

**ARE THE MOSAICS IN THE ROTUNDA
INTO THESSALONIKI LINKED TO ITS CONVERSION
TO A CHRISTIAN CHURCH?**

All the views on the dating of the mosaics in the Rotunda of Thessaloniki are based on the correlation with the conversion of this circular building of Late Antiquity into a Christian church. This correlation gave shape a bipolar scheme of methodological interdependence, according to which the dating of the conversion of the Rotunda into a Christian church is based on the iconography and the style of the mosaics, and the dating of the mosaics is based on the conversion of the Rotunda into a Christian church. Since neither of these two factors is known for certain, the proposed dates diverge by as much as almost two centuries, from the end of the 4th to the beginning of the 6th.¹

What are the features which support this correlation so categorically?

The structural interventions which were made when the Rotunda was converted into a Christian church were: a) the addition of a sanctuary, without mosaic decoration; b) the addition of a perimeter corridor, without mosaic decoration; and c) the addition of southern annexes to the entrance, with a circular burial chapel on the east (fig. 1).²

It is known that the mosaic decoration in the eastern part of the dome has not survived because this part was rebuilt after a collapse. This collapse was linked to the addition of the sanctuary.³ What is not known, however, is whether

* The authors are grateful to Professor Peter Brown, Professor Slobodan Ćurčić and Professor Angelos Delivorias for the fruitful discussions.

¹ Sl. Ćurčić, *Some Observations and Questions Regarding Early Christian Architecture in Thessaloniki*, Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 2000, 11-14.

² E. Hébrard, "Les travaux du Service Archéologique de l'Armée d'Orient à l'Arc de Triomphe "de Galère" et à l'église Saint-Georges de Salonique", *BCH* 44 (1920), p. 28, N. Moutsopoulos, "I paleochristianiki phasi tis Rotondas tou Agiou Georgiou tis Thessalonikis", *Actes du Xe Congrès international d'archéologie chrétienne*, Thessalonique, 28 septembre-4 octobre 1980, *Studi di antichità cristiana* 37; 2 vols. (The Vatican: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 361- 362.

³ Hébrard, "Les travaux" (see note 2), p. 24-26, 37. Moutsopoulos, "I paleochristianiki phasi tis Rotondas" (see note 2), pp. 365-367, 373. K. Theocharidou, "I Rotonda tis Thessalonikis. Nea stoicheia kai aposafiniseis me aformi tis anastilotikes ergasies", *Deltion*

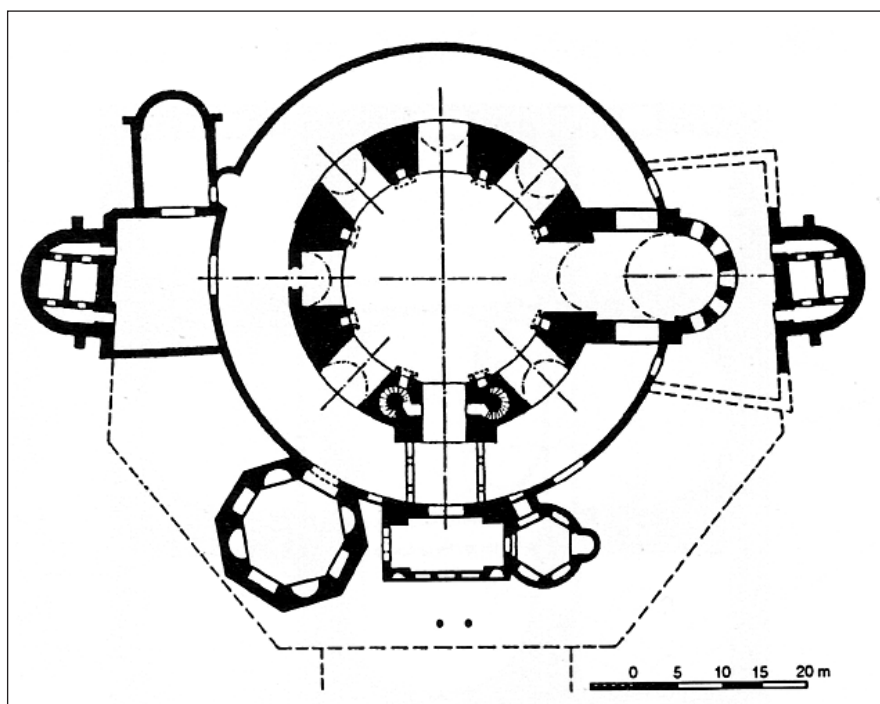


Fig. 1 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki, plan (drawing published by Th. Pazaras, *I Rotonda tou Agiou Georgiou sti Thessaloniki*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1974, dr. 5).

