

DECONSTRUCTING AN ICONOGRAPHY: DEPICTIONS OF CONSTANTINE AND HELENA IN MIDDLE BYZANTINE CAPPADOCIA

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ABSTRACT

Middle Byzantine Cappadocian depictions of Constantine and Helena offer a case study for the deconstruction of “standard” images.* All such depictions can be considered to be Feast Icons, as they present both Constantine and Helena, reflecting the Synaxarion text for May 21. The image compresses the narrative, allowing the viewer to contemplate some, or all, of the acts related in the Synaxarion. I suggest that we can go further; in an analysis of specific iconographical components gleaned from twenty-seven images in Cappadocian rock-cut churches, I recognize two types of Feast Icons: that of the Invention Cross and that of the Vision Cross. Regardless of classification, all Middle Byzantine representations of Constantine and Helena share multiple meanings: all reference the salvific promise symbolized by the Cross, all attest to the authenticity of the Cross and tie the Invention and ownership of relics of the Cross to the divine approval accorded to the Byzantine Empire, and all serve to link the first and current Emperor. The variables found in all of the images offer specific iconographical prompts for the viewer that could evoke any and all of these meanings. A third category can be justified, one that features only variables in which images feature both Constantine and Helena but do not conform to any single type. This group evokes meanings that both encompass and move between those of the Invention and Vision imagery. Their variability is not a misunderstanding of a standard, but a reflection of the needs and desires of a patron or community in order to convey a specific message within a specific space.

KEYWORDS

Constantine, Helena, painting, deconstruction, feast icons

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The importance of Constantine and Helena in, and to, the Byzantine Empire is evident in their celebration on two days in the Church calendar, in the multiple legends recounting the Christian origins of the Empire, and in their many depictions.¹ In the Middle Byzantine period (843–1204), we see the characterization of the ruling emperor and empress as a ‘New Constantine’ and ‘New Helena.’² The legends of Constantine and Helena become combined in art by the late ninth century, and it is also during this period that representations of Constantine and Helena flanking the Cross became regularly featured in church decorative programs.³

In Cappadocia, we find 28 depictions of Constantine and Helena in 27 rock-cut churches. Of these, the greatest number are of Constantine and Helena flanking the Cross, with 17 remaining to us (Fig. 1). A second iconographic type, that featuring Constantine and Helena with a Cross between and above them, is found in seven Cappadocian churches⁴ (Fig. 2).

Scholarly discussion of these two image types focuses on form, particularly that of the Cross. Depictions of Constantine and Helena flanking the Cross has received the lion’s share of attention, as it is found

on art produced outside of Cappadocia and survives in a variety of media. Depictions of Constantine and Helena with a Cross above them have been viewed as a step in an iconographic evolution that emerges in the tenth and eleventh centuries and matures in the eleventh and twelfth centuries into depictions of Constantine and Helena flanking a Cross.⁵

Evidence demonstrates that the two iconographic types were coeval, and in the pages that follow, I argue that meaning in all Cappadocian depictions of Constantine, Helena, and a Cross is conveyed not by the form of the Cross or by any one compositional arrangement, but by the ways in which Constantine and Helena do, or do not, physically interact with it. The two image types convey different messages and were used in painted church programs in different ways.

As we shall see, in all of these images, it is the variables that dominate. While there are replications of the poses of Constantine and Helena, of their dress and accoutrements, and of the forms of the Cross, no single image replicates another in all aspects. Recognition of these iconographic variables allows us to better contextualize their individual meanings, rather than ascribe a single meaning to all.⁶ All such

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¹ Hippolyte Delehaye, ed., *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae. Propylaeum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris* (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1902), cols. 43–45 (September 14) and cols. 697–700 (May 21).

² For an overview and bibliography, see Paul Magdalino, ed., *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries. Papers from the Twenty-Sixth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, St Andrews, March 1992* (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain: Variorum, 1994).

³ Leslie Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 165.

⁴ For images of Constantine and/or Helena which do not conform to either image type, see note 15, *infra*. For rock-cut churches containing images of Constantine and Helena flanking the Cross, see note 16, *infra*; and, for those containing Constantine, Helena, and a Cross between and above them, see note 33 *infra*.

⁵ Natalia Teteriatnikov, “The True Cross Flanked by Constantine and Helena. A Study in the Light of the Post-Iconoclastic Re-evaluation of the Cross,” *Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς ἀρχαιολογικῆς ἐταιρείας* 18 (1995): 169–188; Holger Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen und das ‘wahre’ Kreuz: die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004), 127–130; Christopher Walter, *The Iconography of Constantine the Great, Emperor and Saint* (Leiden: Alexandros Press, 2006), esp. 46–52. A chronology for certain representations of Constantine and Helena is also suggested by Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, “Nouvelle découverte en Cappadoce: les églises de Yüsekli,” *Cahiers archéologiques* 37 (1987): 113–41, esp. 114. Anatole Frolow recognizes the iconographic variables of depictions of the imperial pair in a very specific and limited context, that of reliquaries; Anatole Frolow, *Les Reliquaires de la Vraie Croix*, Archives de l’Orient Chrétien 8 (Paris: Institut Français d’Études Byzantines, 1965), 217–225.

⁶ In this article, I include only descriptions of where the images are located in each decorative program; for plans, refer to sources in notes 16 and 33.



FIG. 1

Constantine and Helena. Yılanlı Kilise (Chapel 28), Göreme.
Image: Lynn Jones

iconography has layers of meaning that could have been accessed in different ways, according to the desires and needs of a viewer.

The images discussed all reflect the Synaxarion entries for May 21 and September 14, and so a brief review of these texts is helpful. The entry for May 21, “Memory of our First Emperor Constantine and Helena,” begins with Constantine’s birth, then celebrates his Vision and subsequent military victories, his sole rule, and his establishment of a Christian Empire.⁷ It next recounts his gathering of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, the founding of Constantinople, his baptism and death, and his burial in the Church of the Holy Apostles. The text then turns to Helena and recounts her discovery of the Cross in Jerusalem and her construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It celebrates her foundation of the Church of the Nativity, in Bethlehem, and that

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FIG. 2

Constantine and Helena. Yılanlı Kilise, Ihlara. Image: Lynn Jones.

