

THE REPRESENTATION OF SAINT CONSTANTINE AND SAINT HELEN WITH THE CROSS IN 19TH-CENTURY ENGRAVINGS FROM ATHOS

The topic of the present study is the analysis of some engravings depicting Constantine and Helen with the cross¹ (fig. 1 and 2). The art objects to be introduced all have roughly the same composition and main motifs. Their creators obviously followed each other in their work. The present paper focuses on iconography, the stylistic differences of the works fall outside its scope.

The iconographic type into which all the engravings fall emerged in the 11th century at the earliest and can be found in monumental painting² (fig. 3) and on 11th- and 12th-century reliquaries (fig. 4).

The common motifs of these compositions are the following: in the centre, a double cross above human height, with a footrest; on the left, the Emperor Constantine portrayed in full-length, in Byzantine imperial costume, that is, in a khiton decorated with gemstones, with a loros and with a crown on the head; on the right, the Empress Helen also portrayed in full-length and in regalia decorated with gemstones – in a khiton, with a loros,³ a thorakion on her side and a crown on the head. They both touch the cross or turn towards it with a praying gesture. The emergence of this iconography must have been influenced by contemporary representations of the *Crucifixion*, whose compositions and motifs (two figures with a cross between them) are identical with those of the Constantine and Helen depictions.⁴

¹ Dory Papastratos, *Paper Icons – Greek Orthodox Religious Engravings 1665 – 1899* (Athens, 1990). The author publishes altogether 16 Athos engravings depicting Saints Constantine and Helen, all with a similar iconography (fig. 332-47).

² A similar depiction can also be found in the 11-12th century fresco of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Novgorod. Н. Б. Салько, *Живопись древней Руси XI – начала XIII века. Мозаики, фрески, иконы* (Ленинград, 1982), fig. 105-6.

³ According to the description of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, the loros placed across the chest in the shape of a cross is a symbol of Christ's victory. Alexander P. Kazhdan, ed. in chief, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York – Oxford, 1991), 1251.

⁴ E.g. *Crucifixion* on a triptych-shaped staurotheke: *Staurotheke* (10th-early 11th century). C. Helen Evans and D. William Wixdom, ed., *The Glory of Byzantium* (New York, 1997), fig. 110.



Fig. 1 Saints Constantine and Helen. 1st quarter 19th c.). Monastery of Simonopetra, Mount Athos. [Dory Papastratos, *Paper Icons – Greek Orthodox Religious Engravings 1665 – 1899*, (Athens, 1990), fig. 335.]

Сл. 1 Свети Константин и Јелена. Први квартал XIX века). Манастир Симонопетра, Света Гора. [Дори Папастратос, *Папирне иконе - грчке православне религијске гравуре 1665 - 1899*, (Атина, 1990), сл. 335.]



Fig. 2 Saints Constantine and Helen. June 10, 1847. D. P. Collections, Athens. [Dory Papastratos, *Paper Icons – Greek Orthodox Religious Engravings 1665 – 1899*, (Athens, 1990), fig. 339.]

Сл. 2 Свети Константин и Јелена. 10. јун 1847. Д.П. колекције, Атина [Дори Папастратос, *Папирне иконе - грчке православне религијске гравуре 1665 - 1899*, (Атина, 1990), сл. 339.]

A portion of the Meta-Byzantine representations fully adheres to the use of these motifs,⁵ or at least keeps to it to a certain extent, with the omission of some elements: for example, they do not depict the thorakion on Helen's side, etc. The rest of them are devoid of the typically Byzantine garments, while they add the motifs of the sceptre and the vertical palm branch in Constantine's and Helen's hand, respectively (fig. 5). The Empress and the Emperor are also represented in a similar manner in the much later, 19th-century engravings from Athos.

In them Constantine wears a highly decorated long khiton with a robe⁶ covering his shoulders over it. Under the influence of Western Baroque, he

⁵ E.g. in the 18th-century *Icon of Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen*, originally from the Holy Monastery of Sinai, currently at the Holy Monastery of Aghiou Pavlou at Mount Athos. M. Vassilaki, I. Tavlakis and E. Tsigaridas, *The Holy Monastery of Aghiou Pavlou*, (Mount Athos, 1999), fig. 110.