Сл. 1. Ротунда у Солуну, план (цртеж је објавио Th. Pazaras, *I Rotonda tou Agiou Georgiou sti Thessaloniki*, Институт за балканске студије, Солун 1974, цртеж 5.).

it was associated with the first or second phase of the sanctuary. If the collapse was actually associated with the first phase, as we believe, i.e. with the conversion of the Rotunda to a Christian church, then we must accept that the mosaics in the dome are older.

Torp claims that, after the death of Galerius in 311, the Rotunda remained for many decades half-finished, undecorated and without a roof, and that it was finished 70-80 years later by Theodosius I at the end of the 4th century and decorated with mosaics in order to function as a Christian church.⁴ This theory not only is opposite common sense but also does not correspond to the facts. It is most likely that the lower part of the dome was built with the support of a wooden *xylotypos*, and the upper without support. Torp's theory merely covers the time gap between the construction of the Rotunda at the beginning of the 4th century and its decoration with mosaics at the end of that century.

tis christianikis archaiologikis etaireias, 16 (1980), p. 66.

⁴ H. Torp, "The date of the Conversion of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki into a Church", in Øivind Andersen and Helene Whittaker eds., *The Norwegians Institute at Athens: The First Five Lectures* (Athens, 1991), pp. 15-17. This theory has been accepted by Theocharidou, "I Rotonda tis Thessalonikis" (see note 3), p. 66, and Ćurčić, *Observations* (see note 1), pp. 13-14.

Fig. 2 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki.
Damian
(SW panel).

Сл. 2. Ротунда у Солуну, Дамјан (ЈЗ
Панел).



The only mosaics that could be associated with the conversion are those of the barrel vaults in the rectangular large niches on the ground floor, since they extend as far as their external edge and presuppose the opening of the niches and the existence of the perimeter corridor.⁵ These mosaics repeat themes of those in the lunettes of the dome and their frames are decorated with motifs within the Early Christian repertoire.⁶ Moreover, the birds depicted on the mosaics of the barrel vaults are different than the birds appeared on the mosaics of the dome; they are less naturalistic and closer to the birds appeared on the mosaics of Acheiropoietos. See also below, paragraph 3, our remarks on the monogrammatic crosses.

It follows that the Christian structural additions do not categorically support the correlation of the mosaics with the conversion of the Rotunda into a Christian church, since they have to do with parts of the building to which the

⁵ J.-M. Spieser, *Thessalonique et ses monuments du IVe au VIe siècle. Contribution à l'étude d'une ville paléochrétienne*, Paris 1984 (Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 254), p. 149. E. Nikolaidou-Kourkoutidou, "Ta psifidota tis Thessalonikis kai o Giannis Kolefas", *Giannis Kolefas*, Athens 1990, p. 45, H. Torp, "Un décor de voûte controversé: L'ornementation "sassanide" d'une mosaïque de la Rotonde de Saint-Georges à Thessalonique", *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, vol. XV, (ed. J. Rasmus Brandt, O. Steen), Bardi Editore, Roma 2001, p. 315.

⁶ P. Mastora, "Ho psefidotos diakosmos stis fotistikes thyrides tes Rotondas Thessalonikes", *Archaeologike Ephemeris* 149 (2010), pp. 83-107 .

