THE OTHER IMAGE AT THE PALACE GATE
AND THE VISUAL PROPAGANDA OF LEO III

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Much has been written about the icon of Christ that adorned the outside of the Chalke Gate, the main entrance to the Great Palace of Constantinople, and especially about the vexed question of its early history.1 Was there or was there not an icon in place before Iconoclasm?2 If so, who put it there, and was its removal by the emperor Leo III in 726 the cause célèbre described by Iconophile writers of the early ninth century, in which the ‘Isaurian folly’ of Iconoclasm went public and claimed the first martyrs to the Orthodox defence of holy images? Whatever the truth of this matter, the search for it has diverted attention from one piece of evidence that may provide a reliable clue, and which certainly documents Leo III’s use of visual propaganda in the years when his attitude to religious images was taking shape. This is a passage in the letter of Patriarch Germanos I to Metropolitan Thomas of Claudiopolis defending the depiction and veneration of icons. The letter is preserved in the Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea, and the passage in question briefly describes a composite religious image set up by Leo III and Constantine V at an entrance to the imperial Palace. Its omission from Cyril Mango’s sourcebook on the art of the Byzantine Empire,3 and from nearly all mainline literature on Byzantine art and Iconoclasm,4 has deprived generations of art-historians of a small but vital piece in a highly fragmentary puzzle. My main aim in presenting it here is simply to make it available, yet in attempting to explain what it describes, I hope to demonstrate that it helps to make sense of the confusion that still informs not only the debate on the Chalke icon, but also our understanding of the motives of the first Iconoclast emperor.

2 Further arguments for and against this idea in Haldon and Ward-Perkins (1999) and Brubaker (1999).
The text in which the passage occurs is the last and by far the longest of three letters attributed to Germanos in the Acts of Nicaea II.\(^5\) All three letters express the patriarch’s concern with unauthorized initiatives by two bishops in Asia Minor, Constantine the bishop of Nakoleia and Thomas the metropolitan of Claudiopolis, who had challenged the presence of icons in the churches under their jurisdiction. In the first letter, Germanos reports to Constantine’s superior, John metropolitan of Synada, on their discussions in which he had corrected Constantine’s objection that the veneration of icons transgresses the Second Commandment and dishonours the intercession of the martyrs; portraying Christ, his mother and the saints in their human form simply records the physical reality of their life and devotion to the God whom all Christians worship, and in no way involves the adoration of human beings or material objects.\(^6\) In the second letter, Germanos reminds Constantine that he must become reconciled with his superior and end the “scandal” he has caused.\(^7\) The letter to Thomas of Claudiopolis registers the patriarch’s distress at the news that Thomas, on his return to his diocese from Constantinople, has set about removing icons, despite having given no indication of any worries on this point during their discussions together on problems of Scripture. To upset the traditional Christian use of icons is to cause scandalous innovation, and it is to play along with the insulting and defiling arguments of the Jews, “the real servants of idolatry,” who are no better than the pagans or the Muslims, who also criticise us. The Old Testament prescriptions against idolatry were formulated precisely because of the incorrigible Jewish propensity to apostasise. They do not apply to Christians, who honour the true God by depicting Christ and the saints in images that teach and edify.\(^8\)

After developing this point at length, the letter returns to the argument that it is important to avoid scandal, and above all to avoid playing into the hands of non-Christians by appearing to admit that traditional Christian practice is wrong. This is the context in which the author describes the icon at the Palace gate. Since the context is

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\(^6\) Mansi (1767) 100–105; Thümmel (1992) 374–77 (but Mansi’s punctuation is to be preferred).

\(^7\) Mansi (1767) 105; Thümmel (1992) 377–78.