When considering patronage in twelfth-century Constantinople, and especially patronage in a literary context, one of the first names to come to mind, regardless of gender, is that of the sebastokratorissa Irene.¹ This paper will summarise what is known about her and discuss whether acts of hers that might come under the heading of patronage fit into a pattern, gendered or otherwise. Patronage will be identified simply as the provision of financial support to those who need it to encourage literary and/or artistic activity.

Irene is an enigmatic figure. Although more details survive about her experiences than for almost any other Byzantine woman, the sources are silent about many of the aspects of her life on which we would like information, notably her own family background. Like most Byzantine women, she makes no appearance in the narrative histories for the period, those by Kinnamos and Choniates.² Most of the material with which one has to work is presented by Konstantinos Barzos in his Γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν; it is largely drawn from the poets who were composing at the behest of members of the aristocratic households of the mid-twelfth century.³ Extrapolating from her husband’s conjectured date of birth, the normal age at marriage of Byzantine elite women and the likely ages of her children in the 1140s, it is usually concluded that Irene was born ca. 1110/1112; her marriage to the sebastokrator An-


² Irene is presumably one of the group of noble women mentioned by Kinnamos 36.1–6, ed. A. Meineke, Ioannis Cinnami epitome rerum ab Ioaonne et Alexio Commenis gesturam, Bonn 1836, as greeting Bertha of Sulzbach on her arrival in Constantinople in 1142 as bride for Manuel (then merely John II’s youngest son): she is not singled out although the wife of Andronikos’s brother is (admittedly because her dark garment, and eloquent speech, led Bertha to make an unfortunate comment). Irene is not mentioned by Choniates.

³ K. Barzos, Η γενεαλογία τῶν Κομνηνῶν, 2 vols., Thessaloniki 1984; Irene, married into the Komnenos clan, has no separate entry but is discussed in connection with Andronikos, her husband (Barzos, Γενεαλογία, I, no. 76, pp. 357–379, at pp. 361–378). C. Diehl, Figures byzantines, Deuxième série, Paris 1913, pp. 142–153, presents a romantically enhanced version of Chalandon’s brief statement on Irene.
dronikos, second son of the emperor John II Komnenos, would have taken place around 1125. Her title of sebastokratōrissa was derived from Andronikos’s rank.4 Irene and Andronikos produced five children – two sons and three daughters. In the autumn of 1142 Andronikos died, very unexpectedly, of a fever while on campaign in Cilicia. Though there is no direct evidence, Irene herself probably died in 1152 or 1153.5

Irene was thus the sister-in-law of the emperor Manuel, and until the birth of Manuel’s daughter in 1152 her elder son John (born ca. 1126) was Manuel’s most obvious heir.6 Irene had become a person of considerable dynastic significance. Yet the decade of her widowhood (1142–ca. 1152) was turbulent for her: she fell into severe disfavour with her imperial nephew on at least two occasions, was imprisoned more than once, and taken out of Constantinople to the army camps in Bulgaria.7 The animosity seems to have been restricted to Irene herself since her children remained in active use as pawns in Manuel’s political manoeuvrings, whether within the fractions Komnenian clan itself or in his dealings with external powers: Irene’s eldest daughter Maria, for example, was bullied in 1145 into a second marriage with the prominent young warrior John Kantakouzenos after the premature death of her first husband, while Irene’s second daughter Theodora was married to Heinrich Jasomirgott of Austria in 1148 to bolster Manuel’s crusading alliances.8 The hostility shown to Irene, combined with the sources’ silence about her connections to any of the great Byzantine families of the period, has led to the suggestion that she (like many other brides in the imperial family) came to Constantinople from outside Byzantium as part of John II’s marriage policies of the 1120s; it has been concluded that arguably she was of Norman origin.9 Rather than assuming a source in the Normans of Southern Italy or Antioch, one might think of the Norman groups settled in Constantinople since the early years of the century. In 1121 these had provided a husband (John Rogerios Dalassenos) for John II’s daughter Maria, elder sister of Irene’s husband Andronikos.10

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4 Sebastokratōr by this period had come to be the title of the reigning emperor’s sons and brothers (ODB, s.v.).
5 As is suggested by the dearth of references to her from this point onwards; Barzos, Γενεαλογία (cit. n. 3), I, p. 378 n. 98.
6 Barzos, Γενεαλογία (cit. n. 3), II, no. 128, pp. 142–155.
9 Jeffreys, Who was Eirene? (cit. n. 1), pp. 57–65. It is striking that in the surname-conscious environment of mid-twelfth-century Constantinople in the only references to Irene’s parentage her father is simply a brave warrior, “of the race of the Aineiadae”, S. Lambros, Ο Μαρκιανός κώδικς 52.4, in: Νέας Ελληνικών, 11, 1915, p. 23; poem 56.28–32, and her mother as very beautiful, W. Hörandner, Theodorus Prodromos, Historische Gedichte, Vienna 1974, no. 44.20–28.
10 Barzos, Γενεαλογία (cit. n. 3), I, pp. 349–351, 355–356 (in no. 75: Maria Komnene).
In the previous generation Irene-Piroska of Hungary, John II’s empress and Irene’s mother-in-law, was involved with the founding of the Pantokrator monastery as the Komnenian dynastic shrine. With this one exception Irene the sebastokratorissa stands out from the other foreign brides of this period for her acts of patronage, though this statement has to be treated with caution since source materials survive so spasmodically. In a brief time, maybe in one year (ca. 1122), four foreign brides are recorded as entering the imperial family. However, there is no information at all about donations, dedications, or literary works sponsored by Katya of Georgia (married to Alexios, son of Anna Komnene), or the princess from the Caucasian area married on the same day to Alexios’s brother John, or Dobrodeja Mstislavna of Kiev (married to Alexios, eldest son of John II), or the unnamed bride of John II’s nephew (also Alexios).\(^\text{11}\) Does this mean that they did not act as patrons, or that the relevant evidence has been lost? There is, however, information in connection with Bertha of Sulzbach (in Constantinople from 1142, married to the emperor Manuel in 1146 and re-named Irene). She commissioned, for a handsome sum, an allegorised paraphrase of the *Iliad* from John Tzetzes (though different funding was required to complete it); Tzetzes also initially dedicated to her his *Chiliades* (verse commentaries on his letters).\(^\text{12}\) Two offerings of liturgical items by Bertha-Irene are known, one with an inscription by Theodore Prodromos, the other with an epigram by an anonymous poet.\(^\text{13}\) Bertha-Irene was also the recipient, on what terms we can only guess, of two poems by the poet known as Manganeios Prodromos, to whom there will be further reference below; the occasion is the anticipated birth of an imperial heir, whose gender was as yet unknown.\(^\text{14}\) In the abundance and range of her activity Irene the sebastokratorissa stands apart also from the other, indigenous, sebastokratorissai and high-ranking aristocratic women, including her imperial aunt Anna Komnene.\(^\text{15}\) For these there is evidence for small-scale votive dedications of various types, known because of the epigrams commissioned to be inscribed or embroidered on the objects, as well as some funerary laments.\(^\text{16}\) Interestingly, for none of these women, potentially active in the middle years of the century, is there evidence for participation in the founding or re-founding of ecclesiastical structures.\(^\text{17}\)