⁶ The successor of the Byzantine chlamys.



Fig. 3 Saints Constantine and Helen. 11th c. Church of Hosios Loukas, Greece.

Сл. 3 Свети Константина и Јелена. XI век. Црква Хосиос Лукас, Грчка.



Fig. 4 The Esztergom Staurotheke. 1150-1200. Esztergom, Christian Museum. [C. Helen Evans and D. William Wixdom, ed., *The Glory of Byzantium* (New York, 1997), fig. 40.

Сл. 4 Естергомска реликвија правог крста. 1150-1200. Естергом, Хришћански музеј. [Ц. Хелен Еванс и Вилијам Д. Вискдом, изд., *Слава Византије* (Њујорк, 1997), сл. 40.

holds a sceptre with a cross,⁷ which is a royal attribute. Thus it suits Constantine perfectly, since he was Emperor of Rome between 306 and 337. The sceptre to be seen in his hand is tipped with a cross. Following Constantine's victory at Milvius Bridge in 312, the sceptre decorated in this manner became the royal attribute of emperors.⁸

The Emperor is crowned. The Latin word *corona* means both *crown* and *wreath*. The circular shape of the object signifies perfection and is a symbol of heavens; therefore, it indicates a close connection with the heavenly sphere.⁹

⁷ The Virgin Mary holds a sceptre with a cross, as a royal attribute in her hand in Hristofor Zefar's 1745 engraving entitled *Mother of God the Source of Life*, just like the saint in his 1753 work, *Stefan Štiljanović*. Д. Давидов, *Српски бакорези 18. века* (Нови Сад, 1983), fig. 8, 15.

⁸ Jutta Seibert, ed., *A keresztény művészet lexikona* (Budapest, 1986), 153. A sceptre with a cross can be seen in the hand of Géza I of Hungary (1074-77) in the enamel picture of the so-called Corona Greca part of the Holy Crown of Hungary. Evans and Wixdom, *op. cit.*, 187. About the use of the sceptre with a cross in the imperial court of Byzantium see Kazhdan, *op. cit.*, 1849.

⁹ Hoppál M., et al. *Jelképtár* (Budapest, 2000), 124.



Fig. 5 Saints Constanine and Helen. Icon of the Coronation of the Virgin (excerpt). C.1770. Orthodox Museum, Miskolc, Hungary.

[Nagy Márta, *A magyarországi görög diaszpóra egyházművészeti emlékei – Ikonok, ikonosztázionok.* (Debrecen, 1998), plate XXVI.]

Сл. 5 Свети Константин и Јелена. Икона Крунисање Богородице (одломак). Ц.1770. Православни музеј, Мишколц, Мађарска.

[Нађ Марта, *A magyarországi görög diaszpóra egyházművészeti emlékei – Ikonok, ikonosztázionok.* (Дебрецин, 1998), плоча XXVI]

Referring to a *crown* the word identifies, just like the spectre, a royal attribute, which is thus quite fittingly placed on the head of the Emperor. The crown is symbolic of “power derived from God”,¹⁰ since Roman and later Byzantine emperors deemed that their power on earth had a heavenly origin.

Meaning a *wreath*, the word refers to belonging to heavens, being devoted to God. Constantine deserves a wreath on the one hand because he is venerated as a saint. On the other hand, the wreath is also symbolic of victory. In *Revelations* the wreath is the symbol of those who have conquered death and gained eternal life – in short, it is a symbol of eternal life.¹¹ In representations from the Early Christian period, it is Christ himself who hands the triumphal wreath of eternal life over to saints.¹² On the basis of his life’s path, the wreath is the just deserve of the first Christian Emperor.

Similarly, Helen also wears a crown. Both symbolic meanings of the object suit her well. She was a secular Empress from 325, since her son elevated her to the rank of co-ruler by donating to her the title Augusta.¹³ What is known about her life proves her to have been a devoted Christian believer, who was involved in all the constructions Constantine commanded to be carried out on the Holy Land, and who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 326, where

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹¹ Saint John quotes Jesus here: „be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (*Rev* 2:10).

