De Imperatoribus Romanis

An Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors


DIR Atlas

Irene (wife of Constantine V)

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In 732 **Leo III**, in search of allies to help him against devastating Arab incursions into the empire, sent an embassy to the Chazar chagan to arrange for the marriage of the latter's daughter to his son and heir. The girl was escorted to Constantinople and betrothed to **Constantine**, who was now fourteen years of age. Theophanes reports that her father-in-law, the emperor Leo, had her converted to Christianity and renamed her Irene: many foreign-born empresses were later to take this name, which means 'peace'. Theophanes' comment that 'she learned Holy Scripture and lived piously, thus reproving the impiety of those men [Leo and Constantine]' implies that she had open iconophile tendencies.[[1]]

Irene may have been extremely young at the time of her betrothal: at least, her only known child (though there may have been others who failed to live) was **Leo IV**, who, as her son, was known as 'Leo the Chazar'. He was born in Constantinople on 25 January 750, 18 years after her betrothal.[[2]] It seems probable that Irene died in childbirth, or from complications which resulted from the birth, for Constantine was shortly to remarry, perhaps in the same year, 750. Only a year or so after Irene, **Maria**, his second wife, was to die at approximately the same time as**Leo IV's** coronation, which took place in June 751.

It has been suggested that Irene's original name was Chichek, the Turkish for 'flower', on the basis of a scholion to Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *de ceremoniis*, which records that the Chazar empress introduced to the Byzantine court a garment called the 'tzitzakion', presumably called after her own name.[[3]] This suggestion has been widely cited by scholars, but there is less evidence to suggest that the custom of the 'bride-show', by which imperial brides like Maria of Amnia, Theophano, wife of Stauracius, and Theodora, wife of Theophilus, were ostensibly chosen, was a Chazar custom introduced to Byzantium by Irene.

Bibliography:

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W.T. Treadgold, 'The Bride-shows of the Byzantine Emperors,' *Byzantion* 49 (1979) 395-413.

[[1]]Theophanes *AM* 6224 [AD 731/2]; Nicephorus 63.

[[2]]Theophanes *AM* 6241 [AD 748/9]; Nicephorus 69.

[[3]] G. Moravscik, *Studia Byzantina*, Budapest, 1967, 119-26.

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