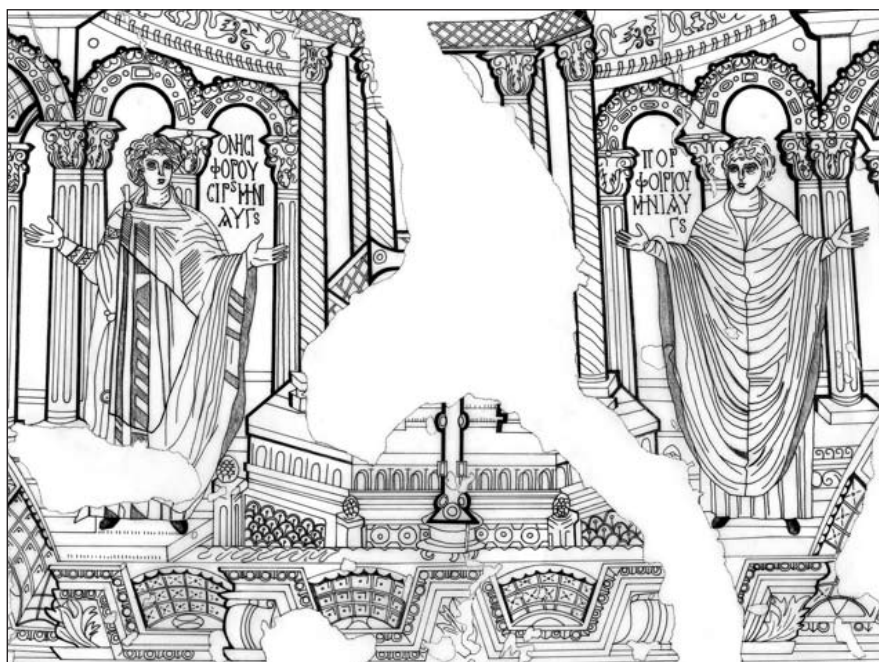


Fig.3 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. The cross in the middle of the N and S panels (drawing detail).

Сл. 3. Ротунда у Солуну, крст у средини С и Ј панели (цртеж детаљ).

mosaic decoration does not extend. On the contrary, the fact that the mosaic decoration was not extended to those portions of the building which underwent Christian structural interventions means in all likelihood that the mosaics were in place in the dome before the building was converted into a Christian church.

It is recognized that the iconography of the mosaics in the dome of the Rotunda bears no relation to the known iconographical programmes in churches. On the contrary, it is generally accepted that features of imperial worship are prominent.⁷ But could, perhaps, individual iconographical themes be taken as exclusively Christian and be linked categorically with the conversion of the building into a church?

1. Despite the efforts of scholars, the equation of the praying male figures and the inscriptions accompanying them with particular saints or Christian martyrs is no more than speculation (fig. 2). For this reason, Kleinbauer based mostly on the naturalistic rendering of their faces claims that they are founders or donors of the Christian church.⁸

⁷ E. W. Kleinbauer, "The Orants in the Mosaic Decoration of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki: Martyr Saints or Donors?" *Cahiers archéologiques* 30 (1982), pp. 25-45. A. Mentzos, "Reflections on the Interpretation and Dating of the Rotunda of Thessaloniki," *Egnatia* 6 (2001-2002), pp. 75-76, L. Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse in Thessaloniki: Interpreting the Early Christian Rotunda", *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 13.4 (2005), 506-507.

⁸ Kleinbauer, "The Orants" (see note 6), pp. 33.



Fig. 4 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. Emblem with a dove fixed onto a cross by a metal, wedge-shaped spigot (N panel).

Сл. 4. Ротунда у Солуну, грб са голубом фиксираним на крст металном славином клинастог облика (С панел).



Fig. 5 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. The stepped podium with a closed book upon a stoop (SW panel).

Сл. 5. Ротунда у Солуну, победничко постолје са затвореном књигом на докату (ЈЗ Панел).