¹² E.g. in the 5th-century apse mosaic of the Basilica of San Vitale (Ravenna) Christ is presenting the triumphal wreath of eternal life to Saint Vitalis.

¹³ Kazhdan, *op. cit.*, 909.

she discovered the True Cross.¹⁴ The Christian Church has revered Helen as a saint since the earliest times. Consequently, she is worthy of the wreath in its symbolic sense, as well. The same idea is confirmed by the palm branch placed in her hand,¹⁵ which is the deserve of the blessed standing in front of the Lamb in Paradise (*Rev* 7.9¹⁶). At the same time, the palm branch is also a reference to the Empress's pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It is so because in Medieval times pilgrims returning from the Holy Land carried a palm branch to their homeland as a sign of victory. Accordingly, they were called "palmers".¹⁷

Therefore, the palm branch equally refers to the most significant event of Saint Helen's journey to the Holy Land, the finding of the True Cross. In the picture she even touches the cross, just like the Emperor.

The large-sized Latin cross is a so-called *double cross*. This type of cross has two crossbars. The upper one is the shorter of the two, and there was a plaque fixed above it on which Pilate had the abbreviation for Iesus Nasareus Rex Iudaeorum written. Below, the footrest or suppedaneum can be seen, which supported Jesus' feet. The cross appearing in the engravings is a Byzantine, that is, Russian cross by its shape. The longer crossbar also ends in crosses, and a Greek cross of this type is called a cross crosslet¹⁸ or consecration cross¹⁹ in special literature.

Before the 4th century Christian theologians dealt only with the cosmic significance of the cross. It was only later that the notion of the cross became charged with the events of Constantine's time, in other words, it was connected to one particular person, Christ.²⁰ It was only following this turn that the cross became a symbol of both cosmic and historical significance.²¹

The cross is decorated with jewels, gemmas. Gemstones – starting from Antiquity – have been the emblems of power and glory.²² The *crux gemmata* represents Christ. Christ died on the cross and by that conquered death. It is for this reason that both a wreath – a symbol of resurrection and eternal life – and gemma were added to the cross.²³

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 909. The pilgrimage to the Holy Land is described by Eusebius. *Vita Constantini* III, 42. Quoted in Hungarian at Vanyó László, *Katekézis, költészet és ikonográfia a 4. században* (Budapest, 2005), 184.

¹⁵ About Saint Helen's connection with the palm branch see Nagy Márta, „Saint Helen with a Palm in Meta-Byzantine Icon Painting,” *Ниш и Византија – Зборник радова* III, ed. Миша Ракоција (Ниш, 2005), 359-68.

¹⁶ According to Saint John, the blessed are standing “before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands” (*Rev* 7:9).

¹⁷ Among others, Geoffrey Chaucer also commemorates “palmers” in *The Canterbury Tales*. See Nagy, *op. cit.*, 365.

¹⁸ Seibert, *op. cit.*, 169.

¹⁹ Hoppál, et al. *op. cit.*, 115.

²⁰ Vanyó, *op. cit.* 120.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

²² Their decorations served the glorification of imperial families. E.g. the enthroned Augustus, posing as Jupiter, is crowned by the Goddess of the Earth. Petz Vilmos, ed., *Ókori Lexikon*, Vol. I-VII (Budapest, 1904), article „Gemma.”

²³ Vanyó, *op. cit.*, 119.



Fig. 6 Cross of Justin II. 6th century. Vatican, St Peter's Treasury. [Robert Fossier, ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Middle Ages*, Vol. I. (Cambridge, 1989), 350–950, no plate numbering.]

Сл. 6 Крст Јустина II. VI век. Ватикан, Трезор Светог Петра. [Роберт Фосијер, изд, Кембрицова илустрована историја средњег века. Том I. (Кембриџ, 1989.), 350-950, плоча без нумерације.]

The jewelled cross, the *crux gemmata* is a symbol of glory since this is what gains eternal life for man. Following Matthew the Evangelist,²⁴ the *crux gemmata* is seen as a representation of Jesus in his heavenly glory.