\(\text{11}\) Katya: *Bartzos, Γενεαλογία* (cit. n. 3), I, pp. 308, 316–317 (under no. 65 Alexios Komnenos); Caucasian princess: *Bartzos, Γενεαλογία*, I, p. 318 (under no. 66 John Doukas); Dobrodeja Mstislavna: *Bartzos, Γενεαλογία*, I, pp. 343–344 (under no. 74 Alexios Komnenos); unnamed bride: *Bartzos, Γενεαλογία*, I, pp. 331–333 (under no. 69 Alexios Komnenos).

\(\text{12}\) Bartzos, *Γενεαλογία* (cit. n. 3), I, pp. 456–457 (under no. 81 Manuel Komnenos).


\(\text{14}\) Manganeios Prodromos. nos. 12 (unedited) and 29 (ed. Miller, *Receuil* [cit. n. 7], pp. 341–343).

\(\text{15}\) Anna Komnene is an exceptional case – an author in her own right and instigator of philosophical commentaries (and so a patron of intellectual activities): see the papers in T. Gouma-Peterson (ed.), *Anna Komnene and her Times*, New York 2000. However, there is little evidence that she took part in the fashion for commissioning “occasional” poetry (though note Hörandner, *Historische Gedichte* [cit. n. 9], nos. 38 and 39 and cf. the prose epitaphia for her sons’ marriages [*PG* 133, cols. 1397–1406]).

\(\text{16}\) Notably icon curtains, or veils, and cloths to cover chalices and patens: see the material collected in V. Nunn, *The Enchelion as Adjunct to the Icon in the Middle Byzantine Period*, in: Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 10, 1986, pp. 73–102. The epigrams which form this evidence are found almost entirely in Marc. Gr. 524 (a mixed collection) and Marc. Gr. XI. 22 (largely Manganeios Prodromos). On the difficulties in interpreting these dedications see E. Jeffreys, *The Depiction of Female Sensibilities in the Twelfth Century*, in: C. Angelidē (ed.), *Byzantium Matures: Choices, Sensitivities and Modes of Expression* (Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries), Athens 2004, pp. 73–85.

\(\text{17}\) After the imperial female dedications prior to ca. 1130 (Anna Dalassene: Pantepoptes monastery; Irene Doukaina: Kecharitomene nunnery; Irene Pitoska: Pantokrator monastery), there is a pause of some fifty years before Maria
Irene may be associated with three types of patronage. Firstly, of texts; so many did she sponsor that the first assumption for a text from this period with a reference to “the sebastokratorissa” in its title is that the reference is to this sebastokratorissa, Andronikos’s wife, despite the many other holders of the title. This assumption seems usually to be correct. Secondly, through a web of arguments in recent scholarship Irene has come to be associated with several lavishly illustrated books, about which increasingly elaborate interpretations have been made. Thirdly, explicitly, she made dedications of liturgical objects in many churches of the Theotokos in Constantinople. As just indicated, this record is hard to match. It gives rise to several questions about the reasons for her actions, her intentions, and her influence.

**TEXTS**

John Tzetzes wrote for Irene a *Theogony*, which was a genealogy of the Olympian deities, and also addressed two letters to her, one of which grumbles about her secretaries who are reluctant to allow him access to their mistress, and the other asks for a book to be returned to him.\(^\text{18}\) Constantine Manasses wrote for her his *Synopsis Chronike*, a racy, interestingly expressed chronicle, unusually in verse – in its picturesque elements it has elements of the coffee-table book; he also wrote for her a poem on astrology and the signs of the zodiac.\(^\text{19}\) Theodore Prodromos wrote a grammar, and several poems recording events in her family’s life – most notably one immediately following the death of Andronikos, and also one in which he is asking for her financial support.\(^\text{20}\) The monk Jacob, her spiritual father, corresponded with her, over a period of unknown length: there survive forty-three letters and a sermon on the Holy Spirit addressed to her by him.\(^\text{21}\) Two un-named persons from the many aspiring rhetoricians who seem to have been swarming around mid-century Constantinople touting for custom included Irene amongst their...
clientele. One produced two encomia now found in Marc. Gr. 524. The other was a member of her household, who is conveniently and conventionally referred to as Manganeios Prodromos; some 18,000 lines of verse from his pen are preserved, largely in a single manuscript, Marc. Gr. XI 22. About a third of Manganeios’s output deals with Irene and her immediate family. The poems range through celebrations of marriages, votive dedications on behalf of an injured son, to pleas to the emperor for clemency, incidentally providing tantalising but stylised glimpses into the realities of life in Constantinople in the 1140s.

All these writers address Irene with great respect, often using the title of empress (ἡ βασιλεία σου or δέσποινά μου): her rank was enough to allow the informal use of titles to which, in strict terms, she had no right. Otherwise, the way in which these writers express their relationship to Irene varies. The monk Jacob advises her on her reading matter — warning her away from some books, both secular and theological, and recommending others (unspecified but including pamphlets of his own); he reproves her mildly on occasion for not disciplining her household sufficiently and elsewhere in the correspondence explodes with vehement indignation at the treachery of others towards her. He makes no demands of her but rather shows a sense of his own responsibility for her well-being. Manganeios Prodromos is indignant on her behalf to others, especially Manuel, but he can also make aggressive demands when he feels she has not fulfilled her obligations to him. He is in some form of permanent employment in Irene’s household — at one point in the period around 1150 he claims he had been in her service for twelve years: perhaps he was one of the grammaticoi, secretaries, with whom Tzetzes became indignant; in which case Manganeios’s name may in fact be Aspidopolos.

In the cases of Tzetzes and Manasses the relationship with Irene is expressed in terms of her having requested a text from them, and having paid them for it, apparently quite handsomely. The poems differ in length: Tzetzes’s Theogony is quite short (ca. 500 lines), Manasses’s Synopsis Chronike is far longer (over 6500 lines). Both are written in the fifteen-syllable line, a form which skilled literary practitioners frequently claimed to find demeaning.

22 Ed. Lambros, Ο Μαρκιανός κώδιξ (cit. n. 9), nos. 56 and 57. It is, however, not impossible that these are also products of Manganeios Prodromos since they share some of his compositional quirks; there are metrical issues which remain to be explored.