2. According to Torp, three central iconographical themes are susceptible of Christian interpretation:⁹ a) the cross with the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove within a médaillon (fig. 3). But this subject could also be given another interpretation: after the cleaning of the mosaics it is quite clear that at the top of the cross there is a depiction of a metal, wedge-shaped spigot (fig. 4). This contraption fixes onto the cross not, of course, the light of the Holy Spirit, but rather a metal, circular emblem which encloses a representation of a dove in flight with outstretched wings. This is, then, a particular transferred object, which is no different from the cross-shaped labarum in the sarcophagus in the Vatican, which dates back to before the middle of the 4th century, or the bronze coin of Constantine I from 327.¹⁰ The difference is that in the Rotunda the Christogram

⁹ H. Torp, "Dogmatic Themes in the Mosaics of the Rotunda at Thessaloniki", *Arte medievale*, n.s. 1.1 (2002), pp. 11-34.

¹⁰ G. Bovini, H. Brandenburg, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, I, Wiesbaden 1967, pp. 48f., no 49, pl. 16. Ch. Walter, *The Iconography of Constantine the Great. Emperor and Saint*, Alexandros Press, Leiden 2006, fig. 29.



Fig. 6 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. Parapet (W panel).

Сл. 6. Ротунда у Солуну, парапет (З Панел).

is depicted as a dove, which is not only a Christian symbol, but also a military emblem from Late Antiquity.¹¹ Is the cross in the Rotunda, perhaps a version of the first Christian labarum described by Eusebius?¹² From this point of view, the waters flowing in front of the labarum are not a baptismal font, as Torp claims, but the River Tiber, which is rendered in the same manner as in Constantine's triumphal arch in Rome.

b) The second theme is a closed book on a stool standing on a stepped podium (fig. 5). Torp associated the book with the Gospel on a throne, claiming that it is a depiction of the *cathedra gradata* and an indirect representation of Christ. After the task of cleaning was completed, it became clear that this is not a cathedra, but a low, folding stool (*diphros*), the well-known *sella curulis* upon which the book of the law was placed to symbolize the emperor dispensing justice.

c) The third theme is the partition with the perforated parapets within the apse, which might be any kind of partition at all with typical Late Antique parapets, as the fence depicted in the arch of Constantine in Rome, not necessarily the altar rail (*templon*) of a Christian church (fig. 6).

3. The monogrammatic crosses with birds in the roof of the secular buildings in the south-west and north-west panels (fig. 7) certainly do not have a

¹¹ P. Lavedan, *Dictionnaire illustré de la mythologie et des antiquités grecques et romaines*, Librairie Hachette, Paris 1931, 258, m. Colombe. G. Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology Folklore and Symbols*, The Scarecrow Press Inc, New York 1962, part I, 466, w. Dove.

¹² Walter, *The Iconography* (see note 9), p. 39.



Fig. 7 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. A cross between peacocks in the roof of a building (SW panel).

Сл. 7. Ротунда у Солуну, крст између паунова на крову зграде (ЈЗ Панел).

connection with established Christian worship since they have been replaced by craters and birds in the roof of similar buildings in the south and north panels.¹³ The monogrammatic crosses in the Rotunda are not the predominant cross, which, according to Eusebius, was depicted in the Palace of Constantinople. An early icon of the established Christian cross is given on the mosaic on the barrel vault of the southern nich, in front of the southern entrance of the Rotunda (fig. 8).

4. All that survives of the central figure at the top of the dome is a part of a halo, the palm of a raised right hand and the upper tip of a gold sceptre (fig. 9-10). The tip of the sceptre cannot have been in the shape of a cross, as has been claimed by Torp,¹⁴ since the left part of its horizontal arm would have covered the halo, or even the face of Christ. It is simply that the tip is broader, as in the sceptre held by Constantine in the triumphal arch in Rome. It appears from iconographical analyses of the sketch of the depiction that the central figure of the Rotunda incorporates iconographical elements of the Sun god (*sol invictus*), which had passed into imperial iconography.¹⁵

¹³ For the origin of the monogrammatic cross see L. W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.

¹⁴ Torp, *Mosaikkene* (see note 4), pp. 34-37.

¹⁵ E. W. Kleinbauer, "The Iconography and the Date of the Mosaics of the Rotunda of Hagios Georgios, Thessaloniki," *Viator* 3 (1972), p. 32.



Fig. 8 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. The cross on the barrel vault of the southern nich.

Сл. 8. Ротунда у Солуну, крст на своду јужне нише.

