CHAPTER 3

THE EMPRESS ARIADNE
AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSITION

Ariadne the queen, the wife of Zeno, was allied to this Anastasius after the death of her husband, and she made him king, and she held the kingdom for many years, as many as forty. . . .

—Zacharias of Mitylene, Syriac Chronicle, VII.13

The Empress Ariadne (d. 513/515)—whose period in power stretched between the fifth and sixth centuries—transformed the Late Roman traditions that imperial women such as Helena, Eudokia, and Pulcheria had so successfully developed. Her reign marks the transition to the altered conception of the imperial woman that emerged in the early Byzantine period. Theodosian predecessors had mostly elaborated Roman imperial imagery, but with Ariadne a new sensibility starts to materialize. Her identity is conveyed through normative visual language, and Ariadne’s images carved out of luxury materials do not even bear her name, so strongly does her imperial identity override any individual meaning. The eldest daughter of the Emperor Leo I and Verina, Ariadne had no brother to follow Leo to the throne. The Empire now without a male heir, Ariadne became the transmitter of imperial rule. The Empress Ariadne assumed an unprecedented level of authority in the nebulous moments between emperors, and this chapter will focus on how these dynamics are reflected in the official ivories. She determined a sequence of three emperors in her roles as mother and wife, for after her son ruled, Ariadne’s two husbands, Zeno and Anastasios, reigned in succession. Fundamental changes made in coinage during her rule with Anastasios also impart a sense of rupture in the official imagery of her reign. This
flux sets the backdrop for arguments later in this book, for the numismatic record has too often been confined to the narrow domain of specialist studies, and its importance within broader visual culture neglected.

Art historians and historians have overlooked the accomplishments and public status of the Empress Ariadne; glamorous figures such as the Empress Theodora captivate our imagination. Charles Diehl's Byzantine Empresses omits Ariadne altogether from his pantheon of femmes fatales, and she falls just beyond the chronological span of both the end of Kenneth Holum's Theodosian Empresses and the start of Lynda Garland's Byzantine Empresses. A careful review of the early medieval textual and visual record will correct this oversight; Ariadne emerges as a central figure in sources such as the Chronicon Paschale and Zacharias of Mitylene. Extant visual representations flaunt her preeminence. Ariadne's image emblazoned part of the coinage that circulated throughout the Empire, as well as the ivory consular diptychs now scattered through Europe from Liverpool to Verona. The consular diptychs document her authority within a series of medallion portraits. The identification with Ariadne of the two imperial ivories in Florence and Vienna, however, will be reassessed in chapter seven's look at the Empress Sophia's images.

A survey of the historical context will help clarify our understanding of the visual representation of Ariadne. Because the Emperor Leo I had no son, his daughter Ariadne assumed a crucial role in the transition of power. While her father ruled, Ariadne married Zeno in 466 or 467.1 Ariadne soon bore a son and named him Leo II to honor his grandfather. The young grandchild, not the son-in-law Zeno, was designated the next ruler by the aging Emperor Leo. Ariadne's prominent depictions illustrate her dynastic significance, for a tenth-century manuscript describes a votive image commissioned by her parents that visually marks their grandson, Leo II, as heir:

The same emperors (Leo and Verina) beloved of God and Christ set up . . . an image, all of gold and precious stones, in which image [is represented] Our Lady the immaculate Mother of God seated on a throne and on either side of her Leo and Veronica, the latter holding her own son, the younger emperor Leo, as she falls before Our Lady the Mother of God, and also their daughter Ariadne. This image has stood from that time onward above the bema of the holy soros. . . . 2

Cyril Mango is no doubt correct in his explanation of the text's reference to the son Leo as a reference to Ariadne's son Leo, and therefore the boy who was the grandson of Leo I and Verina.3 The image likely was fashioned for the ciborium above the reliquary of the Virgin in the Church of