⁷ Delehaye, *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, cols. 697–700.

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FIG. 3

Constantine's dream; Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge; Helena discovering the True Cross. Paris, BnF, MS gr. 51o (Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos), fol. 44or. Image: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

of the Ascension, on the Mount of Olives. It ends with her elevation to the rank of Augusta and her death. The textual commemoration of Constantine and his deeds—his vision, the Council of Nicaea, the establishment of a Christian Empire—is equally balanced with those of his mother—the Invention of the Cross and the establishment of foundations commemorating key events in the life of Christ. The entry for September 14, “The Discovery and Elevation of the Precious Wood,” is an abbreviated version of that for May 21. It relays the events in the same order: first Constantine, then Helena. All Middle Byzantine representations of Constantine and Helena function as synecdoches of these liturgical texts, invoking and evoking in the viewer some, or all, of the acts described.

For this period, the only surviving narrative scenes featuring Constantine and Helena are found on folio 440r in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, dated to 879–82 (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, gr. 510; hereafter the Paris Gregory).⁸ It offers an important link to iconography that we find in the Cappadocian churches. The full-page illumination is divided into three registers (Fig. 3). The upper two depict the Vision of Constantine; the lower register features two scenes of Helena and the Invention. In the upper, Constantine is shown receiving the Vision while asleep on a jeweled couch in full regalia. His eyes are closed, and there is no Cross in the scene. The second register depicts Constantine acting in accordance with the instructions received in the Vision and so defeating Maxentius. Here, the Vision is given visual expression by the presence, form, and placement of the Cross. Constantine, mounted on a white horse, gallops towards the Milvian bridge. The Cross floats in the sky above the horse’s head. It is equal armed, gold, and inscribed EN TOYTΩ NIKΑ, “in this conquer.” It is set against a circular green-blue background, which



FIG. 4

Detail: Bishop Makarios touching the True Cross. Paris, BnF, MS gr. 510 (Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzos), fol. 440r. Image: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

encloses and separates it from the action taking place beneath it.

The third register features Helena, a placement that reflects the textual organization of the entries in the Synaxarion. Helena is shown twice in this register: to the left she is enthroned; to the right she stands, directing the excavation of the Cross. In the latter scene, the Cross has been uncovered and lies at her feet. A figure, possibly representing Bishop Makarios, kneels and reaches out to the revealed Cross, touching the staff with the fingertips of his right hand while the figures grouped to the far right of the scene make gestures of amazement⁹ (Fig. 4).

Markarios’s physical interaction with the True Cross is important. As we have seen in the second register of the Paris Gregory, the form and placement of the Cross of the Vision emphasizes its nature. It is part of, but separate from, the events of the narrative. In contrast, in the scene of the Invention, we have a representation of a physical object. Helena gestures to it as Makarios reaches out and touches it. These actions reflect and emphasize the Cross’s physical existence in Byzantium, where it was displayed in reliquaries, processed in the liturgy, and taken into battle.¹⁰ The iconography also reflects the haptic veneration of Byzantine relics of the Cross.

⁸ Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning*, 163–172.

⁹ Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning*, 164 for the suggested identification of the figures.

¹⁰ Robert Nelson, “And So, With the Help of God’: The Byzantine Art of War in the Tenth Century,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 65/66 (2011–12): 169–92.

This tactile experience is made clear in the eleventh-century liturgical typikon for the Euergetis Monastery in Constantinople. It contains a description for September 14, the feast day for the veneration of the True Cross.¹¹ On this day, the priest carries a staurotheke on his head and places it on a wooden stand in front of the sanctuary. He removes the relic from the staurotheke, stands on the ambo, and elevates it above his head.¹² The relic is then set back within the staurotheke, uncovered, and the faithful are allowed access to it. They approach the staurotheke, make obeisance, and kiss the relic.¹³

We turn to Cappadocia and to the opportunity it affords for deconstructing an iconography. Cappadocia contains the largest concentration of images of Constantine and Helena surviving to us from the Middle Byzantine period.¹⁴ They survive in varying degrees of legibility; I include only those in which both Constantine and Helena are identifiable by inscription, iconography, or composition, and in which some portion of the Cross is evident—or in which

both saints are shown together and are clearly without a cross.¹⁵ I also discuss contemporary, non-Cappadocian works of art to support my argument that the Cappadocian examples offer a reflection of what once existed in art throughout the Empire.

CONSTANTINE AND HELENA FLANKING THE TRUE CROSS

In 17 rock-cut churches, we find paintings containing what we accept to be necessary for depictions of the imperial pair: Constantine, Helena, and a Cross.¹⁶ I suggest that this iconographic type requires only two elements: both Constantine and Helena must be depicted, and they both must touch the Cross. There are exceptions—as we shall see—but they are rare. In every Cappadocian example in which at least the upper half of the scene survives and is legible, they grasp the Cross in front of their bodies, presenting it to the viewer. By this gesture Constantine and Helena serve as witnesses of the authenticity of the

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11 For the typikon, see Robert Jordan, ed., *The Synaxarion of the Monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations* 6.5 (Belfast: Institute of Byzantine Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast, 2000), 52–65.

12 This is illustrated in the eleventh-century *Menologion of Basil II* (Vat. Gr. 1613, 35).

13 Such acts of veneration are illustrated in an eleventh-century lectionary (Vat. Gr. 1156, fol. 248).

14 While secure dating of Cappadocian painted church programs is notoriously difficult, there is general agreement that those I discuss in this essay date to the Middle Byzantine period. I include only those that have been published or that I have seen in the course of fieldwork.

