

# The Seal of Approval: Visualizing Patriarchal Power and Legitimacy in Ninth-Century Constantinople

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The so-called end of Iconoclasm in 843 initiated a significant shift in the way art was used in the society of ninth-century Constantinople. This paper discusses the political career of Patriarch Photios (r. 858-867, 877-886), the leader of the Byzantine church, within this context and focuses specifically on how his seals functioned as one strategy of a larger campaign to validate Photios's patriarchal legitimacy and authority. Building upon the work of John Cotsonis, this discussion situates Photios's seals within the historical context of his patriarchate.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of Photios's seals reveals how the Patriarch's decision to feature particular iconography and inscriptions asserted his validity as an Iconophile leader and launched a visual campaign that framed his patriarchal predecessor and political opponent, Ignatios (r. 847-858, 867-877), as an Iconoclast.

The controversy between Ignatios and Photios began during the reign of the Emperor Michael III (r. 842-867). When Michael III exiled Ignatios and appointed Photios as his replacement in 858, Ignatios continued to vie for his reinstatement on the grounds that Photios was not legiti-

mately elected as patriarch.<sup>2</sup> This created two camps: those who supported Photios and those who supported Ignatios.<sup>3</sup> Ignatios's supporters argued that patriarchs must be culled from ecclesiastical institutions, which conveniently supported Ignatios and his monastic background.<sup>4</sup> This contrasted with Photios's lay background as an elite civil administrator.<sup>5</sup> Thus throughout Photios's terms as patriarch he was required to establish and promote his own legitimacy and authority to counteract these accusations: this was achieved in part by the denigration of his opponent, Ignatios, as an Iconoclast through verbal, textual, and visual means.<sup>6</sup> Within this tenuous stability, elite members of the Byzantine aristocracy and the imperial administration would have seen Photios's seals and recognized the featured iconography and inscription.<sup>7</sup>

A description of the seals of Methodios (r. 843-847) illustrates the precedent of Iconophile patriarchal iconography that was established after the end of Iconoclasm and to which the seals of Ignatios and Photios can be compared. Upon the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, Empress Theodora, the regent empress and mother to Michael III, appointed

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<sup>1</sup> For John Cotsonis's work on patriarchal seals see: John Cotsonis, "The Imagery of Patriarch Methodios I's Lead Seals and the New World Order of Ninth-Century Byzantium," in *Legacy of Achievement: Metropolitan Methodios of Boston Festal Volume on the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his Consecration to the Episcopate, 1982-2007*, ed. G. Dragas (Palmyra, VA: Newrome Press, 2008), 366-387; and John Cotsonis, "The Imagery of Patriarch Ignatios' Lead Seals and the *Rota Fortunae* of Ninth-Century Byzantine Ecclesio-Political Policies," in *Servant of the Gospel: Studies in Honor of His-All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. T. Fitzgerald (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College, 2011), 52-98.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Karlin-Hayter, "Gregory of Syracuse, Ignatios and Photios," in *Iconoclasm: Papers Given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 1975*, ed. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin (Birmingham, UK: Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1977), 143. For the political tension between Ignatios and Photios also see Francis Dvornik, *The Photian Schism: History and Legend* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 1-70.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Dvornik, "Ignatius's Resignation and Photius's Canonical Election," in *The Photian Schism*, 39-70.

<sup>4</sup> Karlin-Hayter, "Gregory of Syracuse," 143.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Kazhdan, "Photios," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. Alexander Kazhdan (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3:1669. Photios was born into a Constantinopolitan aristocratic family. His family held elite positions within the Byzantine political structure; his uncle was the Iconophile Patriarch Tarasios (r.784-806). Despite his family's ecclesiastical connections, Photios began his career as a secular intellectual. It is unconfirmed whether he held a position at Constantinople's university, but his fame in Constantinople's intellectual sphere is well known. Prior to Photios's appointment to the Patriarchate, he served as the *protasekrites*, or the head imperial secretary, an elite civil position within the Byzantine bureaucracy. Alexander Kazhdan, "Photios," 1669. Photios's lay background required that he complete all the degrees of priesthood within a week of his consecration. This was against canon law and was thus used by Ignatios's supporters to claim Photios as illegitimate. Francis Dvornik, "Ignatius's Resignation," in *The Photian Schism*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Cyril Mango, "The Liquidation of Iconoclasm and the Patriarch Photios," in *Iconoclasm: Papers Given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 1975*, ed. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin (Birmingham, UK: Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1977), 140.