The same idea is expressed by the representations in Early Christian apse mosaics in which Paradise is depicted with a *crux gemmata* in it.²⁵ After the Fall, when man ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge, though God had forbidden it, God barred man's access to the tree of life. Man can regain the paradisiac tree of life and eternal life itself by salvation, that is, by Jesus' cross.²⁶

This is the reason why the jewelled cross, symbolic of victory, is placed in Paradise almost as a new tree of life.

Consequently, the *crux gemmata* was a well-known Christ-symbol in the Constantine Era, it made its appearance after Helen had discovered the True Cross and the cult of the cross had arisen. Christian theologians²⁷ mention that the Emperor Constantine himself had a gilt cross inlaid with jewels erected in the forum. They even add that that cross was an exact copy of the one the Emperor

²⁴ „And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (*Mt 24:30*).

²⁵ E.g. the 5th-century apse mosaic of the Basilica of Santa Pudenzia (Rome), or the 4th-9th-13th-century apse mosaic of the Lateran Basilica (Rome).

²⁶ This idea is supported by the legend according to which the True Cross was roughed from a tree growing out of Adam's mouth, which, in turn, had shot forth from a branch of the tree of Paradise. Dávid Katalin, *A kereszt – Teológiai és ikonográfiai értelmezés az első évezredben* (Budapest, 2011), 167.

²⁷ László Vanyó refers to the 10th-century author of *Patria Constantinoupolis*. *Op. cit.* 116.

Fig. 7 Staurotheke. 1743. Benedictine Church Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Győr, Hungary. [Dávid Katalin, *Magyar egyházi gyűjtemények kincsei* (Budapest, 1981), fig. 82.]

Сл. 7 реликвија правог крста. 1743. Бенедиктинска Црква Светог Игњатија Лојоле, Ђер, Мађарска. [Давид Каталин, *Magyar egyházi gyűjtemények kincsei* (Будимпешта, 1981.), сл. 82]



had seen in his vision before the battle at Milvius Bridge. Eusebius describes that following the vision Constantine commanded that this sign of war adorned with Christ's initials – a bringer of salvation and a protector from peril – should be made of gold and decorated with gemstones.²⁸

In the engravings the cross stands on a well-wrought pedestal. A circular shape can be seen at the meeting point of the arms of the pedestalled crux gemmata. This composition is highly reminiscent of staurotheques. They are nothing else but reliquaries for the keeping of the shreds of the True Cross, which are actually cross-shaped themselves. Justin II's cross from the 6th century is also such a reliquary (fig.

6). In other words, what the artists of the engravings from Athos depicted between the Emperor and the Empress is not a simple double cross, like the ones in earlier representations, but a reliquary of the True Cross, a staurotheke.

What can be the explanation for this? Engraver's workshops in Athos were heavily influenced by Western – Viennese and Venetian – trends.²⁹ In Western Europe, as an effective means of Re-Catholisation, medieval works introducing relics (so-called *Heiltumbuchs*³⁰) were reprinted simultaneously with the revitalisation of the veneration of relics in the 17th century. The masters of Mount Athos must have been inspired to represent a stylised version of cross-shaped medieval Byzantine staurotheques by the influence of these publications.

In the engravings, there is a huge sun-disk with sun-rays depicted behind the meeting of the arms of the cross. Such an image can be seen on Justin II's

²⁸ Eusebius, *op. cit.*, I, 28-9.

²⁹ Though this influence had weakened by the end of the 18th century (Papastratos 28-30), this decline was more apparent in the choice of forms (for example, in the abandonment of the central perspective and the consequent plasticity together with it, etc.) and not in the iconography.

³⁰ Knapp Éva, „Gyönyörű volt szál alakja” – Szent István király ikonográfiája a sokszorosított grafikában (Budapest, 2001), 57.