23 The poems are only partially in the public domain, in scattered and for the most part elderly editions; for a list of editions prior to 1970 see E. Mioni, Biblioteca Divi Marci Venetiarum codices graeci manuscripti, III, Venice 1970, pp. 116–131, and Magdalino, Empire of Manuel I (cit. n. 1), pp. 494–500, for additions to 1993 (mainly S. Bernardinello, Theodore Prodromi De Mangani, Padua 1972); the poem numbering follows that of Mioni’s catalogue. The edition in preparation by E. and M. Jeffreys is making progress. “Manganeios” Prodromos, has gained his modern nickname from his persistent and eloquent requests between 1152 and 1158 to both the emperor Manuel and the sebastokratorissa Irene to be allowed to enter the adelphaton at the Mangana monastery in Constantinople.

24 Jakobos, Epistolae (cit. n. 21), pp. xxvi–xxviii; see especially epp. 39 and 41.

25 Indigation: notably in e.g. poems 43, 47, 108 but it appears as a motif in petitions to the Theotokos (e.g. poems 67–74). Demands: most notably for her promise in connection with the Mangana hospice to be fulfilled (poems 61, 62 = ed. Bernardinello, Theodore Prodromi [cit. n. 23] I, II) but less dramatically for a piece of brocade (used for a child’s dress) to be given to him (poems 56, 57).

26 Years of service: Manganeios 61.8; possible name: Tzetzes, ep. 43.12.

payment. Though the details of the process are not spelt out the most obvious interpretation is that Irene has actively commissioned work from two men who are amongst the best known of the literary figures of the twelfth century. The situation with Theodore Prodromos is less clear. The Grammar is a substantial piece of work, covering 117 printed pages of Teubner-size text – though even so shorter than Manasses’s Synopsis Chronike (Theodore comes in at about 3,500 lines of prose as opposed to Manasses’s 6,500 lines of verse). The Grammar’s connection with Irene is implied, rather than stated, in its opening lines where there is an appeal to φιλολογωτάτη μοι βασιλίδων, in a form of dedication. The phrase is consistent with the way in which other writers refer to Irene, as indicated below, so there is no reason to query the currently accepted view; the dedication implies a commission. There is no apparent reference to fees in Theodore’s turgidly thorough progression through the parts of speech. Nor are there any such references in Theodore’s poems on Irene’s family (nos. 44 and 45 in Wolfram Hörandner’s edition), which express consolations at the time of Andronikos’s death with a touching vignette of the bereft children. Poem 46, however, is entirely focused on himself and the need to rescue him from his current grim circumstances, presumably following his bout of smallpox: there is an ill-concealed indirect demand for financial support. To conclude that fees for service were the norm in transactions of this type would be unreasonable: this is a direct benefit passing from Irene to these men with writing skills. It is also plain that payment in kind – food, clothing, perhaps board and lodging – could also be part of transactions of this type, as indicated by comments from Tzetzes (in other contexts) and the anonymous encomiast of Marc. Gr. XI. 22 (in connection with Irene). We will consider in a moment Irene’s side of the bargain.

There are two further points to be noted. The first is that all of these writers – the monk Jacob, the anonymous encomiast and Manganeios Prodromos as well as Tzetzes and Manasses – emphasise Irene’s generosity: she is golden-handed, she is a veritable Pactolos flooding gold all round, streams of gold flow from her to unspecified persons, and in unspecified contexts. In the case of Tzetzes and Manasses the lavish payment explicitly makes up for the simplistic nature of the task she had set them. In Manasses’s case the task was burdensome and lengthy; for Tzetzes, it was demeaning for he was not asked to use complex metres, hexameters, merely the fifteen-syllable line which posed no compositional challenges and had no classical antecedents. There may be topoi here: a variation on the topos of the Begging Poet which developed in both East and West in the early twelfth century, as well as the topos of the generous patron; however, have some basis in reality. Perhaps it is legitimate to wonder whether Irene was indeed exceptionally generous.

The other point is that these writers also all praise Irene for her learning and devotion to

29 Hörandner, Historische Gedichte (cit. n. 9), p. 49.
30 Tzetzes, Chiliades (ed. Leone), lines 11.24–25. The anonymous encomiast (Lambros, Ο Μαρκιανός Κώδιξ [cit. n. 9], pp. 22–26, no. 55, at lines 1–25) talks of the lavishness of the hospitality provided by Irene; if this poet is to be identified with Manganeios Prodromos, then this adds a little more light on the terms of his association with Irene.
32 E.g. Manganeios 48.116, 50.63, 60.54; Jakobos, ep. 9.20–21; anonymous encomiast (Lambros, Ο Μαρκιανός Κώδιξ [cit. n. 9], no. 55, p. 25), lines 100–110.
scholarship. She is φιλόσοφη ψυχή and μοῦσα φιλολόγε, φιλολογώτατε, fully capable of comprehending the twists and turns τῶν φιλενσόφων βιβλίων into which she plunges daily. Jacobs, as spiritual adviser, attempts to divert her from ὁ σὸς Ὀμηρός and other books of Hellenic learning which destroy the soul. In the midst of troubles Manganeios laments that she who had been so devoted to books has now been herded into a crude prison. The anonymous encomiast declares that her interests cover grammar, Homer, history, Hermogenes and Demosthenes, and that she preferred Plato to Aristotle: she is an ornament to women. Nevertheless, as has been pointed out before, the evidence for her learning is unconvincing. There is not much evidence that she produced any compositions of her own: there will, of course, have been the letters to which Jacob is replying in their correspondence, and of whose style he is complimentary (e.g. epp. 5.55, 19.42–43) can find a parallel in the phrases used, for example, by Michael Italikos of Irene Doukaina (who died in 1133, well after the sebastokratorissa became a part of the imperial court). In a speech improvised in the presence of the dowager empress, Italikos alludes to her intellectual activities: he praises Irene Doukaina’s perceptiveness and her quick mind which combines intellectual ability with practical qualities. According to Anna Komnene, her mother read extensively and perceptively in the scriptures and theology, while the one clear piece of literary patronage attributable to Irene Doukaina is Nikephoros Bryennios’s Hyle Historias, an account of Alexios I’s youthful achievements. Is there a difference in kind between the academic activities of the imperial mother and daughter and those for which the sebastokratorissa is praised? The place of the so-called theatra in these activities is discussed below.