15 Churches with images of Constantine and Helena that I have not viewed in person are the Chapel of Saint Symeon the Stylite in Zelve and the “Église du pic 1223” in Zindanönü; see Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce: un siècle après G. de Jerphanion*, 2 vols. (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 2015), 1:134–35, 1:155. Üzümlü Kilise (Zelve 4) features Constantine and Helena flanking the enthroned Theotokos and Child; Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:138. For the depiction of Constantine without Helena see Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, “The Bahattin Samanlı Kilisesi at Belisirma (Cappadocia) Revisited,” in *Byzantine Art: Recent Studies, Essays in Honor of Lois Drewer*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 81–110; and Lynn Jones, “The Imperial Cult in Middle Byzantine Art: Cappadocia and Constantinople,” in *Space and Communities in Byzantine Anatolia, Papers from the Fifth International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, eds. Nikos D. Kontogiannis and Tolga B. Uyar (Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2022), 377–98.

16 For the rock-cut churches first described by Guillaume de Jerphanion, *Une nouvelle province de l'art byzantin: les églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, 2 vols., Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 5–6 (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1925–42), I cite whenever possible only Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, as the latter both updates and provides citations to Jerphanion. For the churches containing depictions of Constantine and Helena flanking the Cross, see Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:23–25 (Göreme 9, Chapel of the Theotokos, John the Baptist, and Saint George), 1:45–47 (Göreme 1, Chapel of El Nazar), 1:53–54 (Göreme 2d), 1:62–63 (Göreme 33, Kılıçlar Kuşluk, Meryemana Kilisesi), 1:63–64 (Göreme 31), 1:70–72 (Göreme 7, Tokalı Kilise, Old Church), 1:81–85 (Göreme 23, Karanlık Kilise), 1:86–88 (Göreme 19, Elmalı Kilise), 1:89–91 (Göreme 22, Çarıklı Kilise), 1:92–93 (Göreme 21, Chapel of Saint Catherine), 1:94–95 (Göreme 28 - Yılanlı Kilise), 1:110 (Avclar 5, Yusuf Koç Kilisesi), 1:130–33 (Çavuşin, Pigeon House Church), 1:158 (Açık Saray, Church 1), 1:260–61 (Soğanlı, Belli Kilise, Kubbeli I, Lower Church), 1:265–66 (Soğanlı, Belli Kilise, Kubbeli III), 1:267–70 (Soğanlı, Tahtalı Kilise, Saint Barbara).

Cross and thus of the salvific promise it represents. Together, they serve as guarantors of the legitimacy of Cross relics and witness and confirm the divine approval of both Empire and Emperor represented by the relics. This is further conveyed by their regalia, which is consistently anachronistic, changing only slightly to reflect the fashions of the Middle Byzantine period. Visually, the contemporary dress serves to link the first Byzantine emperor to the current, creating a genealogy of Byzantine ownership of the Cross from the time of the Invention and the divine approval it reflects and brings. All other aspects of this iconography are variable: the form and size of the Cross, the placement, dress, and pose of Constantine and/or Helena, and the placement of the scene within the church.

The Patriarchal, or double-armed cross, has been positioned as an essential part of the iconography of this scene, creating a perceived standard in which it is the evolutionary end-product, supplanting other forms of Crosses.¹⁷ The paintings in Cappadocia provide evidence to the contrary—they demonstrate that the Cross form is of little importance. They feature Crosses with two arms and with one, with and without suppedanea. It can be difficult to determine the number of cross-arms, as finials and serifs often mimic the form of the upper bar—a difficulty that supports my argument that the form of the Cross in these images is not key to their meaning.

An emphasis on the physical presence of the Cross is found in the depiction of Constantine and Helena in St. Barbara in the Soğanlı Valley. It is a large,

barrel-vaulted church with an extensive painted program that is now badly damaged.¹⁸ Constantine and Helena are depicted on the north wall (Fig. 5). Constantine wears the X-shaped loros while Helena wears the T-shaped variant.¹⁹ Both are frontal, but Helena's head is turned toward Constantine and the Cross. The Cross is slightly taller than the imperial pair, and the central arm extends halfway across their bodies. Constantine's right arm is bent at the elbow (Fig. 6). The Cross rests in the crook of his arm, and his right hand reaches around to the front (the viewer's side). The fingers are horizontally extended across the lower half of the cross arm, while the thumb points upward, at a 90 degree angle from the fingers. His left arm is extended behind the cross; he grasps the staff just below the crossing. His fingers curve up, around the staff, and overlap Helena's right hand. The position of her right arm echoes that of Constantine, extending from behind to the front of the cross arm. Helena's left arm is placed in front of the cross arm; only two fingertips survive, but they suggest that this hand position also likely mirrored that of her son. This placement of arms and hands underscores the physical nature of the Cross they support.

Yılanlı Kilise in Göreme is small, decorated with individual painted panels rather than a unified narrative program²⁰ (Fig. 1). Constantine and Helena are depicted grasping the staff of a two-armed Cross, presenting it to the viewer. The Cross features a tilted suppedaneum and is painted brown with vertical black striations in imitation of wood.

17 Nicole Thierry, "Le Culte de la croix dans l'empire byzantin du VIIe siècle au Xe," *Revista di studi bizantini slavi* 1 (1981): 205–18; Teteriatnikov, "The True Cross," 176. The term "Patriarchal Cross" usually refers to a cross with two cross-arms. Frolow avoids this term, instead describing it as a cross with two cross-arms, Frolow, *Les Reliquaires*, 124–36. Both single- and double-arm crosses can feature suppedaneum, the support on which Christ's feet rest in representations of the Crucifixion. The upper, shorter arm of the double-arm cross represents the titulus, the plaque affixed to the Cross of the Crucifixion, inscribed with the "King of the Jews," the "title" given to Christ.

18 Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:267–70.

19 In all of the paintings discussed, Constantine and Helena are depicted wearing different types of loroi in the same church. There is no consistency in who is depicted wearing which type, but the T- and X-shape are most common.

20 Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:94–95.



FIG.5

Constantine and Helena. Tahtali Kilise (Church of St. Barbara),
Soğanlı. Image: Lynn Jones.