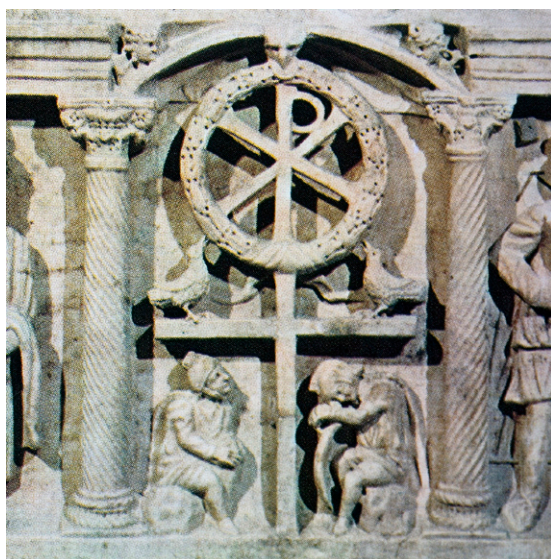


Fig. 8 Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Passion of Christ. 4th century. From the Catacomb of Domitilla, Vatican Museum. [Aradi Nóra, ed. in chief, *A korai középkor* (Budapest, 1988), 33.]

Сл. 8 Саркофаг са сценама из Страдања Христовог. IV век. Из катакомби Домицила, Музеј Ватикана. [Аради Нора, главна уредница *A korai középkor* (Будимпешта, 1988), 33.]

staurotheke, on the 18th-century reliquary of Santa Croce Church³¹ and on a very simple 16th-century antimenzion from Athos.³² This shape is reminiscent of the Celtic crosses made of stone which also appeared on the continent. The sun-rays emanating from the meeting point of the arms of the cross are a specific feature of Baroque crosses (fig. 7). Nevertheless, monstrance-shaped reliquaries are also formed similarly. These latter might have motivated the artists in placing a relatively larger sun-disk behind the cross, as opposed to the tiny circular shape associated with the Justinian cross.

In Early Christian thought Jesus was identified with the sun-god of Antiquity, Helios. In the mosaic of Mausoleum M in the Vatican Necropolis, for example, there are sun-rays emanating from Helios'/Jesus' glory.³³ In its pagan interpretation the sun is cosmic intelligence itself in the sense denoted by the Greek *logos* and the Latin *spiritus*;³⁴ it is life itself, the conqueror of darkness. All of these meanings were taken over by the figure of Christ. This is what is also expressed by the cross enclosed within a circle which one can find in catacombs (fig. 8), or by the Christ-monogram resembling a sun-disk.³⁵ The idea lives on in the shape of the halo, the mandorla, even of the holy wafer used in communion, or the form of Gothic rosettes.

The sun-disk is life, Jesus Christ himself. And where this life takes place is the cosmos, which is embodied by the Sun and the Moon in the upper corners of the engravings.

³¹ Published in Dávid, *op. cit.* fig. 72, among others.

³² A. Athanasios Karakatsanis, ed., *Treasures of Mount Athos. Exhibition: Treasures of Mount Athos* (Thessaloniki, 1997), 419.

³³ The picture is published in Dávid, *op. cit.* fig. 17, among others

³⁴ Hoppál, et. al., *op. cit.*, 159.

³⁵ Such a motif, surrounded by angels, can be seen in the 6th-century mosaic on the ceiling of the Archiepiscopal Chapel in Ravenna.

Having surveyed the central motifs of the composition, let me attempt to interpret the relationship of its three main elements – the cross, Constantine and Helen.

The composition is structured around the cross, which appears as an attribute.

In the first reading, the cross is a personal symbol. It represents the Emperor and Empress's conversion to Christianity, since in the course of baptism the priest draws a cross on the forehead of the baptised: the cross of the engravings is a crossed cross, that is, a baptismal cross. At the same time, the cross represents Constantine and Helen's Christianity, since it is a symbol of Christianity in general.

It is undecided whether Constantine saw in his vision a Chrismon, which was displayed on the Emperor's labarum, or a *crux gemmata*. According to some sources he himself had *cruxes gemmatae* erected. Thus the cross might be a personal symbol in this respect, as well.