<sup>7</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Methodios," 367.

Methodios as patriarch.<sup>8</sup> He used one seal type; only two of his seals remain.<sup>9</sup> The obverse features the iconography of the Hodegetria, an icon type characterized by the pose and gesture of the Theotokos, the mother of God (Figure 1). A comparison to a tenth-century ivory, featuring the same iconography of the Hodegetria clarifies the seal's degraded image (Figure 2). On Methodios's seal, a full length Theotokos stands holding the Christ Child centered before her torso; her right hand gestures toward him. The obverse inscription on the seal reads, "Most Holy Theotokos, help."<sup>10</sup> The reverse completes the invocation on the front, "Methodios, bishop of Constantinople, servant of servants of God."<sup>11</sup>

Ignatios used two seal types, of which only three remain; they feature either half or full-length images of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Ignatios served two terms as patriarch; his seals give no indication of the date of production, but his consistent use of the image of Christ suggests that his seals changed little between terms. On each seal, Christ blesses with his right hand and holds the Gospel book in his left (Figure 3). There are two versions of Ignatios's obverse inscriptions; they read "Jesus Christ Lord, lead" or "God, lead."<sup>13</sup> The reverse inscription is the same for all three seals, "Ignatios, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome."<sup>14</sup>

Of the extant Byzantine seals, John Cotsonis observed that Methodios is the first patriarch to feature an image of the Theotokos and the first to use the epithet "Most Holy" in his invocation.<sup>15</sup> He also identifies Ignatios as the only patriarch to feature an image of Christ, the first patriarch to refer to himself as an Archbishop, and the first to refer to Constantinople as New Rome on his seal.<sup>16</sup> This paper moves Cotsonis observations forward by discussing why Photios chose to emulate certain aspects of Methodios and Ignatios's seals to establish his patriarchal identity and promote his legitimacy.

An analysis of Photios's iconography and inscriptions reveal how he used the Hodegetria to establish an Iconophile visual tradition to support his legitimacy as the successor to

Methodios rather than Ignatios. Photios used two seal types, though only four are extant; they all feature iconography of the Theotokos.<sup>17</sup> Like Ignatios, Photios served two patriarchal terms but his consistent iconography again suggests Iconographic continuity. The majority of his seals, three out of four, directly copy the iconography of Methodios's seals by featuring a full-length Hodegetria (Figure 4). Photios's obverse inscription reads "Most Holy Theotokos, help" and the reverse reads, "Photios, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome."<sup>18</sup>

Photios separated himself from Ignatios and his controversial policies by visually emulating Methodios through his seals' shared iconography. Methodios instituted many anti-Iconoclast policies—the most controversial being the removal of former Iconoclasts or those with Iconoclast affiliations from all levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>19</sup> When Ignatios succeeded to the patriarchate, he overturned most of Methodios's policies in hopes of seeking peace with the former Iconoclasts.<sup>20</sup> Instead of dissolving the tension, Ignatios angered those who supported Methodios's actions against the Iconoclasts.<sup>21</sup> Photios's alignment with the legacy of Methodios through his patriarchal emblem did more than establish his loyalty; it also allowed him to visually alienate and reinforce Ignatios as an unorthodox patriarch who challenged Methodios and the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

In addition to the Hodegetria, Photios's appropriation of Methodios's obverse inscription, "Most Holy Theotokos, help," appears as a conscious choice to establish himself as the legitimate successor to the revered Iconophile patriarch. The epithet "Most Holy" reinforced the Hodegetria's Iconophile significance as the preeminent intercessor.<sup>22</sup> As Cotsonis demonstrates, the Hodegetria's rise to become the Iconophile symbol *par excellence* was accelerated by Methodios's celebration of the Theotokos's role in providing Christ's human nature.<sup>23</sup> Methodios composed epigrams and canons in her honor.<sup>24</sup> One such epigram was located on the Chalke

<sup>8</sup> Karlin-Hayter, "Gregory of Syracuse," 141.