It follows that none of the existing iconographical features categorically supports the equation of the figure at the top of the dome of the Rotunda with Christ. If, therefore, the mosaics are disassociated from a Christian interpretation, it is reasonable to ask why this figure should not be a triumphal emperor (*adventus imperator*), in the form of the Sun god, in fact. In this case, the winged figures with halo, which are holding the sphere of the triumphal advent are one of the earliest representations of Victories/Angels.

It can be seen from the above that the mosaics cannot provide categorical support for their correlation with the conversion and functioning of the Rotunda as a Christian church either, since they do not contain iconographical features related exclusively to Christian worship. On the contrary, motifs like the swans (fig. 11), the winged dragons, the emblems on the pediments have nothing to do with the Christian iconography; they are well known motifs of the imperial cult art. As a result, the whole subject is open to other approaches, which we present in brief.¹⁶

After the discovery of a mausoleum associated with Galerius in Romuliana, in Eastern Serbia, Sl. Ćurčić claimed that the Rotunda was built by Constantine as his mausoleum, during his sojourn in the city in 322-323 and was included in the works he carried out in Thessaloniki on its establishment as the new capi-

¹⁶ Ch. Bakirtzis and P. Mastora, *The Mausoleum of Constantine in Thessaloniki* (forthcoming).



Fig. 9 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. The médaillon with the central figure at the top of the dome.

Сл. 9. Ротунда у Солуну, медаљон са централном фигуром на врху куполе.

tal.¹⁷ Moreover, taking into account the remarks set out in brief earlier, we are of the opinion that not only the building but also the mosaic decoration of the Rotunda can be attributed to Constantine.

The Rotunda has all the features of early Christian mausolea, as these have been defined by Mark Johnson: the mausolea of Helen and Constantina both in Rome and that of Constans in Centcelles in Spain¹⁸. Moreover, as it is demonstrated by Ćurčić, Mango and others the Rotunda in Thessaloniki is

¹⁷ Ćurčić, *Observations* (see note 1), p. 11. S. Ćurčić, "Christianization of Thessalonike: The Making of Christian 'Urban Iconography'", in L. Nasrallah, Ch. Bakirtzis and St. Friesen (eds), *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonike: Studies in Religion and Archaeology* (Harvard Theological Studies 64 Harvard University Press 2010, pp.215-218.

¹⁸ M. Johnson, *The Roman Imperial Mausoleum in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press 2009, 110-156. Following the idea of Galerian origin of the Rotunda, he has not included it among the Christian mausolea, *o.p.*, p. 75.

in accord with Eusebius' description of Constantine's mausoleum in Constantinople:¹⁹ both of them are built round about the centre, with large windows, marble revetments on the vertical walls and mosaics in the dome. If, in fact, Eusebius' description of the phoenix means that he actually saw this depiction in Constantine's mausoleum in Constantinople, which is most probable, then the iconographic programme of the mosaics in the Rotunda presents at least one theme analogous to that in Constantine's mausoleum, which, in general terms, would have had the same arrangement in bands.

In the first band of the mosaics in the Rotunda, there is a representation of the composition and character of the élite promoted by Constantine to ensure he would prevail in the East. The men depicted are portraits of particular persons in Constantinian portraiture. This is borne out also by the *segmentum* with the figure of the emperor worn by certain praying soldiers.²⁰ The figures are accompanied by inscriptions which were visible from floor-level within the Rotunda, with details of their identity: name, capacity, and month of birth.

There is not much we can say about the next band of mosaics. The positions of the feet depicted indicate 36 male figures moving as a civilian or military laudatory "chorus" (fig. 12). It may be that this subject was the cause of the mosaic's removal, when the Rotunda was converted into a Christian church.

The third band included Constantine's triumphal coming (*adventus*) with the support of his ancestral god, the Sun, and of the revealed Christ. Above his head, to the east, there is the phoenix, which was associated with the worship of the Sun.²¹ Beside him on the right, there is the radiant cross, as a victory trophy,



Fig. 10 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. The preliminary sketch of the central figure at the top of the dome (drawing published by H. Torp).