34 Manganeios 51.166.
35 Manasses, Synopsis Chronike (cit. n. 19), 3.
36 Manasses, Astrological poem (cit. n. 19), 9–10.
38 Manganeios 68.81.
39 Anonymous encomiast (Lambros, Ο Μαρκιανὸς Κώδιξ [cit. n. 9], no. 55, p. 24), lines 75–87.
40 Jeffreys, Who was Eirene? (cit. n. 1), pp. 47–49.
41 At this point Jacob recasts verses from the Song of Songs into dialogue form and puts them in Irene’s voice. The passage dissolves into uncertainty upon consideration of the multiple meanings of λόγος (written discourse as opposed to conversational speech, etc); the position is put too strongly by M. Evangelatou, Pursuing Salvation Through a Body of Parchment: Books and Their Significance in the Illustrated Homilies of Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos, in: Medieval Studies, 68, 2006, pp. 239–284, at p. 245, n. 20).
44 E.g. Alexiad, XII.3.
45 Cf. Bryennios, Hyle Historias, ed. P. Gautier, Nicéphore Bryennios, Histoire, Brussels 1975, Prooimion § 11. A military man, though one with literary interests, Nikephoros was not perhaps the most obvious candidate for this task, which was ultimately completed by his wife, Alexios’s daughter, in her Alexiad, a eulogy of the emperor’s mature years.
Decorated Books

There are several important manuscripts, extant or lost, for which a case can be made for connections with Irene, ranging from very strong to weak and indirect. The extant manuscripts are amongst the most splendid products from the group of painters functioning in the first half of the twelfth century that has come to be known as the Kokkinobaphos workshop, with the major painter from the group known as the Kokkinobaphos master from his association with homilies that are discussed below. The range of this group of painters is extensive: the dates within which the painters functioned and the manuscripts to be associated with them remain the subject of research.

Of these manuscripts the one with the strongest links to Irene is Jerusalem, Taphou 52, a copy of Theodore Prodromos’s Grammar, which, as we have seen, was dedicated to her. The manuscript has extensive decoration in the style of the most prominent workshop, or group of painters, from mid-twelfth-century Constantinople. It has been argued, convincingly, that the rarity of decorated grammars and the cost implications of the workshop involved must mean that this manuscript was a presentation copy made for Irene, though the opening pages which would provide the clinching argument are lost.47

Manasses’s Synopsis Chronike survives in a large number of manuscripts (over seventy), though none apparently from the twelfth century. Three late manuscripts have headpieces, admittedly in different formats, that suggest that at the beginning of the transmission of the text there stood a presentation copy with an image which depicted the author and arguably also the person who had requested the work;48 this would be consistent with Byzantine practice. No comment can be made about the details of the putative dedicatory image as the surviving pages have different layouts; nor can we say whether the lost dedication copy would have included other decoration, such as initial letters or illustrations to the text, or from which painters’ workshop it might have derived.49

The next instance concerns Jacob the monk. His letters to Irene have a number of peculiarities, as the recently published editio princeps indicates.50 They do not seem to have circulated widely since they are preserved in one contemporary manuscript only, and two late sixteenth-century partial apographs.51 The correspondence between Jacob and Irene seems to have taken place in the

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46 The bibliography on this group of painters is large, with significant contributions from J. C. Anderson (see, e.g., The Seraglio Octateuch and the Kokkinobaphos Master, in: Dumbarton Oaks Papers, 36, 1982, pp. 83–114, and Illustrated Sermons [cit. n. 1]).


48 Vienna, Hist. gr. 91 (fourteenth–sixteenth century; O. Mazal, Byzanz und das Abendland, Vienna 1981, pl. 35); Vienna, phil. 146 (fourteenth–fifteenth century; Manasses, Synopsis Chronike [cit. n. 19], pl. 1); Jerusalem, Patr. Bibl. 65 (fifteenth–sixteenth century).


50 Note, however, that the Slavonic version of the Synopsis Chronike was richly illustrated: I. Dujčev, The Miniatures of the Chronicle of Manasses, Sofia 1963.

51 Notably his extensive cut-and-paste technique with his sources: Jakobos, Epistolae (cit. n. 21), pp. xlix–lix.

52 Contemporary manuscript: Par. Gr 3039; apographs: Marc. Gr. II 93, fols. 32r–92v and Vat. Gr. 1759, fols. 261r–303v; Par. Gr. Suppl. Gr. 98 is a copy made in the Bibliothèque nationale in the mid-eighteenth century. The date of Par. Gr. 3039 is discussed further below.
mid to late 1140s until the early 1150s. It is not clear why it ended, whether with Irene’s death or her return to an environment in which Jacob could communicate in person rather than by letter. At the end of the letters as we have them Irene was facing another potential disaster, though one caused by loss of imperial support rather than her own ill-health (especially epp. 32, 39 and 41). On the basis of absence of references to her in such sources as might be expected to notice her, Irene’s death, as stated earlier, seems to have taken place ca. 1152. Only Jacob’s side of the correspondence is preserved, though — tantalisingly — it is plain that Irene did respond and in fact had initiated the letter exchange (ep. 1).

The manuscript, Par. Gr. 3039, which preserves Jacob’s letters is striking: it is large, uses good quality parchment, and has sumptuous ornament, notably a headpiece and also initials at the beginnings of letters. Like Jerusalem, Taphou 52, the manuscript for Theodore’s Grammar, it is a product of the painters associated with the Kokkinobaphos master. The headpiece of Par. Gr. 3039, fol. 1r, for example, is identical to that on fol. 74r of Par. Gr. 1208 (containing the Kokkinobaphos Homilies, discussed further below), while the scribal hand also has many similarities. As with Theodore’s Grammar the high quality of the manuscript is at odds with the nature of the text it contains, though it is of a piece with the lavishness already noted in connection with Irene’s patronage. There is nothing in the text or the manuscript itself to indicate whether the book was made before or after Irene’s death.

Dating on stylistic grounds is imprecise, at best to be placed ca. 1150. At least two scenarios for the book’s production immediately suggest themselves: it could have been commissioned by Irene herself to record her adviser’s words, or by Irene’s heirs to commemorate her through her spiritual adviser.

The correspondence with Jacob leads to the other work now known to be written by this monk and which has increasingly in recent scholarship been associated with Irene, though by links that are entirely circumstantial. The work is the set of six homilies on the Theotokos conventionally known as the Kokkinobaphos Homilies since their author signs himself as Jacob the monk from Kokkinobaphos (Ἰακώβος μοναχὸς τοῦ Κοκκινοβαφοῦ). Given that the Jacob of the letters does not sign himself as τοῦ Kokkinobaphou the identity of the two monks was for long debatable. It was finally resolved when it became apparent that both used an identical and idiosyncratic method of composition: that is, both make extensive use of quotations from patristic authors, and composed virtually nothing of their own. The extent of the quotations in the letters is now fully documented, though that in the homilies is only partially published (and indeed only partially traced); however that the two authors called “Jacob the monk” are one and the same person is now indubitable. From the letters it is apparent that Jacob was active in the late 1140s through to the early 1150s, and presumably also for a period before then whilst acquiring sufficient status to advise a prominent aristocrat;

53 Jakobos, Epistulae (cit. n. 21), pp. xxix–xxxii. Firm dating is hard to find in the letters, and while the disasters referred to by both Jacob and Manganeios must relate in some fashion precision is elusive.
56 Irene’s daughters Maria and Theodora seem to have been particularly supportive of her in times of crisis: Manganeios 51 and 54.
57 See Jeffreys, Sevastokratorissa Eirene (cit. n. 1); Nelson, Theoktistos (cit. n. 1), pp. 75–76; Anderson, Illustrated Sermons (cit. n. 1), pp. 100–102.
there is no textual evidence for his subsequent activity. There are at present no other writings that can be associated with him.

