

Constantine: The Model for Imperial Theocracy

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From his Christian conversion under the influence of revelatory experiences outside Rome in A.D. 312 until his burial as the “Thirteenth Apostle” in Constantinople in A.D. 337, the first Christian emperor of the late Roman world, Constantine the Great, developed the role and defined the model of the Christian imperial theocrat. Through his relationship with the Christian Deity, his study of the scriptures, and apologia with the leading Christian intellectuals of his time (Ossius, Lactantius, and Eusebius of Caesarea), and through his assessments of divine interventions in recent imperial history, the emperor came to feel that he had been placed in power by the “Almighty God” of the Christians, that he had been chosen as a special “servant of God,” and that he had been entrusted with a mission to protect the Catholic Church in the empire and propagate the Christian faith throughout the world.

This illustrated presentation surveys the reign of the first Christian emperor and examines the manner in which he developed the role of the Christian imperial theocrat in his public letters and imperial actions, and how Lactantius at Trier (in Latin) and Eusebius at Caesarea (in Greek) codified that role in their writings to and about Constantine. It then examines how the role pioneered by Constantine in late antiquity served as a model for Byzantine emperors in eastern Europe and for medieval kings in western Europe over the next millennium, and how that model was altered to meet the needs and circumstances of the times. Through the presentation, slides from Constantine’s own reign, and from subsequent Byzantine and medieval history will illustrate the images of imperial and royal theocracy conveyed in coins, statues, mosaics, and paintings.

Helena: The Model of the Sainly Queen

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Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, became empress of the Roman world during her lifetime and was elevated to the status of a Christian saint after her death by popular favor in the informal, natural, and gradual process of the late antique and early medieval periods before formal canonization processes were developed in the high middle ages. To fully understand Helena, she must be studied both in her real role as a late Roman empress, and in her legendary role as a medieval saint. Just as it was the ultimate compliment for a Byzantine emperor or a European king to be compared to Constantine, so it was the ultimate compliment for an empress or queen to be compared to Helena.

This illustrated presentation will briefly look at the real Helena of Constantine’s reign and then focus upon her role as a model of the saintly queen in the millennium thereafter in both the Byzantine east and the Latin west. In the Byzantine east, Aelia Flaccilla, the wife of Theodosius I (379–95), appears to have emulated Helena in her cultivation of the virtues of piety, humility, and charity. Just as Helena had served the consecrated virgins at Jerusalem, so she served the poor and sick. Athenais-Eudocia, the wife of Theodosius II (408–450), undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and had a martyrrium for St. Stephen Protomartyr built in Jerusalem. Helena seems to have been her model. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the emperor Marcion was hailed as a new Constantine while his wife Pulcheria was hailed as a new Helena. The emperor and empress had supported an orthodox definition of the nature of Christ as had Constantine at an ecumenical council. Pulcheria's charitable and church-building activities in Constantinople were reminiscent of those of Helena. In 518, Justin I and Euphemia were hailed as a new Constantine and a new Helena as they ascended the Byzantine throne. So too were Constantine VI and his mother Irene in the 780s for their support of the 7th ecumenical council in restoring the veneration of icons. In the West, Pope Gregory the Great in 601 encouraged the Anglo-Saxon King Ethelbert and his Queen Bertha to emulate Constantine and Helena to guarantee success in their reign in Kent. In the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey of Monmouth (1136–39), there is the fictitious tradition which holds that Helena was the daughter of King Cole of Colchester—the intent being to enhance the local prestige of the region. The ubiquitous presence of Constantine and Helena in Byzantine and Western art will be illustrated with slides during the presentation.