<sup>9</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Methodios," 370; and Nicolas Oikonomides, *A Collection of Dated Byzantine Lead Seals* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection), 58-59.

<sup>10</sup> [ΥΠΕΡΑ]ΓΙΑ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΕ ΒΟΗΘΕΙ. All transcriptions and translations are published in Oikonomides, *Dated Byzantine Lead Seals*, 58-62.

<sup>11</sup> ΜΕΘΟΔΙΩ ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΩ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ ΠΟΛΕΩΣ ΔΟΥΛΩ ΤΩΝ ΔΟΥΛΩΝ ΤΟΥ ΘΕ[ΟΥ]

<sup>12</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Ignatios," 53-55; Oikonomides, *Dated Byzantine Lead Seals*, 59-61.

<sup>13</sup> IV XE KE ΗΓΟΝ or O ΘΕΟΝ ΗΓΟΝ.

<sup>14</sup> ΙΓΝΑΤΙΟΥ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΩ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ ΠΟΛΕΩΣ ΝΕΑΡ ΠΩΜΗC.

<sup>15</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Methodios," 374.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>18</sup> Obverse: [Υ]ΠΕ[ΡΑ]ΓΙΑ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΕ ΒΟΗΘΕΙ  
Reverse: ΦΩΤΙΩ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΩ ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΥ ΠΟΛΕΩΣ ΝΕΑΡ ΠΩΜΗC.

<sup>19</sup> Karlin-Hayter, "Gregory of Syracuse," 141.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Methodios," 370.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 369 and 375.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 369. Methodios authored the Synodikon of Orthodoxy, a canon recited on the first Sunday of Lent, which became known in the Byzantine Church as the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy. In this poem, Methodios condemned the heretical Iconoclast patriarchs and emperors and celebrated the restoration of the Icon of Christ on the Chalke Gate. See Andrew Louth, *Greek East and Latin West, AD 681-1071* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007), 133.

gate next to the icon of Christ, the icon understood to represent the Triumph of Orthodoxy over Iconoclasm (Figure 5).<sup>25</sup>

Photios's choice of iconography suggests that his appropriation of the Hodegetria retroactively defined Ignatios and his Christological iconography as a departure from an Iconophile visual tradition initiated by Methodios. Ignatios's seals, when viewed within this constructed visual tradition appear as an anomaly. Cotsonis explains that Ignatios likely chose to feature Christ on his seals to enhance his own legitimacy and authority through his family connections to the imperial office.<sup>26</sup> At this time, imperial seals also featured images of Christ, illustrated by the seal of the Emperor Michael III (Figure 6). The half-length image of Christ on Ignatios's seal mirrors Michael's. Here, Ignatios's imitation of the imperial seal cultivates a different source of patriarchal legitimacy culled from imperial lineage rather than the ecclesiastical issues of the period. This reveals new questions concerning the nature of patriarchal power during the new political realities created by the Triumph of Orthodoxy. Did the end of Iconoclasm cause the patriarch and emperor to reconfigure their visual expressions of power in order to maintain the status quo of power relations? Or did the Triumph of Orthodoxy provide the patriarchal office a new visual language to express authority and thus new grounds to claim legitimacy independent from the emperor? The answers to these questions remain beyond the purview of this discussion, but their significance to this paper lies in understanding that the implications of the Iconoclast controversy continued to shape political ideologies and rhetoric of the mid-ninth century.