The *Kokkinobaphos Homilies* survive in two richly illuminated manuscripts whose quality is such that scholarly convention has lent their name to the workshop that produced them.\(^{59}\) The manuscripts are virtually identical but for their size: Vat. Gr. 1162 is twice as large as Par. Gr. 1208.\(^{60}\) While the *Homilies* have a clear statement of authorship they acknowledge no sponsors other than the patristic figures, Chrysostomos and Nazianzos, who appear with Jacob in the frontispiece to Par. Gr. 1208 (there seems never to have been a frontispiece in Vat. Gr. 1162). Par. Gr. 3039, the manuscript containing Jacob's *Letters*, comes, as stated above, from the same painterly environment as both of the *Homilies' manuscripts*. It is thus a tempting suggestion that the commissioning of the *Homilies' manuscripts* involves the same aristocratic figure as patron: Irene.

The strongest support for this supposition is the fact that the *Homilies' author* is Irene's spiritual father. An additional point is that the *Homilies' manuscripts* are on a lavish scale, with sumptuous images copiously ornamented with gold: the lavishness resonates with the references elsewhere to Irene's lavish payments for services rendered (though it is not clear just how costly manuscripts of this type would be). Irene also demonstrates elsewhere, as is discussed below, a fervent devotion to the Theotokos.

Against this supposition is that there is no indisputable textual evidence that ties the *Homilies* to Irene. There is no dedication and no reference to her – or to any other reader – within the *Homilies*.\(^{64}\) However, the *Homilies* do not cover the material usually found in Marian homiletic texts, that is, the liturgical Marian feasts. These *Homilies*, based on the *Protoevangelion of James* (second century CE?) with the addition of copious encomiastic material taken (mainly) from eighth- and ninth-century homilies, cover the conception and birth of the Theotokos (*Hom. 1–2*), her childhood and upbringing in the Temple and her selection to weave the purple veil of the Temple (*Hom. 3–4*), and the annunciation (*Hom. 5*); the climax of the composition is not, as one might expect, the birth of Christ but rather the Theotokos's vindication after false charges of unchastity have been laid against her (*Hom. 6*).\(^{63}\) The images in the two manuscripts place the Theotokos in an aristocratic, indeed palatial, setting: there are handsome cradles with embroidered coverlets, marble floors, bright hanging lamps, richly dressed attendants. The narrative thread that underlies the encomiastic overlay is of a well-born young woman thrust into unexpected prominence, who is subjected to unjust charges but vindicated. This could be said to parallel what is known of Irene's life.\(^{66}\) By one argument it would thus follow that Irene's spiritual adviser recast teachings on the Theotokos to encourage her in her devotions by finding in the Theotokos an even

59 Anderson, The Seraglio Octateuch (cit. n. 46).
60 Facsimiles: Vat. Gr. 1162 in: Hutter/Canart, Marienhomiliar (cit. n. 54); Par. Gr. 1208 in: H. Omont, Miniatures des Homélies sur la Vierge du moine Jacques (ms. gr. 1208 de Paris), Paris 1927.
61 In the *Homilies*, as in the *Letters*, it is hard to argue that the occasional appearance of the word *εἰρήνη* conceals any allusion to the *sebastokratorisa* (e.g. in the typological discussion of the Couch of Solomon [Vat. Gr. 1162, f. 80v, Par. Gr. 1208, f. 107 bis], cf. Jakobos, Epp. 8.13, 11.16, 13.32, and Jakobos, *Epistulae* [cit. n. 21], p. xxv). The most recent discussion of the Couch of Solomon is K.Linardou, The Couch of Solomon, a Monk, a Byzantine Lady, and the Song of Songs, in: R.N. Swanson (ed.), The Church and Mary, Woodbridge 2004, pp. 73–85.
62 This is part of the narrative in *Protoevangelion* but is not a normal subject in the Marian homiletic corpus.
63 Unexpected rise: Jakobos, Ep. 2.5–9; false charges: Manganeios, e.g. poems 43, 214, 251–7, 48, 166, 53, 81, 69, 44, 108, 66 and paras; Jakobos, Epp. 8, 32, 39. However, the charges against Irene concerned treachery to the emperor, and lack of chastity was not an issue (as recognised by Evangelatou, Pursuing Salvation [cit. n. 41], pp. 263–264).
more relevant model to follow. This suggestion, if sustainable, would have implications for the dating of the Homilies’ manuscripts, as indicated below. It is indubitable that the images illustrating the Homilies follow the text closely, often explicating certain idiosyncratic passages and showing that the author and painter worked in intimate collaboration.64

Of the many issues still outstanding over the Kokkinobaphos Homilies, not least is that of the relationship of one manuscript to the other,65 and their dates of production. At present dating suggestions derive from stylistic arguments, with the only consensus that both manuscripts are from the middle years of the century. If there is any validity in the correlation of the Homilies’ narrative with Irene’s life experiences, then neither book would have been produced before 1143/4 and the first period when she incurred imperial displeasure. Discussion continues to be hampered by the lack of a complete, let alone a critical, edition of the Homilies’ text.66

The assumption that Irene is the patron behind the Kokkinobaphos Homilies now seems surprisingly well entrenched in the scholarly literature, and is giving rise to increasingly elaborate interpretations.67 A certain amount of caution, however, is still necessary. It is indubitable that Jacob was Irene’s advisor, that she was a known patron and that the manuscripts of Jacob’s Homilies and Letters were both produced by painters and scribes from the same identifiable group of craftsmen. However, that group was patronised by many others in mid-twelfth-century Constantinople, ranging from the emperor John II (a Gospel book), his brother the sebastokrator Isaac (an Octateuch), to the abbot Joseph of Glykeria (the liturgical homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos).68 Furthermore, just as Irene was not the only person to be exercising patronage at this time, she was also not the only woman to have had a deep devotion to the Theotokos. The list given below of Irene’s offerings to churches of the Theotokos may be extensive but it is not unique, as is attested by the dedicatory epigrams on behalf of women found in Marc. Gr. 524.69