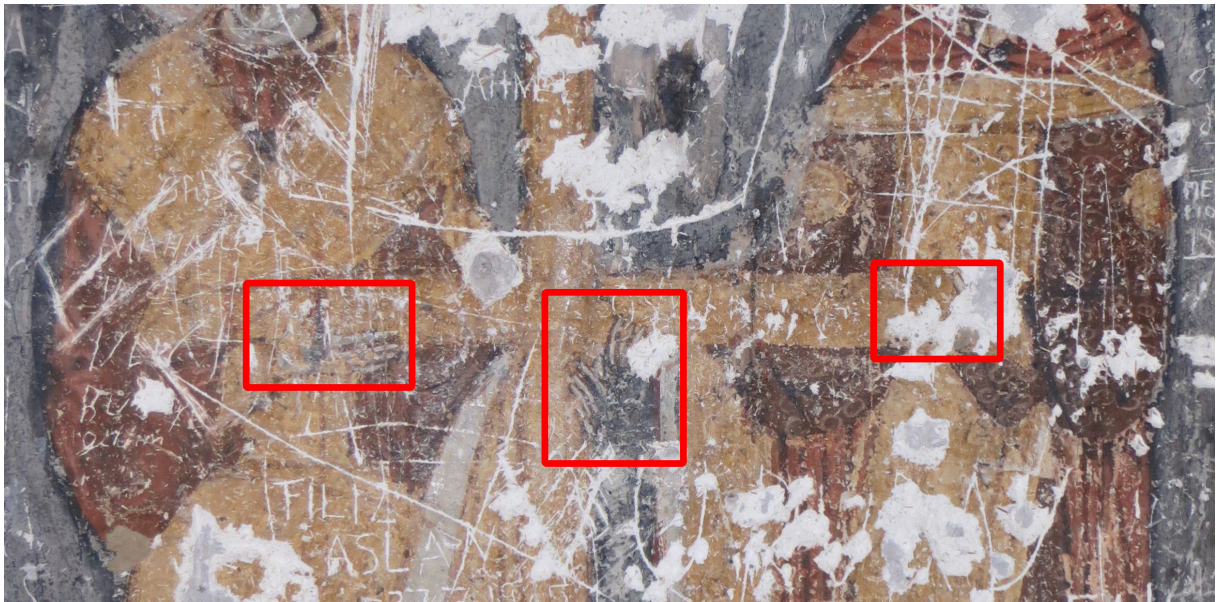


FIG. 6

Detail: Constantine's and Helena's hands holding the True Cross.
 Tahtalı Kilise (Church of St. Barbara), Soğanlı. Image: Lynn Jones.

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It is instructive to view these Cappadocian images with the ivory triptych now in the Bode Museum²¹ (Fig. 7). The triptych is associated, via medium, with an elite class of patron, and assigned by style and medium to a Constantinopolitan workshop.²² Constantine and Helena are depicted on the lower panel of the inner, left wing. They grasp the staff of a double-armed Cross, holding it between and in front of their bodies. Constantine, to the left, turns toward, and gestures to, the Cross with his right hand. Helena turns slightly toward the Cross and holds a globus cruciger in her left hand. The ivory offers a glimpse of the variables present in this iconographical type; here it is the Emperor, not the Augusta, who most

deviates from the frontal. This ivory underscores the ways in which the presence of variables in depictions of Constantine and Helena is not restricted to Cappadocia but is also found in elite objects associated with Constantinople. This then leads to the reasonable conclusion that Cappadocian variables are not misunderstood versions of Constantinopolitan-produced art but were rather reflections of what was current in Byzantine iconography.

El Nazar, on the outskirts of Göreme, retains an image of Constantine and Helena on one intrados of an arch in the narthex²³ (Fig. 8). The pair are frontal and grasp a Cross that is approximately half their height; they hold it up, in front of their bodies.²⁴

21 Adolph Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.–XIII. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 2, reprint edition (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1979), 46–47, no. 72.

22 The ivory has been dated by the museum to the eleventh century and to the second half of the tenth century by Anthony Cutler, *The Hand of the Master: Craftsmanship, Ivory, and Society in Byzantium (9th–11th Centuries)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), esp. 222.

23 Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:45–47.

24 The figure of Helena is largely destroyed, but Constantine remains legible. They are not crowned and wear variants of imperial regalia. For a description of the figures, see Jerphanion, *Cappadoce*, 1:182..



FIG. 7

Triptych of the Crucifixion. Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Bode Museum, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, no. 1578. Image: David Hendrix.

The so-called Column Churches—Karanlık, Elmalı, and Carikli Kilise in Göreme—are linked by the many similarities in their carved interiors and their lavish painted programs.²⁵ Elmalı and Carikli retain only partial depictions of Constantine, Helena, and/or the Cross. Karanlık Kilise features a legible image in which the Cross is taller than the flanking pair and the long cross-bar stretches halfway across their bod-

ies (Fig. 9). Constantine and Helena are both frontal, and both grasp the Cross just beneath the crossing.

The depiction of Constantine and Helena in Tokalı Old Church is placed in the register of standing saints on the north wall²⁶ (Fig. 10). Helena is on the left and Constantine the right of the Cross, which they grasp below the cross-arm. Their heads turn

25 For the column churches, see Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:81–85 (Göreme 23, Karanlık Kilise), 1:86–88 (Göreme 19, Elmalı Kilise), 1:89–91 (Göreme 22, Çarıklı Kilise). All three have been dated to the eleventh century.

26 Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:70–72.



FIG. 8

Constantine and Helena. Chapel of El Nazar (Chapel 1), Göreme. Image: Lynn Jones.