With relation to the Emperor, however, the symbol of the cross is elevated beyond the category of a personal symbol. Following his vision at Milvius, Constantine launched the cross on its career of conquering the world with his Edict of Milan in 313. As a matter of fact, he elevated this personal symbol to the rank of the sign of a community, the emblem of victory, glory and eternal life.

Consequently, the cross manifests itself as a sign in these engravings.

By the Empress Helen's discovery of the True Cross during her 326 journey to the Holy Land, the cross of the Golgotha became substantiated, it gained physical certainty.³⁶ The sign became a historical reality. The relic authenticated the sign. The True Cross is one of those rare symbols which became signs through their relationship with one individual.

With this, the holiest relic of Christianity was launched on its historical mission, and the worldwide cult of the cross was started.

In other words, the cross appears between Constantine and Helen both as a sign and as a relic originating a cult.

All in all, the following can be said about the works of the masters from Athos:

The basis of the composition just like its motifs, are fundamentally Byzantine in origin. The sceptre and the palm branch are Western influences, but they also became essential parts of Meta-Byzantine representations. The turn to the many-rayed sun-disk rooted in Antiquity as a decoration for the cross might also be put down to the influence of the sun-rayed reliquaries and monstrances so popular in Baroque. This motif overlaps with the shape of Early Byzantine reliquaries with a sun-disk, whose origins can be found in Early Christian representations: in the sun-wheel-like Chrismon, etc. The *crux gemmata* which is also a *staurotheke* also follows Early Byzantine prototypes. Consequently, the masters structured the composition from the elements of different eras and cultures.

³⁶ Dávid, *op. cit.*, 328.

Thereby they represented the role of the cross in the personal life of the two imperial figures, but beyond this, they also introduced the cross as a symbol of community, that is, a sign, a relic and an object of cult.

By differing from earlier representations in depicting not a simple double cross but a staurotheke between the Emperor and the Empress, the artists from Athos demonstrated the thriving of the cult of the cross ever since Helen's era. Beyond this, they met the contemporary requirements of their chosen genre, the reproduced graphic work: they served with it the popularisation of a cult, more particularly the cult of the cross.

The engravings by the Athos masters can be regarded as compilations characterised by a richness and actuality of thought pertaining to their own era.

Нађ Марта
ПРЕДСТАВА СВЕТОГ КОНСТАНТИНА И СВЕТЕ ЈЕЛЕНЕ СА ЧАСНИМ КРСТОМ
У XIX ВЕКУ- ГРАВИРЕ СА СВЕТЕ ГОРЕ

Тема ове студије је анализа неких гравира које приказују Константина и Јелену са крстом. Уметнички предмети који ће бити представљени имају сви приближно исти састав и главне мотиве. Њихови творци су очигледно следили једне друге у свом раду. Ова студија се фокусира на иконографију, стилске разлике радова се не разматрају у делокругу овог рада.

Организација композиције, баш као и њени мотиви, у основи су византијског порекла. Жезло и палмина грана су утицаји запада, али су постали битни елементи поствизантијских представа. Заокрет према диску сунца са бројним зрацима укорењен у Антици, као украс крста може такође да се повеже са утицајем моштију и показница сунца са зрацима које су биле толико популарне у бароку. Овај мотив се преклапа са обликом рановизантијских мошти сунчевог диска, чије порекло се може наћи у раним хришћанским представама као што је Христовог монограма налик сунцу, итд. Крст са драгим камењем, такође реликвија правог крста, исто прати рановизантијске прототипове. Сходно томе, мајстори су састављали композицију од елемената из различитих епоха и култура.

Тиме су они представљали улогу крста у личном животу две царске фигуре, али даље од тога, они су такође увели крст као симбол заједнице, односно знак, реликвију и предмет култа.

Разликовањем од ранијих представа у описивању сложеног двоструког крста, него реликвију правог крста између цара и царице, уметници са Свете Горе су показали успешност култа крста још од доба Јелене. Даље, они су задовољили савремене захтеве свог изабраног жанра, репродуковани графички рад: они су са њим служили и популаризацију култа, нарочито култ крста.

Гравире мајстора са Свете Горе могу се сматрати компилацијама које се одликују богатством и савременошћу мисли кључне за њихово доба.