Сл. 10. Ротунда у Солуну, прелиминарна скица централне фигуре на врху куполе (цртеж објавио Х. Торп).

¹⁹ C. Mango, "Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83 (1990), pp. 51-61. Ćurčić, *Observations* (see note 1), pp. 12.

²⁰ Kleinbauer, "The Orants", (see note 6), p. 33. Nasrallah, "Empire and Apocalypse" (see note 6), p. 488, 507.

²¹ R. van den Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix, According to Classical and Early Christian Traditions*, Leiden 1972, pp. 223-233, 260.

which would have been the first thing seen by anyone entering the Rotunda from the main, southern, entrance. The depiction of Constantine in the dome of the Rotunda is the most complete image of the statue which was later, in 330, placed upon a honorific column in the forum of Constantinople,²² and formed the model for the representation of Christ in the mosaic in the Monastery of Latomos in Thessaloniki.

Does the removal of the figure of Constantine from the Rotunda imply *damnatio memoriae*? Constantine did not undergo *damnatio memoriae*. What he did suffer, 22 years (359) after his death (337) was expulsion from the mausoleum in Constantinople, where he had been buried as the thirteenth apostle.²³ By the same token, we suppose that in Thessaloniki, too, he was expelled from the Rotunda when this was converted into a Christian church.

If the niches in the mausoleum in Constantinople were designed as “receptacles” with the relics of the 12 apostles, those in the mausoleum in Thessaloniki would have received the labarum, the book of the law and the partition, for their establishment as cross, Gospel and sanctuary. In this sense, the apses depicted in the 8 panels of the dome are the eight ground-floor niches of the Rotunda, before which the emperor’s people are praying in silence and at length.



Fig. 11 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. Swans from the relief decoration of the buildings (S panel).

Сл. 11. Ротунда у Солуну, лабудови са рељефне декорације зграда (J панел).

²² G. Fowden. “Constantine’s Porphyry Column: The Earliest Literary Allusion,” *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 81 (1991), pp. 119–31.

²³ Mango, “Constantine’s Mausoleum” (see note 18), pp. 51-61.



Fig. 12 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. The feet of male figures in the second band of the mosaics.

Сл. 12. Ротунда у Солуну, ноге мушких ликова у другом групи на мозаицима.



Fig. 13 The Rotunda of Thessaloniki. Constantine with two Victories on the pediment of the building on the NE panel.

Сл. 13. Ротунда у Солуну. Константин са две Викторије, на тимпанону зграде на СИ панелу.

In this case, the man with the Victories depicted on the pediment of the building on the north-east panel, who, according to Grabar,²⁴ cannot possibly be Christ, is none other than Constantine (fig. 13). This identification is supported by the similarity of the facial features to his portraits.²⁵

The Rotunda of Thessaloniki as mausoleum of Constantine, with the outstanding mosaic decoration, records not only the unique personality and historical role of the man, but also the convergence of two worlds which left their mark on the history of humanity.

Charalambos Bakirtzis, Pelli Mastora
ЈЕСУ ЛИ МОЗАИЦИ У РОТУНДИ У СОЛУНУ
ПОВЕЗАНИ СА ЊЕНОМ КОНВЕРЗИЈОМ У ХРИШЋАНСКУ ЦРКВУ?

Погледи на датирање мозаика у Ротунди су искључиво занснвани на односу њене конверзије у хришћанску цркву. Хришћански структурни додаци, међутим, не пружају категоричну потврду за ову кореспонденцију. Напротив, вероватније је да су мозаици већ били у куполи зграде пре конверзије у хришћанску цркву. Штавише, са иконографске тачке гледишта, мозаици не садрже карактеристике са искључиво хришћанским верским тумачењем. Напротив, елементи обожавања цара у касноантичком периоду су чести. Цела ствар је такође отворена и за друге приступе. Ротунда у Солуну, као Константинов маузолеј, пружа одговоре на низ питања.

²⁴ Grabar, "À propos" (see note 14), pp. 76-77.

²⁵ E.V. Harrison, "The Constantinian Portrait", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 21(1967), pp. 81-96. Walter, *The Iconography* (see note 9), p. 16, note 20, fig. 162-163.