FIG. 9

Constantine and Helena. Karanlık Kilise (Chapel 23), Göreme. Image: Lynn Jones.

toward the Cross, and each gestures to it with their free hand. Their bodies also curve towards the Cross, forming a parenthesis with the Cross at its center; this pose allows them to stand out in the crowd of frontally depicted saints that flank them in the register. The painted decoration of the Pigeon House church of Cavusin is generally accepted to copy elements found in Tokalı Old Church²⁷ (Fig. 11). The representation of Constantine and Helena in Cavusin is cited as evidence of this relation, as the pose of the pair is similar. All other details differ—the regalia, their individual positioning relative to the Cross, the size and decoration of the Cross, and the placement of the image in the southern curve of main apse.

²⁷ Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:130–33.



FIG. 10

Constantine and Helena. Tokalı Kilise, Old Church (Chapel 7), Göreme. Image: Lynn Jones.

In the examples discussed thus far, each features three components—Constantine, Helena, and a Cross—contained in one scene. That is not the case with Tokalı New Church.²⁸ Here, the figures of the imperial pair are placed facing each other in the intrados of the central arch of the corridor arcade²⁹ (Fig. 12). Constantine carries a cross-staff in his right hand and an orb in his left; Helena raises her hands in the orant position (Fig. 13). The imperial pair fill their individual, framed panels, a detail which con-

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FIG. 11

*Constantine and Helena. Pigeon House Church, Çavuşin.
Image: Lynn Jones.*



FIG. 12

*Constantine and Helena. Tokalı Kilise, New Church (Chapel 7),
Göreme. Image: Lynn Jones.*

firm the deliberate omission of a cross, as there is no room for one at the apex of the arch. The key to the meaning of these representations of Constantine and Helena is, I suggest, tied to their placement. The central arch of the corridor arcade is aligned with the main apse, which features the Crucifixion (Fig. 14). The apse is viewed through the arch on which Constantine and Helena are painted—the True Cross is seen in the Crucifixion in the main apse. Helena's orant pose supports this reading, as she bears witness to the Wood of the Cross upon which Christ is shown crucified and to its later Invention and possession by Byzantium.

²⁸ Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:73–80. This church has been dated to the mid-tenth century.

²⁹ Ann Wharton Epstein, *Tokalı Kilise: Tenth-Century Metropolitan Art in Byzantine Cappadocia* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1986), 50, 55.



FIG.13

Helena. Tokalı Kilise, New Church (Chapel 7),
Göreme. Image: Tolga Uyar.

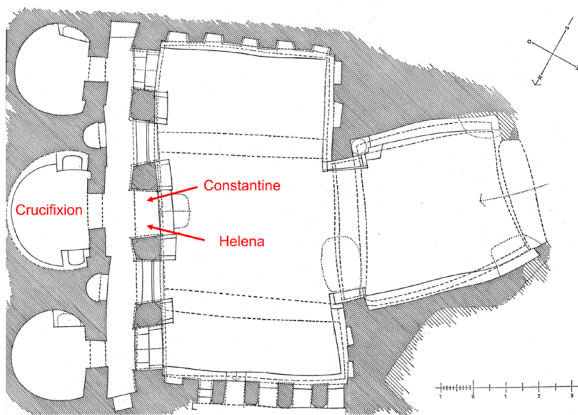


FIG.14

Plan indicating the placement of Constantine, Helena, and the Crucifixion. Tokalı Kilise, New Church (Chapel 7), Göreme. Image: plan after Restle, *Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor*, 2:X.



FIG.15

Triptych of the Crucifixion, central panel with Constantine and Helena. Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, no. 55.301. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

Scholars agree, based on style, the presence of lapis lazuli in the brilliant blue paint, the use of gold leaf, and the quality of execution, that Tokalı New Church was funded by elite patrons connected to both Cappadocia and Constantinople.³⁰ The Constantinopolitan link is supported by an ivory triptych, now in the Cabinet des Médailles, Paris (Fig. 15).³¹ The central panel features the Crucifixion flanked by the large figures of the Theotokos and John the Evangelist. The diminutive figures of Constantine and Helena flank the base of the Cross, turning toward, and gesturing to it. If we were able to extract their figures from the triptych and place them in front of it, we replicate the presentation at Tokalı New Church, where Constantine and Helena also frame the scene of the Crucifixion, compressing the Crucifixion and the Invention of the True Cross.³² This message is reinforced on the ivory with the placement of a two-verse, dodecasyllable epigram.³³

Verse 1, above Christ's head, reads "Jesus Christ the emperor (ὁ βασιλεὺς) of Glory." Verse 2 begins below the suppedaneum and is indicated by an incipit cross and by the gestures of Constantine and Helena: "as flesh you suffered as God you deliver from sufferings."³⁴

When viewed in comparison with each other, these images of Constantine and Helena flanking the True Cross demonstrate that it is the variables that domi-

nate. These variables include the relative positioning of Constantine and Helena—Constantine is sometimes on the right of the Cross and sometimes on the left; Constantine's hand is sometimes above Helena's and sometimes below hers on the Cross staff. In some images, Constantine is taller, or larger, than Helena; in others, it is Helena who is larger. One or the other, or both, hold orbs or globus crucigers, and they are sometimes without them. They are often frontal, but one, or the other, or both, also deviate from the frontal. The scene is found in the narthex, naos, and apse, placed in a lower register, a middle register, and the intrados of arches.

The greatest variation in these Cappadocian images is seen in the form of the Cross. We find double-armed and single-armed crosses, with and without suppedanea.³⁵ Some suppedanea are tilted and some are horizontal. Some crosses have serifs on the cross-arm/s and the upper arm, some only on the cross-arm/s. Some feature painted decoration, some are painted in imitation of wood, and some are plain. There are crosses that are taller than the flanking pair and crosses which are half their height or smaller. Some have flared bases or are set in a representation of a mound of raised earth. Some are depicted with two short planks of wood driven into the base of the staff, creating a V-shape. This presence, and predominance, of variables demonstrates that there

30 Epstein, *Tokalı Kilise*; Jerphanion, *Cappadoce*, 1:297–376; Nicole Thierry, "La peinture de Cappadoce au Xe siècle. Recherches sur les commanditaires de la Nouvelle Église de Tokalı et d'autres monuments," in *Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and His Age*, ed. Athanasios Markopoulos (Athens: Europaiko Politistiko Kentro Delphōn, 1989), 217–33.

