in portraiture as well as in ceremonial performances, sublimed the emperor’s humanity, bringing him closer to the divine within the framework of the imitation of Christ. At the same time, and quite paradoxically, the ability of the emperor to bear the sheer weight of the regalia with dignity and poise affirmed his bodiness, being an unequivocal statement of his physical strength and, more importantly, of his self-command. Both Kinnamos and the anonymous poet known in scholarly literature as Manganeios Prodromos make much of the ease with which Manuel carried the weight of his dress during his triumphal entry into Antioch in 1159. By contrast, it boded ill for the reign of Andronikos I Komnenos (r. 1183-1185) that on his coronation day in 1183, upon returning from Hagia Sophia, he chose to ride at a fast pace when entering the Great Palace through the Chalke Gate, rather than proceeding slowly as was the custom. Though it is impossible to know why Andronikos decided to depart from established protocol, Choniates claimed that he did so either because of fear or because he was unable to suffer the weight of the imperial insignia due to his advanced age (he was around 65 at the time). Andronikos’s cruel death two years later at the hands of the Constantinopolitan mob confirmed his failure as a ruler foreshadowed by his perceived inability to carry the weight of the imperial attire. Like the demands of the imperial office, imperial dress made no allowances for age or infirmity.

The powerful sensory impact of the emperor’s dressed body and its multi-layered connotations were at the same time magnified and nuanced by the protocols and rituals that regulated imperial appearances and the mise-en-scène of individual ceremonial performances. These
were constructed as a succession of contrasts – between concealment and revelation, light and dark, motion and stillness, silence and noise – aimed to cultivate the emperor’s mystique and to dramatize the ideology, structures, and expectations that both shaped him and were brought to life by him. In order to illustrate these points, we can take a closer look at Manuel’s triumphal entry into Antioch, shortly after Easter 1159, as narrated by Manganeios Prodromos in a poem composed only a few months after the event and, years later, by Kinnamos. The triumph was the culmination of the emperor’s campaign in Cilicia in Asia Minor, seeking to advance Byzantine interests in the region and to bring local rulers, Thoros of Armenia and Renaud of Antioch, into line through a great show of strength.55

Though this may appear surprising, the Byzantine emperor did not participate in imperial triumphs in full armour, signalling by his non-militant appearance that the war was over and that a new period of peace and prosperity was ushered in due to the emperor’s military successes.56 Precisely because of this custom, rumours that the emperor might be attacked during his entry into Antioch caused concern and led to Manuel’s wearing ‘double breastplates’ (two superimposed mail shirts?), Kinnamos tells us, hidden beneath his equally heavy, gem-studded outer garment.57 Wearing body armour overtly would have been an admission of weakness and fear, which had no place in the construction of the formidable and fearless triumphant emperor. Moreover, it could have been perceived as openly aggressive by the already nervous population of the Syrian metropolis. Manganeios Prodromos makes no reference to the hidden armour, just as one would expect if, as suggested by his editors, he was embellishing on official reports released by the emperor’s circle. He speaks only of the magnificent mantle that the ruler wore with ease, despite its being weighed down by an abundance of pearls and gold.58 As for the headdress that the emperor wore, Kinnamos calls it stephos, which suggests a crown rather than the traditional toupha, or ceremonial crested helmet, worn by earlier emperors during their military triumphs;59 Manganeios makes no mention of the emperor’s headgear.

The ceremony possibly began close to dawn and would have lasted the whole day. A multitude of clergymen and laymen, carrying icons of Christ and the Virgin, Gospel books, and crosses, went out of the city to meet the emperor. He waited for them upon a chariot, surrounded by the imperial banners and the cross, signalling thus his acknowledgement of God as the source of his victory. The wording of Manganeios’s poem describing the event suggests that the emperor may have been hidden behind a curtain and then revealed suddenly, his figure lit by artificial lights (or by the natural light of dawn), since the poet speaks of the emperor rising from his chariot and dazzling the onlookers with his light. Nevertheless, he displayed his piety by descending from his chariot and venerating the cross and the icons. Only then did he mount

55 On the historical background of these events, see Magdalino, *The Empire*, pp. 66–76; Jeffreys and Jeffreys, ‘A Constantinopolitan Poet’, pp. 50–53.
57 John Kinnamos, pp. 186–87; trans. Brand, pp. 142–43. Spingou, ‘The Supreme Power’, pp. 61–63, interprets this passage differently, assuming that the emperor was asked to enter the city unarmed, but he refused to do so ‘because [she claims] his armour was part of his body’.
58 See above, n. 53.
his horse, ‘clothed in light’ to begin the slow procession towards the city. Outside the gates, he dismounted to venerate at a small chapel and to wait, away from spectators, while all was made ready for the next stage of the procession. When the time came, he appeared before the crowd that waited in anticipation to behold him once again, stunning them, according to Manganeios, with the ease with which he mounted his horse, despite the weight of his garments, as if flying high. Given the context and the audience in question – the warlike and troublesome Latins – it is no wonder that the ceremony was organized in such a way as to showcase the emperor’s physical build and prowess. In the absence of weapons – which were the soldier’s most recognizable external signs – the weight of the dress, the emperor’s comportment, and his horsemanship served to convey the image of the victorious, manly warrior.