In the tense political atmosphere of Photios's patriarchate any inclination toward an unorthodox act or belief—now defined by loyalty to the Triumph of Orthodoxy—became ammunition for one's political adversaries. In the Byzantine Church, innovation was synonymous with heresy.<sup>27</sup> The seals of Ignatios and Photios exemplify the power of images to define a patriarchate—if the chosen image fails to communi-

cate its message of legitimacy to its intended audience, then its authority becomes compromised. Ignatios's Christological iconography failed to fully convey his Iconophile loyalty. This provided the Photian camp an opportunity to support their accusations of his Iconoclast affiliations. By contrast, Constantinopolitan patriarchs continued to feature the Theotokos—most commonly in the form of the Hodegetria—on their seals until after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 thus demonstrating that Photios's choice of iconography was a successful expression of Iconophile patriarchal authority.<sup>28</sup>

A comparison of the inscriptions on Ignatios's and Photios's seals illustrates that Photios did not completely abandon his predecessor's sigillographic innovations. On the reverse of his seals, Photios adapted the inscription from Ignatios's seals. It reads "Photios, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome." Photios's appropriation of Ignatios's title Archbishop continued Ignatios's claim that Constantinople held pre-eminent ecclesiastical authority. In the context of Photios's patriarchate, this title is a direct challenge to the contemporary Pope Nicholas I's same assertion for Rome, a conflict that will be addressed (below in this paper).<sup>29</sup> It is possible that Photios's choice to use the title Archbishop has another specific meaning in Constantinople. With every patriarchal letter and decree that Photios sent, his seals served to usurp Ignatios's claim as the preeminent ecclesiastical authority.

The passionate response from Photios's supporters to Ignatios and his political threats shows that mudslinging was already occurring. According to Ignatios's *vita*, composed by Nicetas the Paphlagonian, Gregory Abestas was believed to have illustrated a now lost parody of Ignatios that portrayed the former patriarch as Satan and the Anti-Christ.<sup>30</sup> Abestas further fueled the anti-Ignatian campaign by declaring that Ignatios's reversal of Methodian policies intentionally maligned the memory of the revered Iconophile patriarch.<sup>31</sup> Byzantine records suggest that Photios also accused Ignatios of committing parricide toward Methodios.<sup>32</sup> Patricia Karlin-

<sup>25</sup> Cyril Mango translates Methodios's Chalke epigram as "Seeing thy stainless image, O Christ, and Thy cross figured in relief, I worship and reverence Thy true flesh. For, being the Word of the Father, timeless by nature, Thou wast born, mortal by nature and in time, to a mother. Hence in circumscribing and portraying Thee in images, I do not circumscribe Thy immaterial nature—for that is above representation and vicissitude—but in representing Thy vulnerable flesh, O Word, I pronounce Thee uncircumscribable as God. Yet the disciples of Manes' teachings, who chatter foolishly in their imaginings to the point of saying ignominiously that the Incarnation (by assuming which Thou hast saved the human race) was but a phantom, enduring not to see Thee portrayed in roaring anger and leonine insolence, cast down Thy most-venerable likeness, formerly portrayed here in holy form. Refuting their lawless error, the empress Theodora, guardian of the faith, with her scions arrayed in purple and gold, emulating the pious among the emperors, and shown to be the most pious of them all, has re-erected it with righteous intent at this gate of the palace, to her own glory, praise and fame, to the dignity of the entire Church, to the full prosperity of the human race, to the fall of the malevolent enemies and barbarians." Cyril Mango, *The Brazen House: A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople* (Copenhagen: I Kommission Hos Ejnar Munksgaard, 1959), 126-127.

<sup>26</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Ignatios," 65.

<sup>27</sup> In his discussion of Basil I's Nea Ekklesia in the Great Palace, Paul Magdalino demonstrates how innovation, considered heretical by the Byzantine Church, could be avoided through "implied imitation." Magdalino explains, "it was a way of authenticating something new by giving it a traditional identity." Paul Magdalino, "Observations on the Nea Ekklesia of Basil I," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 37 (1987): 53.

<sup>28</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Ignatios," 58.

<sup>29</sup> George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 225.

<sup>30</sup> Leslie Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 238.

<sup>31</sup> Cotsonis, "Imagery of Patriarch Ignatios," 65.

<sup>32</sup> Karlin-Hayter, "Gregory of Syracuse," 143.

Hayter demonstrates how Ignatios's time as the abbot of a monastery with Iconoclast connections became the evidence for explicit accusations of Ignatios being an Iconoclast.<sup>33</sup> In this context, we can see how Photios's seals fit within the larger anti-Ignatios campaign.