31 Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, *Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen*, 37, no. 39. Cutler argues that this triptych was likely done by the same master who made the Romanos ivory, and thus dates them to the middle of the tenth century; Cutler, *The Hand of the Master*, esp. 205.

32 A similar, compressed message is conveyed in a different manner in the gold and enamel staurotheke now at the Kremlin Museum; see Irina A. Sterligova, ed., *Byzantine Antiquities: Works of Art from the Fourth to Fifteenth Centuries in the Collection of the Moscow Kremlin Museums* (Moscow: Moscow Kremlin Museums, 2013), 172–75, cat. 19, and Jones, *Cult of the Emperor*, forthcoming.

33 For the epigram inscribed on the cross, see Andreas Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme auf Ikonen und Objekten der Kleinkunst*, vol. 2 in *Byzantinische Epigramme in inschriftlicher Überlieferung* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 328–29, no. El21.

34 The second verse of the epigram was also inscribed on a reliquary of the True Cross that was last at the Clairvaux Abbey. See Rhoby, *Byzantinische Epigramme*, 2:174 (Me14). I thank Brad Hostetler for bringing this inscription to my attention.

35 The suppedaneum represents the support on which Christ's feet rest in representations of the Crucifixion. Frolow suggests that the upper, shorter arm of the double-arm cross represents the titulus, the plaque affixed to the Cross of the Crucifixion, inscribed with the "King of the Jews," the "title" given to Christ: Frolow, *Les Reliquaires*, 132–33.

is no standard depiction of Constantine and Helena flanking the True Cross during this period. What the majority of these scenes have in common is the way in which Constantine and Helena physically interact with the Cross—they hold it and present it toward the viewer.³⁶

CONSTANTINE, HELENA, AND THE VISION

The representations of physical contact with the Cross stand in contrast to the seven extant Cappadocian scenes representing, I suggest, Constantine's Vision.³⁷ The Cross in these scenes displays less variability in form than those featured in Constantine and Helena flanking the Cross. In all Cappadocian depictions of the Vision, the Cross has a vertical staff and single cross arm of approximately equal length.³⁸ It is enclosed within, or set against, a background that separates and distinguishes it from the background behind all other figures. In all of these depictions, the Cross itself is not touched by Constantine or Helena; this is also seen in the second register of f. 44or in the Paris Gregory. On the folio, the Cross, floating just above the horse's head, is removed from the earthly realm and the depicted events. In Cappadocia, the supernatural nature of this Cross is underscored by the ways in which Con-

stantine and Helena physically interact with it. They reach up and, with both hands, grasp the surround, but not the cross within it. They cannot touch the cross, because for this image to function—for it to evoke the narrative of Constantine's Vision and any and all of the events that it set into motion—this Cross must be without physical substance. Helena's presence both expands and compresses the narrative, taking the viewer from the revelation of the Cross to Constantine, to its Invention by Helena, and to its subsequent presence in Byzantium.

There are three components most frequently included in this iconographic type. Both Constantine and Helena are present; the Cross is enclosed in a surround, such as a multi-banded halo, that indicates its separation from the space occupied by the imperial pair; and, both Constantine and Helena reach toward, but do not touch, the Cross. Taken together, these elements would recall, for the viewer, the text of the Synaxarion describing the Vision and the appearance of the cross in the sky at midday.³⁹ According to Eusebius, the Cross was “formed from light,” and when Constantine summoned goldsmiths to replicate it, he instructed them to copy it in “gold and precious stones.”⁴⁰

Karlık, Chapel 1 shows the precision with which the identity of the Cross is conveyed (Fig. 16).⁴¹ Con-

36 Majority” is a necessary qualifier, as it includes variables that illustrate the fluidity of the iconography in these suggested types, such as that found in Tokalı New Church.

37 Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:29–31 (Göreme 3), 1:149–50 (Güllüdere 4, Ayvali Kilise, Church of Saint John), 1:51 (Göreme 2a, Saklı Kilise), 1:158 (Gülşehir, Yüksekli, Church 1), 1:186–90 (Mustafapaşa, Church of the Holy Apostles), 1:226–29 (Karlık); Marcell Restle, *Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor*, 3 vols. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1968), 1:173–74, 3:LVII (Ihlara, Yılanlı Kilise).

38 This is sometimes referred to as a Maltese Cross; see, for example, Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:31, 105, 178, 285.

39 ἔπειτα κατὰ τὸ μέσον τῆς ἡμέρας δι’ ἀστέρων τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ σταυροῦ ἐγκαρῶν γεγραμμένον, ἐξενεχθείσης αὐτῷ φωνῆς «Ἐν τούτῳ νίκα.» Καὶ μετὰ τὴν κλήσιν εὐθὺς διανοήθη ἡ τοῦ καλέσαντος ἀξία· πάλιν αὐτῷ τε καὶ τοῖς ἀξίοις ὁ φιλόανθρωπος Θεὸς ἐμφανίσαι ἠξίωσε. Διὸ θαρρήσας τῷ τύπῳ τοῦ τιμίου σταυροῦ ὀπλοποιήσας τε αὐτὸν διὰ χρυσοῦ; Delehaye, *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, 699.29–37.

40 ἀμφὶ μεσημβρινᾶς ἡλίου ὥρας, ἤδη τῆς ἡμέρας ἀποκλινοῦσης, αὐτοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἰδεῖν ἔφη ἐν αὐτῷ οὐρανῷ ὑπερκείμενον τοῦ ἡλίου σταυροῦ τρόπαιον ἐκ φωτὸς συνιστάμενον, γραφὴν τε αὐτῷ συνήθαι λέγουσαν· τούτῳ νίκα...κᾶπειτα χρυσοῦ καὶ λίθων πολυτελῶν δημιουργοῦς συγκαλέσας μέσος αὐτὸς καθίζανει καὶ τοῦ σημείου τὴν εἰκόνα φράζει, ἀπομμεῖσθαί τε αὐτὴν χρυσοῦ καὶ πολυτελέσι λίθοις διεκελεύετο; Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, 1.28.2 and 1.30, ed. Friedhelm Winkelmann, *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte, Eusebius Werke 1.1, rev. ed. (Berlin, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1991); Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall, *Eusebius, Life of Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 81.