65 That Vat. Gr. 1162 (the larger manuscript) is the first of the two to be produced is advocated by I. Hutter, Die Homilien des Mönches Jakobos und die Illustrationen, Ph.D. dissertation, Vienna 1970, followed by Linardou, Kokkinobaphos Manuscripts (cit. n. 64), p. 407, who wishes, somewhat improbably, to argue that Par. Gr. 1208, the smaller manuscript, was Jacob’s personal copy. Anderson, Illustrated Sermons (cit. n. 1), pp. 76–85, argues that Par. Gr. 1208 is the earlier (with a full discussion of previous scholarship on the issue).
66 Work is in progress on an edition; preliminary collations indicate that the two extant manuscripts are independent copies of a third.
67 The current consensus stems from: Jeffreys, Sevastokratorissa Eirene (cit. n. 1); Nelson, Theoktistos (cit. n. 1); Anderson, Illustrated Sermons (cit. n. 1); J. C. Anderson, Anna Komnene: Learned Women and the Book in Byzantine Art, in: Gouma-Peterson, Anna Komnene (cit. n. 15), pp. 125–156. Irene’s patronage of the Homilies’ manuscripts underpins the discussions of the manuscripts’ images in Linardou, Couch of Solomon (cit. n. 61); Linardou, Kokkinobaphos Manuscripts (cit. n. 64), and Evangelatou, Pursuing Salvation (cit. n. 41).
69 Discussed in Jeffreys, Depiction of Female Sensibilities (cit. n. 16).

14 THE SEBASTOKRATORISSA IRENE AS PATRON 187
The verse written by Manganeios Prodromos on behalf of Irene offers an insight into the votive offerings made by a devout woman. Irene dedicated icon veils to cover icons of the Theotokos in churches in Constantinople, as well as in her own chapel: the Hagiosorotissa, Hodegetria, Basiotissa, tou Kyrrou, and tes Peges. It is not always clear whether these icons were located in the monastery associated with the name or housed elsewhere. She also dedicated poterokalymmata and diskokalymmata (cloths to cover the chalice and paten). She made offerings of incense and rose-water in, for example, the churches of the Theotokos tou Kyrrou and of the Hodegetria, as well as in the chapel in her own house. These offerings are known thanks either to supplicatory poems produced at the time of offering, or to dedicatory epigrams. The supplicatory poems, usually attached to items of liturgical relevance (such as rose-water, incense or lighting devices), tend to be quite long and are intended to be read out in the course of a service: the final lines turn to the officiating priest and ask for the service to continue. The epigrams associated with the fabrics seem to suggest first that they were to be placed on the fabric itself, that is, embroidered there, and second that Irene had herself made them. Scepticism might be in order about Irene’s direct participation, but the encomiast in Marc. Gr. 524 speaks of Irene’s household as being the centre of virtuous domestic industry. Needlework is a regular female occupation (though spinning and weaving are the forms most mentioned in Byzantine contexts). In the medieval West aristocratic women engaged in large-scale embroidery projects: one that springs to mind is the Bayeux tapestry, traditionally but wrongly associated with queen Mathilda, wife of William the Conqueror of England, while rather earlier Mathilda’s saintly mother, queen Margaret of Scotland (1045–1093), ran a workshop for embroidering ecclesiastical vestments. The
mid-twelfth century also seems to be the point at which embroidered decoration of liturgical cloths began to come into fashion. Irene’s poterokalymmata and diskokalymmata and icon veils, which can be dated from ca. 1144, presumably resembled the Halberstadt aeres, dated to ca. 1185, the earliest surviving examples known of this type of fabric. 81

WHEN DID IRENE FUNCTION AS PATRON?

To be considered next is whether it is possible to locate these activities in any one stage of Irene’s life. Apart from the life-changing event that was her marriage, the most drastic episode for Irene would have been the unexpected death of Andronikos in 1142. Is it possible to see changes in her patterns of patronage before and after this event? One problem is that it is very hard to put a date on most of her actions. Tzetzes’s letters survive in chronological order. Those to her seem to come in a date-bracket of 1143–1146, after Andronikos’s death. 82 Tzetzes addresses Irene as sebastokratorissa, as he does in the Theogony, to which he refers elsewhere in a context which makes it contemporaneous with the other book he wrote for a woman. 83 This is a reference to the Allegories on the Iliad that he wrote for Bertha-Irene, Bertha of Sulzbach, Manuel’s German-born wife, who was in Constantinople from 1142 though married only in 1146. This would put Irene’s patronage of Tzetzes into the years of her widowhood. Theodore’s Grammar refers to her as φιλολογωτάτε μοι βασιλίδων, which is unspecific. As noted above, βασιλίς is used elastically of all the most senior women in the Komnenian courts and cannot be used as a dating tool in connection with Irene. 84 In Theodore’s poems to her family, at the birth of her youngest son Alexios in the spring of 1142 Andronikos is addressed as much as Irene; thereafter, in the poem of consolation on Andronikos’s death and in Theodore’s request for support, she is simply the sebastokratorissa. 85 This “stripped-down” title would seem to add weight to the suggestion of Odysseus Lampsidis that Manasses’s Synopsis Chronike, where the hexameter dedication stresses the lustre brought to Irene from her marriage to Andronikos, can only have been produced for her in the years before her widowhood. 86 However, in – for example – the marriage poems by Manganeios Prodromos for Irene’s children in the mid to late 1140s, Andronikos is always mentioned where Irene is not, while in other contexts where Irene is acting alone in widowhood Manganeios adduces Andronikos as, as it were, the guarantor of her position. 87 For dating purposes, then, evidence from nomenclature is ambiguous and the presence or absence of references to Andronikos is meaningless. Most weight should be given in connection with the Synopsis Chronike to the complimentary phrases about Manuel as emperor that occur half way through the text (at

84 Note that the monk Jacob consistently refers to Irene as ἡ βασιλεία μου, in the late 1140s.
85 As well, admittedly, as φιλάγαθε βασιλίσσα καὶ φιλολογωτάτη (Hörandner, Historische Gedichte [cit. n. 9], no. 46, line 3).
87 E.g., Manganeios, poems 21 (wedding of Irene’s son John in 1148), 22 (wedding of Irene’s daughter Theodora, also in 1148), 93 and 94 (Irene, wife of Andronikos, dedicates an encheirion, ca. 1148).
lines 2506–2512), and which would thus put the date of composition after 1143, and Manuel’s accession. Significant portions of Manganeios Prodromos’s output can be matched to events (such as the arrival of the Second Crusade or Manuel’s campaigns in the Balkans) that are witnessed in other sources and can be placed at points in the 1140s and early 1150s. While the sequence of dramas hinted at in Jacob’s letters can be roughly correlated with events recorded by Manganeios, a detailed meshing of the two is frustratingly elusive. The dedications of liturgical furnishings, while often blandly uninformative, sometimes provide a context (the wounding of Irene’s son John, for example), which can be fixed by other sources (e.g. Kinnamos).