Photios's supporters also took advantage of the Patriarchate's contentious relationship with Rome to build their accusations against Ignatios. Upon his election the same year Photios began his first term, Pope Nicholas I declared supreme authority over ecclesiastical matters in the West and the East.<sup>34</sup> The title of Archbishop on Photios's seals clearly demonstrates his response to Nicholas's claim. It is in the context of this argument between Photios and Nicholas over which patriarchate had the most power that the Ignatios faction appealed to the Pope to declare Photios as illegitimate.<sup>35</sup> Nicholas seized this opportunity to interfere in the Orthodox Church. He summoned a council in 863 to denounce Photios's canonicity despite the East's resolution of the matter in Photios's favor two years earlier.<sup>36</sup> Thus when Ignatios's supporters appealed to Nicholas, they too defied the authority of the Orthodox Church. This undesirable link with the West in the eyes of Photios's supporters provided another target to attack Ignatios and his tenuous loyalty to Orthodoxy.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>34</sup> Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 225.

<sup>35</sup> Karlin-Hayter, "Gregory of Syracuse," 142. Francis Dvornik argues that Ignatios never personally appealed to Pope Nicholas I. What is important here is that Ignatios's supporters' appeal to the papacy made it possible for the Photian faction to link the deposed patriarch with Nicholas. Francis Dvornik, "The Synod of 861," in *The Photian Schism*,

In the context of the strong anti-Ignatian slander and contention with Rome, Photios used his seals to portray Ignatios's Christological iconography as anti-Iconophile and thus evidence for his Iconoclast sympathies. Photios's seals, first, conveyed him as a legitimate Iconophile patriarch via the image of the Hodegetria, and second, asserted his universal ecclesiastical authority over Ignatios and Nicholas I via the title Archbishop.

By maligning Ignatios, Photios secured his own legitimacy and asserted himself as the superior Archbishop of Orthodoxy. Photios's seals thus function as one part of his larger campaign to answer Ignatios's threats and establish his patriarchal legitimacy. Photios achieved this by consciously choosing to feature the Theotokos on his seals and constructing an Iconophile patriarchal visual tradition that functioned to alienate Ignatios's own Christological emblem. Defining Ignatios as an innovator who departed from Iconophile tradition gave credence to anti-Ignatian slander that framed him as an Iconoclast, thus indicating the importance of the Iconoclast Controversy in Byzantine politics beyond its conclusion in 843.

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85-88. See also Milton V. Anastos, "The papal legates at the Council of 861 and their compliance with the wishes of Emperor Michael III," in *Aspects of the Mind of Byzantine Political Theory, Theology, and Ecclesiastical Relations with the See of Rome*, ed. Speros Vryonis Jr. and Nicholas Goodhue (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2001), 185-200.

<sup>36</sup> Dvornik, "Synod of 861," 89.





►Figure 2. Hodegetria, icon with Theotokos and Child, mid-10th to mid-11th century, ivory, 9 3/16 x 2 3/4 x 1/2 inches (23.4 x 7 x 1.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.103). Available from [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)



◄Figure 1. Obverse and reverse of the seal of Patriarch Methodios. Obverse featuring the icon type of the Hodegetria and inscription, "Most Holy Theotokos, help." Reverse features inscription, "Methodios, bishop of Constantinople, servant of servants of God." 843-847 CE, lead, 37 mm diameter. Zacos Collection, Basel. Photo credit: Nicolas Oikonomides, *A Collection of Dated Lead Seals* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection), 59. Drawing: Sarah C. Simmons.



Figure 3. Obverse (left) and reverse (right) of the seal of Patriarch Ignatios. Obverse featuring bust of Christ and the inscription, "Jesus Christ Lord, lead." Reverse features inscription, "Ignatios, Archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome." 847-858, 867-877 CE, lead, 34 mm diameter © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C.



Figure 4. Drawing of the obverse (left) and reverse (right) of the seal of Patriarch Photios. Obverse featuring the icon type of the Hodegetria and inscription, "Most Holy Theotokos, help." Reverse featuring inscription, "Photios, archbishop of Constantinople, New Rome." 858-867, 877-886 CE, lead, 35 mm diameter. Photograph published in Nicolas Oikonomides, *A Collection of Dated Lead Seals* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection). Drawing: Sarah C. Simmons.