41 Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:226–29. This church has been dated to the first-half of the tenth century.

stantine and Helena face each other, painted on the intrados of a sanctuary arch. Both reach up to the Cross, which is placed at the apex of the arch. It is encircled in a thick band of gold that extends into the space between the cross arms, a space also defined



FIG. 16

Constantine and Helena. Chapel 1, Karlık. Image: Lynn Jones.

with red paint. The cross itself is distinct within this surround; it is dark brown, with arms of equal length, each of which ends in a serif. Constantine and Helena reach up and, with both hands, grasp the surrounding band, but not the cross within it.⁴² The

⁴² This precision is also seen at the church of the Holy Apostles near Mustafapaşa. While the image is quite badly degraded, it remains clear that both saints, depicted facing each other in the intrados of a sanctuary arch, reach up to the Cross painted at the apex of the arch. It is dark brown with white details, is equal-armed, and is enclosed by a multi-banded circle. The outer band of this surround is decorated with imitation pearls, and lines drawn from the intersection of the cross arm to this band further convey its radiant, visionary nature. See Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:186–90. This church has been dated to the first quarter of the tenth century.

⁴³ Restle, *Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor*, 1:173–74, 3:LVII, dates this church to the second half of the eleventh century. I thank Sarah Mathiesen for discussions on this church, which is the focus of her forthcoming doctoral thesis.



FIG. 17

Constantine and Helena. Saklı Kilise (Chapel 2a), Göreme. Image: after Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor, 2:II, figs. 38–39.

scene of the Vision was not relegated to the intrados of arches. The southern naos wall of Yılanlı Kilise in Ihlara features an image of Constantine and Helena flanking a window.⁴³

They wear Middle Byzantine regalia and hold orbs in their left and right hands, respectively, which are raised to shoulder level (Fig. 2). Both look to the Cross, which is painted between them, above the window. It is equal-armed with a short tang, is gold and jeweled, and is set within a white quatrefoil-shaped surround. Constantine and Helena reach toward the Cross with their free hands, each grasping the surround. The window beneath the Cross is the sole source of natural light in the naos; the win-

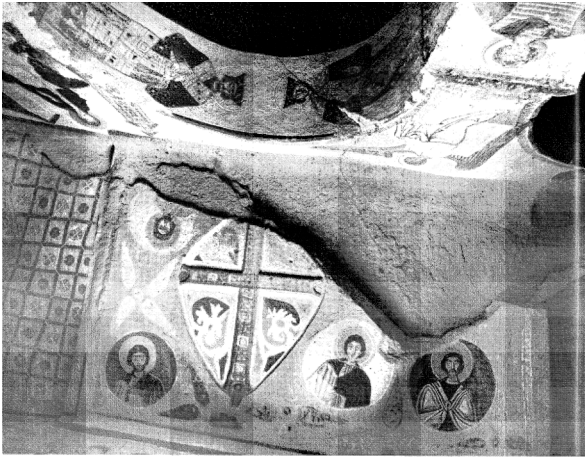


FIG. 18

Constantine and Helena with a view of the cross on the ceiling. Saklı Kilise (Chapel 2a), Göreme. Image: after Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor, 2:II, fig. 44.

dow's small size concentrates the light, which does not illuminate the painted cross above it; rather, the viewer saw this Cross only by looking toward the window and into the light, further enhancing the scene's visionary message—and the viewer's experience of this Vision.

Saklı Kilise features what I suggest is another way of conveying the message of Constantine, Helena, and the Vision. The figures of Constantine and Helena are painted opposite each other in the intrados of an arch between the narthex and sanctuary⁴⁴ (Fig. 17). Constantine holds an orb at his waist with his left hand; his right is raised at chest level, with the palm facing the viewer. Helena makes this same gesture with her left hand, mirroring her son; she holds a small short-handled cross staff in her right hand. While there is room in the apex of the arch for the representation of a cross, the space was left blank. It was not omitted or forgotten: the ceiling of the narthex is decorated with three carved crosses, each positioned on-axis with the three openings of the ar-

⁴⁴ Jolivet-Lévy, *La Cappadoce*, 1:51.

⁴⁵ Robin Cormack and Ernest J. W. Hawkins, "The Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul: The Rooms above the Southwest Vestibule and Ramp," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977): 175–251, esp. 179, n. 11.

cade, and each carved into a high-relief base (Fig. 18). Each cross is single armed, with a staff slightly longer than the cross-arm, and is jeweled; for each, the base creates a surround. The proximity of a cross of this form with that of the depictions of Constantine and Helena suggests a variation on the iconography of Constantine, Helena, and the Vision, one in which any representation of touch is not necessary.



FIG. 19

Constantine and Helena with a view of the cross on the ceiling. Saklı Kilise (Chapel 2a), Göreme. Image: after Restle, Byzantine Wall Painting in Asia Minor, 2:II, fig. 44.

The Vision iconography is also found in the room over the southwestern vestibule of Hagia Sophia. In their seminal study, Robin Cormack and Ernest J.W. Hawkins convincingly identified this room as the large sekreton.⁴⁵ Their argument is based on textual evidence that the large sekreton housed relics



FIG. 20

Constantine, room over the southwestern vestibule. Hagia Sophia. Image: Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks fieldwork records and papers, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC.