As for the decorated books, two are to be associated with commissioned texts, and so would presumably have been produced with the completed commission, as part of the commission and presumably at the expense of the commissioner. This applies to Theodore’s Grammar, on whose date we have no information, and Manasses’s Synopsis Chronike, which was produced after 1143. Jacob’s letters are preserved in a manuscript which, it has been suggested, dates by script and decoration to the early 1150s.

88 Most notably Manganeios, poems 20 and 24, which deal with the arrival of the Second Crusade at Constantinople. The value of Manganeios’s work as a historical source has long been recognised (witness the use made of it by Miller, Recueil [cit. n. 7], or Magdalino, Empire of Manuel I [cit. n. 1]), and will be fully discussed in the forthcoming edition.

89 E.g. Irene and the emperor Manuel are at odds in 1143/4 and apparently reconciled in 1145 (Manganeios, poem 50, partially ed. Miller, Recueil [cit. n. 7], pp. 770–771); the letters from Jacob refer to problems early in the correspondence (e.g. ep. 4, and 8) but the issues are not clear, and we do not know when the correspondence began. In ep. 21 Irene is consoled for the death of a prominent man (who cannot be Andronikos): possible candidates could be her son-in-law Diomedes (mourned by Manganeios in poem 50) or her brother-in-law Anemas (mourned in poem 42); both died in 1148.

90 Manganeios, poems 97 and 98, refer to an encheirion dedicated when John Kantakouzenos, husband of Irene’s eldest daughter Maria, lost a finger when fighting in Dalmatia, ca. 1150; this can be correlated with the battles in Kinnamos, ed. Meineke (cit. n. 2), pp. 131–134; cf. P. Stephenson, Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier, Cambridge 2000, pp. 234–237.

91 Anderson, Illustrated Sermons (cit. n. 1), pp. 90, 95.


93 Linardou, Kokkinobaphos Manuscripts (cit. n. 64), p. 407.

94 Evangelatou, Pursuing salvation (cit. n. 41), pp. 265–266 and n. 84.

95 Manganeios, poem 73.58, ed. Miller, Poèmes inédites (cit. n. 70), pp. 20–24.

96 Manganeios, poem 68.54 (unedited).
Reasons for Patronage

This has sketched out what is known of Irene's activities that could come under the heading of patronage – in this context, the support of writers, who are named (or, in the case of Manganeios, allow their personalities to obtrude), and painters and artisans who are not named, a division indicative of the relative social status of the two groups. The dedications Irene made in liturgical contexts are statements of cult practice that employ the writers and artisans.

The presumption must be that she acted in these ways because such actions were appropriate to her position in Constantinopolitan society where she was a member of the higher echelons of the elite and part of the imperial court.

Courts are places which provide occasions for conspicuous display, occasions which demonstrate the hierarchies, material as well as intellectual. Ceremonial display has its rituals which are accompanied by words, leading to a need for skilled producers of words. This is apparent in Byzantine court society from the earliest period onwards: good examples are the connections between George of Pisidia and Herakleios in the seventh century or Psellos and Constantine Monomachos in the eleventh. The twelfth century is no exception; indeed in this century the processes that produced skilful practitioners of verbal crafts went into overdrive.

In the reign of John II the phenomenon of the theatron, a long-standing element in Byzantine culture – a gathering, an occasion, which allowed for the display of literary talent – flourished as never before. Conspicuous for their role in these were the dowager empress Irene Doukaina (d. 1133), and her daughter Anna Komnene. Glimpses into the workings of a theatron can be found, for example, in Michael Italikos's account of the response to a letter from Nikephoros Bryennios that he read out in one such gathering: it produced roars of laughter, much admiration for Bryennios's style and his wit, and the next instalment was eagerly awaited. This tells us that the meetings were open to aspiring literary figures (Italikos) as well as aristocrats (Bryennios). The benefits would have been mutual – prestige for the aristocrats, networking leading to job opportunities for the literary figures. One reason for the prominence of women in these contexts at this period must surely have been the absence from Constantinople on campaign of men of military age who would otherwise have participated. Nikephoros Bryennios is an example: we know of his involvement because his absence is recorded. On entering Constantinopolitan society in the mid-1120s literary patronage would have been an aspect of acceptable female aristocratic behaviour that Irene could not have failed to observe, and there were role models for her. However, despite the allusive remarks made by Jacob about Irene's participation in contests, it is noteworthy that in the poems of Manganeios Prodromos, that date from ca. 1143 to the late 1150s (after Irene's death), the word theatron appears only once, and with the meaning of a large assembly. Theatra, of whatever sort, in the 1140s were not part of Irene's scene though it is plain that most of the corpus of Manganeios Prodromos's verse was intended for oral presentation.

97 As is explored for the Constantinopolitan environment in the contributions in H. Maguire (ed.), Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204, Washington, DC 1997.
98 The definition of a theatron is hard: rather like a “bain-marie”, “Ce n’est pas une chose, c’est une situation”. A good discussion remains Mullett, Aristocracy and Patronage (cit. n. 1), but see also the nuanced remarks in Magdalino, Empire of Manuel I (cit. n. 1), pp. 336–356.
100 Manganeios, poem 12.142 (unedited); dated 1153.
Display also has its physical manifestations, in robes and in objects. From Manganeios Prodromos there comes a sense of the colour and display that was involved in court occasions in the 1140s, in for example, his references to the imperial prokypsis with its brilliant lights. The instances where Irene commissioned decorated books, liturgical cloths and other objects for liturgical use formed one conspicuous way to demonstrate her place in the social hierarchy.

There is also the intangible aspect to display and patronage. On the one hand, tapping into the prestige emanating from the inherited cultural capital of Byzantine intellectual life must be the reason why Irene pursued the Homeric interests challenged by Jacob (though we do not know what form they took); it would also have been the reason why Anna Komnene and Irene Doukaina had previously followed their own cultural directions. On the other, the presentation of costly offerings to churches makes a contract with the unseen spiritual powers: support and protection in adversity is sought in reciprocation for a bejewelled ritual object. However, the objects that Irene offers in the churches she frequented, in times of acute personal distress and in dire need of support, are modest, humble even: rose-water, incense, candles, embroidered cloths. This area of spiritual display does not match the apparent ostentation of her secular patronage: others offered lavishly decorated icons where Irene dedicated an icon veil.