The next stage of the ceremony shifted to present the emperor as the rising, glorious sun, shedding his beneficial light on the people. Upon entering the city, instead of processing down the main street, the emperor climbed up the city gates and appeared in a glorious epiphany, standing still and shedding his light and grace over the people gathered below. Manganeios has a field day describing the glow of the colourful jewels that adorned the emperor’s dress, and it is more than likely that the effects he describes had been achieved using some mechanism of artificial lighting to illuminate the emperor’s figure. What we have here is a transposition to Antioch of a traditional imperial ritual, which involved the sun-like imperial ruler ‘rising’, i.e. appearing from a high place to be seen by his subjects gathered below, most notably, in the imperial box at the Hippodrome in Constantinople. Adjusting to the realities of Antioch’s monumental topography, Manuel used the gates as the appropriate, high-rising stage for his spectacular epiphany, ensuring maximum visibility. At the same time, by surmounting and appearing at the gates, he made a rather high-handed statement about the city’s vulnerability before his overwhelming power and presence; the Byzantine army stationed outside the city would have added substance to this assertion. Following the imperial manifestation upon the gates, the emperor descended, remounted his horse, and proceeded with great fanfare through the main street laid with carpets, drawing the admiration of the men for his strength and of the women for his beauty. When he arrived at the terminus of the procession, Saint Peter’s Cathedral, he once again impressed everyone by dismounting his horse lightly in order to be welcomed by the local prelate.

The last ceremony in which the emperor’s body participated and was visible was that of his own funeral. To my knowledge, extant Komnenian sources do not go into detail about imperial

60 Jeffreys and Jeffreys, ‘A Constantinopolitan Poet’, pp. 127–31 (poem 10, lines 1–65, and editors’ comments, where it is suggested that the emperor was hidden and then brilliantly revealed).
attire worn on this occasion.66 Choniates, however, gives special attention to dress in his loaded account of Manuel's death.67 Sensing death approaching, the emperor turned his mind towards the salvation of his soul. He thus renounced his imperial identity and became a monk upon his deathbed, assuming the name Matthew.68 To signal this change, he requested to be attired in monastic garb, yet, given the suddenness of the decision, none could be found in the palace. Thus, always according to Choniates, the emperor's attendants, after removing his soft, imperial vestments, dressed him in a threadbare garment insufficient to cover his tall frame, leaving his calves bare. Though monastic dress was perceived as the armour of the spiritual warrior, the pitiful sight of their dying emperor's half-exposed body brought tears to the eyes of all who saw him, as they contemplated 'the frailty of the human condition and the worthlessness of the body at the time of death'.69 Divested of his imperial garments yet having failed to assume proper monastic attire, the powerful emperor was reduced to an ordinary man made all the more woeful by his humiliating nakedness.

Having reached the end of our discussion, what can we say in response to the question posed in this essay's title? In Byzantium, clothes indeed turned a man into an all-powerful emperor and ensured that anyone who saw him recognized him as such. But it was the man in the clothes, as well as the state behind the man, that gave them their transformative potency. If either the man or the state proved inadequate to support and fulfill the claims made by the clothes, then those same clothes were the unmaking of the emperor, becoming either the attire of the pompous tyrant or that of the unmanly weakling.

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66 According to the tenth-century protocol recorded in the Book of Ceremonies, the emperor's body was taken to the place of his interment dressed in a tunic, a golden chlamys, the campagia (shoes), and the crown. Before being put to rest, however, the crown, as the symbol of the empire that lived on, was removed. Divested of his crown, the emperor was interred with a plain purple band on his head, as an acknowledgement that he had been a ruler. See Constantin VII Porphyrogénète, Le Livre des Cérémonies, ed. by Gilbert Dagron and Bernard Flusin, 5 vols, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae. Series Parisiensis, 52 (Paris: ACHCByz, 2020), II, 148-49 (book 1, chap. 69).

67 Niketas Choniates, pp. 223-23; trans. Magoulias, p. 125. On this passage and Choniates's stance, see Bourbouhaki's comments in Eustathios of Thessalonike, Not Composed, pp. 82-85. Fontes rerum Byzantinarum. Rhetorum saeculi XII orationes politicae, I, 1-2, ed. by Vasilij E. Regel and Nikolaj I. Novosadskaï, Subsidia Byzantina lucis ope iterata, 5 (Leipzig: Zentralantiqariat der DDR, 1982), I, 2, pp. 206-07. Likewise positive, though with an emphasis on the emperor's humility and his awareness of his inadequacy as God's steward on earth in the face of divine judgement to come, is the account of Manuel's death-bed transformation by the Armenian catholicos Grigor IV Tgha (1173-1193); see Isabelle Augé, Églises en dialogue: Arméniens et Byzantins dans la seconde moitié du XIIe siècle (Louvain: Peeters, 2006). I am grateful to Gohar Grigoryan Savary for bringing this source to my attention and for sharing her expert understanding of the text with me.

68 Though Choniates does not mention the name, we know it from the funerary oration of Gregory Antiochos for Manuel, see Fontes rerum Byzantinarum, I, 2, pp. 191-228. For the identification of the author of this oration with Gregory Antiochos, see the references in Karla, ‘Das literarische Porträt’, p. 665, n. 6.

69 Adapted by the author from Magoulias, O City of Byzantium, p. 125.
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