Figure 6. Obverse (left) and reverse (right) of the seal of the Emperor Michael III. Obverse featuring bust of Christ and the inscription, "Jesus Christ." Reverse featuring bust of Michael III and the inscription, "Michael, emperor and basileus." 856-867 CE, lead, 35 mm diameter © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington, D.C.

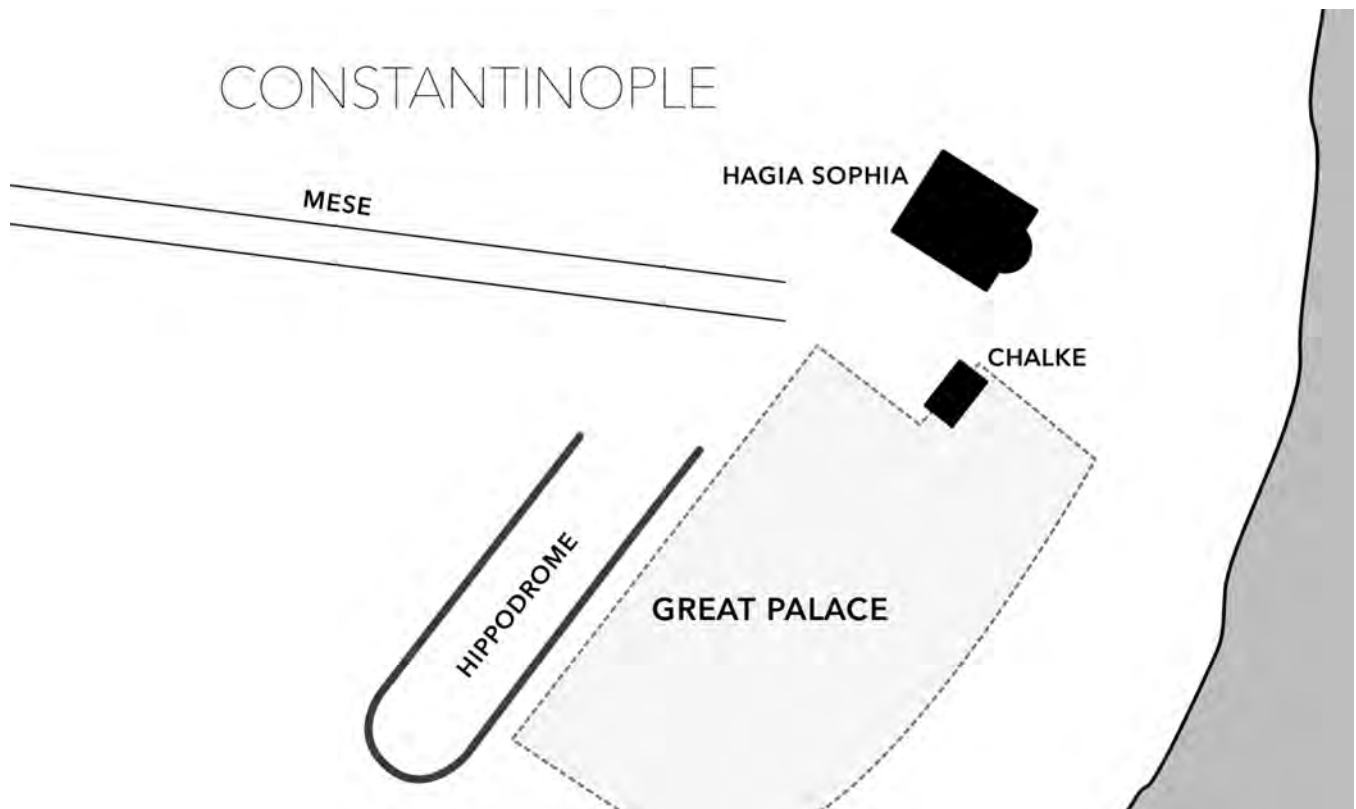


Figure 5. Map of Constantinople showing location of the Chalke Gate. Drawing: Christopher Timm.