But what about the finances of patronage? Although Irene is praised for her lavish payments by Tzetzes and Manasses, one may ask whether she is exceptional. It is not clear what the sums are, not what are the regular rates for commissioned writing. We do not have account books from Byzantine aristocratic households to show the costs of maintaining a “writer in residence”. Nor is it easy to put a figure on the costs of books, or the liturgical furnishings that Irene dedicated: the scanty figures from the twelfth century offer no guide to the expenses incurred in the production of luxury manuscripts. However, they would be as nothing compared to the financial implications of establishing a religious foundation. It is here that the rhetoric on Irene’s generosity comes into perspective. The dowager empress Irene Doukaina established the Kechari-tome nunnery. Irene-Piroska (and the emperor John) set up the Pantokrator monastery with its elaborate charitable establishments. John’s brother the sebastokrator Isaac, who also had literary aspirations and patronised the Kokkinobaphos master and his colleagues, founded the monas-

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103 See, for example, the icon commissioned by the caesar Rogerios made from his deceased wife’s jewellery (Lambros, Ο Μαρκιανὸς κώδιξ [cit. n. 9], p. 21, poem 52).

104 Tzetzes was apparently offered twelve gold nomismata for each quaternion of the Iliad Allegories (Tzetzes, Chiliades 9.274–290).

tery of Kosmosoteira. From the typika of these monasteries it is clear how much real estate was needed to ensure their continuance. Isaac’s rambling comments reveal that he had expended all his imperial inheritance on his foundation.106 The sebastokratorissa Irene was not in this league. When it comes to monastic foundations it is not gender that is the issue but access to funds, which of course more often than not comes to the same thing.

The conclusion has to be that Irene conformed to patterns of behaviour that, almost gender-neutral, were recognised as appropriate to members of the elite families of Constantinople – appropriate to females as well as males. She supported potential word-smiths because they could enhance her standing amongst her peers and she gave to religious causes because the ethos of the age demanded this; she sponsored goods (books almost certainly, liturgical objects quite certainly) of high quality because she had the resources to do so. She seems to have acted alone, during her widowhood and despite financial and social constraints. The only text which might predate her widowhood, Manasses’s Synopsis Chronike, almost certainly does not. Andronikos, her husband, was not without literary connections since the second Ptochoprodromic poem, almost certainly by Theodore Prodromos, is dedicated to him, but there is no evidence for joint action by husband and wife.107 There was, however, no social imperative demanding joint action: perhaps the clearest example involves Irene-Piroska who is credited with an independent line over the foundation of the Pantokrator.108 Irene’s support for writers and artisans after Andronikos’s death came from an insecure basis. Most of the insecurity stemmed from her bad relations with the emperor, and from the confiscation of her resources, though we know merely of the fact of the confiscation and not of what was confiscated – whether it was an income paid by Manuel, a dowry in Irene’s own name, or revenue from estates bequeathed by Andronikos. It is a fascinating comment on the values of the time that Irene seems to have thought it feasible to stabilize her personal position by conspicuous displays of patronage, which were as much intellectual as tangible. Though future work may shed light on the shadowy networks surrounding her, the major reason currently accepted as prompting conspicuous actions by Byzantine women (the need to promote or defend their children) is absent in the case of Irene.109

**EFFECT OF PATRONAGE**

So we come to the question of Irene’s importance in Byzantine cultural history. The first part of the twelfth century saw vernacular registers of language coming into increasing literary use in the non-Greek-speaking areas of Europe, especially in the form of the chansons de geste (lively verse narratives of heroic deeds with a slight tinge of love interest).110 In this same period new interests arise in Byzantine literary circles, notably in the use of vernacular Greek in

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106 BMFD, II, pp. 782–858, no. 29.
107 Though such joint activities were not unknown: note the comments by Tornikes that in the early years of their marriage the palace shared by Nikephoros Bryennios and Anna Komnene had become home of the Muses (J. Darrouzès, Georges et Démétrios Tornikès, Lettres et discours, Paris 1970, p. 267).
110 Of which the Chanson de Roland is emblematic; for overviews see, e.g. J. Fox, A Literary History of France: The Middle Ages, London 1974, pp. 58–105.
verse and in the revived interest in writing erotic fiction. It is an attractive thought that Irene, almost certainly from a non-Greek background, perhaps a Norman, could have acted as a conduit for innovation in Byzantine literary productions in the middle years of the twelfth century, and proposals along these lines have been toyed with.\(^{111}\) However, the timing and circumstances of the Byzantine new developments are now better understood.

Theodore Prodromos is almost certainly the author of the satirical *Ptochoprodromika* which are the best examples of literary use of the vernacular.\(^{112}\) Theodore’s most consistent patron was the emperor John II, for whose favours he and others vied competitively. Another patron was Nikephoros Bryennios, to whom Theodore dedicated his novel *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, which would thus have been written before 1138 (when Nikephoros died on campaign in Cilicia).\(^{113}\) The epic-romance *Digenis Akritis*, Byzantium’s *chanton de geste*, is parodied in the first Ptochoprodromic poem, which is dedicated to John II; *Digenis Akritis* was thus written before 1142 (when John II died, also when on campaign in Cilicia).\(^{114}\) The strands of experimentation that led to these innovative texts would have been under fabrication in the *theatra* of the 1130s (and perhaps of the 1120s). Here the leading figure was Irene Doukaina: Irene the *sebastokratorissa* may well have been a part of these circles, but she is not mentioned in the surviving texts, and she would have been out-ranked. Admittedly some of those whom she subsequently sponsored — most notably Theodore Prodromos — were leading figures in these decades. Admittedly also there are comments in the letters from the monk Jacob which imply that Irene had taken part in literary contests, both as an adjudicator and as a participant.\(^{115}\) However, by the time we come to the years of Irene’s active patronage after 1142 the innovations one might have liked to have associated with her have already been put in place. The situation is not as clear-cut as it once seemed.

Apart from the arguable case of the decorated manuscripts of the *Kokkinobaphos Homilies* (arguable because of questions over the connection to Irene, not because of their quality), it is hard to say that Irene’s patronage stimulated fresh directions in Byzantine culture. It is difficult to suggest that, in the manner of Eleanor of Aquitaine, her near contemporary in the West, she instigated a literary movement. Her secretary, Manganeios, has left tantalising glimpses of her crises, as has her spiritual father Jacob. One yearns to construct Irene’s biography. But in comparison with the documentation that, for example, Marjorie Chibnall could draw on for the life of the empress Mathilda, the Byzantine chancery archives are bare. We can never really know the *sebastokratorissa*, and questions over the reality of her patronage still remain.\(^{116}\)

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115 Epp. 4.19–20, 5.64–69.
116 It is hoped that the forthcoming edition of Manganeios Prodromos will enable a firmer chronology to be established into which the production of the texts and objects associated with Irene can be slotted.