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of the True Cross and on the remaining fragmentary depictions of Constantine, Helena, and a Cross in the vault⁴⁶ (Fig. 19). Constantine and Helena are placed in the upper zones of the eastern and western sides, respectively, of the southern bay (Fig. 20). Between them is a gold cross with slightly flared arms of equal length set within a medallion of concentric rings, all enclosed by a gold rectangle and framed by rinceaux⁴⁷ (Fig. 21). Very little of the mosaics remain, but given the placement of the Cross in relation to the figures of both Constantine and Helena, it is unlikely that they were depicted grasping the surround. Andre Grabar and Christopher Walter offered similar interpretations of the overall decorative program, one which centers on the testimony of visionaries and witnesses of Christ.⁴⁸ If so, Constantine and

Helena were inserted into a larger decorative program in which the primary message was based on bearing witness, whether through visions or sight. This supports a reading of this grouping of Constantine, Helena, and a Cross as a variable of the Vision iconographic type.⁴⁹

CONCLUSION

In Cappadocian depictions of Constantine, Helena, and the Cross, we find variables in iconography and in image types. These rock-cut churches feature scenes of Constantine and Helena flanking the True Cross and of Constantine, Helena, and the Vision. Evidence demonstrates that the scene of the Vision was not a step in an iconographic evolution toward any standard but is a separate image type, coeval



FIG. 21

Cross, room over the southwestern vestibule. Hagia Sophia. Image: Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks fieldwork records and papers, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC.

⁴⁶ Cormack and Hawkins, “Mosaics of St. Sophia,” 250–51, n. 154. For Constantine, placed in the eastern side of the southern bay, see 230; for Helena, placed on the western side of the southern bay, 231.

⁴⁷ Cormack and Hawkins, “Mosaics of St. Sophia,” 250–51, n. 154. For Constantine, placed in the eastern side of the southern bay, see 230; for Helena, placed on the western side of the southern bay, 231.

⁴⁸ Andre Grabar, *L'iconoclasme byzantin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1957), esp. 241ff; Christopher Walter, “Two Notes on the Deesis,” *Revue des études byzantines* 26 (1968): 311–36, esp. 329–30.

⁴⁹ Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning*, 155, rightly sees the medallion mosaic of a Cross in the sekreton of Hagia Sophia as a “fused” reference to the Cross of the Vision and the True Cross.

with that of the imperial pair flanking the Cross. To my knowledge, no Cappadocian church features both. There could be many reasons for this, including the size of the interior, the scope of the program, and the choices made by patrons and artists. The continued use of both types confirms that they could convey different messages; their placement in the churches supports this. The majority of images of the Vision are placed in the upper levels of churches; the faithful, like Constantine and Helena, cannot touch the Cross. The depictions of Constantine and Helena flanking the Cross are, with few exceptions, placed on the lower levels and could be reached, and so could be touched. This supports the suggested relationship between this image type and the ways in which the Cross was venerated. This iconographic type is also much more variable than is generally acknowledged. The key element is not the form of the Cross, but the ways in which the imperial pair interact with it.

Variables abound in both iconographies. In Tokali New Church and the Paris ivory, the suggested meaning does not rely on the depiction of touch but is revealed by the placement of Constantine and Helena in relation to that of the Crucifixion. In Sakli and Hagia Sophia, we do not find the imperial pair touching only the surround of Constantine's Cross. Instead, meaning is conveyed in Sakli by the proximity of the carved cross to the arch in which Constantine and Helena are depicted. In Hagia Sophia, meaning is conveyed by the figures chosen for the greater decorative program of the vault and by the compositional arrangement of Constantine, Helena, and the Cross within this program. In all of the works discussed here, representations of Constantine and Helena convey meaning by their actions, thus evoking either the True Cross, Constantine's Vision, or a combination of the two. In all of these images, actions focus our attention on the Cross, but the Cross is only one part of the meaning conveyed by these scenes.

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ÖZET

Orta Bizans Kapadokyası'nın Constantinus ve Helena tasvirleri, "standart" imgelerin yapısökümü için bir örnek niteliğindedir. *Synaksarion* metninde 21 Mayıs tarihine atıfta bulunan Constantinus ve Helena'yı temsil ettiklerinden bu tasvirlerin tümünü "Yortu İkona"sı olarak değerlendirmek mümkündür. İmge, anlatıyı sıkıştırarak izleyicinin zihninde *Synaksarion*'da geçen eylemlerin bazılarının ya da tümünün canlanmasına neden olur. Hatta meseleye daha geniş bir çerçeveden bakarsak, Kapadokya kaya kiliselerinden derlenen yirmi yedi imgeyi belirli ikonografik bileşenler bağlamında analiz ettiğimizde iki tür Yortu İkonası ile karşılaşırız: Haç'ın Bulunuşu (*Invention Cross*) ve Haç'ın Görünümü (*Vision Cross*). Herhangi bir sınıflandırma yapmaksızın, Constantinus ve Helena'nın Orta Bizans dönemine ait tüm tasvirleri ortak anlamlara sahiptir: Bunların hepsi Haç'ın simgelediği kurtuluş vaadine gönderme yapar ve Haç'ın gerçekliğini doğrular ve yine bunların hepsi Haç röliklerinin "Bulunuşu"nu ve mülkiyetini Bizans İmparatorluğu'na tanınan ilahi onayla ilişkilendirir ve ilk ve son imparator arasında bir köprü kurar. İmgelerin tümünde bulunan değişkenler izleyiciye bu anlamlardan herhangi birini ya da tümünü çağrıştıracak ikonografik ipuçları sunar. Hem Constantinus'u hem de Helena'yı tasvir eden ancak tek bir tip altına girmeyen imgelerdeki değişkenleri içeren üçüncü bir kategoriden de söz etmek mümkündür. Bu grup Bulunuş ve Görünüm imgelemine kapsamakla birlikte, bunlar arasında gidip gelen anlamları çağrıştıırır. Buradaki değişkenlik, standart olanın yanlış anlaşılmasıyla ilgili değildir; aksine belirli bir mekânda belirli bir mesaj iletmek isteyen bir haminin ya da topluluğun ihtiyaçlarının ve arzularının bir yansımasıdır.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER

Constantinus, Helena, resim, yapısöküm, yortu ikonaları