The Greek Root of Byzantine Emperor: Constantine the Great, His Images and the Imperial Cult

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Abstract. In the time of Constantine the Great, the emperor consciously controlled his image to strengthen his presence within the empire to consolidate the imperial power and his rule. In the process, various visual art forms were utilised, with the emperor represented in the form of sculptures, mosaics/paintings, and coin emblems. The use of emperor portraits throughout the secular and sacred spaces reflects Constantine's important role in politics and religion. Constantine showed the element of "worship" in his images. He completed a "self-deification" with subjective initiative, which had important significance in Constantine's time and the political life after his age. In this process, images and ruler cult are two elements that cannot be ignored. In the Byzantine-centered discussion, both features can be traced back to ancient Greece. This paper will show that Constantine used his own image, with images as a tool, along with other means to promote his worship and successfully spread the perception of the concentration of imperial power to the whole society. The use of images and the ruler cult, in turn, is a profound reflection of the Greek roots of the early Byzantine Empire.

Keywords: Byzantine, Constantine, ruler, cult, Greek, Hellenistic.

1. Introduction

The significance of Constantine and his image for the Byzantine Empire stems primarily from his status as the founder of Constantinople. The beginning of the history of this political entity is controversial, but if the city's foundation is taken as a sign of the beginning of the empire's history, the emperor can be called the founder of the empire. Constantine the Great's various initiatives greatly influenced the face of the early Byzantine Empire. Religiously, he issued the Edict of Milan (together with Licinius) and converted to Christianity on his deathbed; militarily, he ended the division of the empire and unified it once again; politically, he laid the foundations of a new political system for the emperor and began the geographical transfer of the political centre symbolised as the building of a new capital. Historians recognise that the strong Christian influence, the political structure inherited from Rome, and the ancient Greek culture were the three key features of the early Byzantine Empire. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, these characteristics had appeared in the time of Constantine.

Although these three characteristics are equal, the extent to which the Byzantine Empire had the genes of Greek culture has been much debated in academic history. For an extended period of time, the genes of Greek culture in the Byzantine Empire were either not recognised or were thought to have appeared in only a short part of the time or a limited area of the empire's history [1]. These scholars cited the following arguments: The racial disconnection of the ancient Greeks, the decline under the Byzantine rule of the ancient Greek identity of temples, academies and the traditional religion and philosophy they represented and the fact that ancient Greek culture existed only for two or three centuries in the late Byzantine period to borrow time against the coming collapse of it and thus was not universal [2]. Some scholars, however, took a different position in this debate; they link ancient Greek culture closer to the Byzantine 'Greek identity' and acknowledge its role in shaping the Byzantine Empire [1, 3]. However, these scholars still do not go beyond the context of 'the late Byzantine' period, and there is still a lack of research on the early Byzantine period. Moreover, they believe this shaping role was limited to the elite class rather than the society as a whole [4]. Of course, because of the controversy over the beginnings of Byzantium, it is necessary to distinguish between different definitions of the period referred to by the term 'early Byzantium' when citing existing research. Specifically, in Constantine's time, the influence of Greek culture in the eastern part of the

empire was evident. This influence, especially in religion and beliefs, was de facto established and recognised by the Byzantines. For now, however, scholars have yet to study this part of history as thoroughly as in other periods.

This is particularly true in the early Byzantine period. Constantine's definition and exploitation of his position already brought out the ancient Greek elements in the foundations of the Byzantine Empire. This visual and intuitive presentation served Constantine's political aspirations to strengthen imperial and centralised power but worked at all ranks of society. Moreover, the realisation of his claims presupposes the apotheosis of his image. Images are both the embodiment and the means of deification in this process, and for researchers, they are also a witness. The cult of the ruler and the person with divine qualities, and the fact that this cult was characterised by images as an essential vehicle, is one piece of evidence that Greek culture had left its legacy in Byzantium. This paper will begin with an analysis of the image of Constantine the Great, the emperor's manipulation and use of his image, and then discuss the Byzantine inheritance of ancient Greek culture. Without a doubt, the traces of ancient Greek culture during the Byzantine Empire are extensive. They cover such a long period of time that it would be impossible to give a perfect interpretation by only looking into the use of images of the ruler during the reign of Constantine alone. So, this paper is merely an exploratory argument for the topic.

2. The Image of Constantine the Great and How it was Used

The image of Constantine is the starting point and core of all the issues discussed in this article. For historiography, the more familiar means of studying the image of a figure is textual analysis. The most famous and influential textual record of Constantine's image is Eusebius's biography of Constantine, Vita Constantini. In his biography, Eusebius portrays an extremely pious and prosperous emperor. He was '… so truly pious and complete in happiness, that with utter ease he governed more nations than those before him, and kept his dominion unimpaired to the very end' (Ex. 20:1-5) [5]. The biographer clearly emphasises the emperor's faith more than his political achievements and attributes both conquest and success in ruling to this [5]. As it was written after Constantine's death, the biographer's intuitive feelings about this elaboration are unknown. However, Eusebius not only baptised the emperor at the time of the latter's conversion to Christianity, but he was also an 'ally' whose religious position was in line with the centralised claims of imperial power, and there was an unusually close relationship between them. The fact that Constantine had a much stronger desire to control the presentation of his own image than many other emperors could be indirect proof of the strong relationship between the portrayal of the biographer and his wishes in this biography [6, 7]. Of course, given Eusebius's status as a religious elite, it may be appropriate to reduce the spiritual component when looking at Constantine's self-perception in the light of his work. What is certain is that 'religion' and 'politics' are the two key words in Constantine's image. All the specific features that emerge in the following discussion are, at the time of their appearance, in the service of these two keywords.

What is discussed in this article is the image of Constantine as conveyed through a variety of visual media. These media include both flat visual art and three-dimensional visual art. These works were ubiquitous amid the Empire, and the Constantine they depict possesses the qualities mentioned earlier. However, these qualities are not represented in a general way, nor are they portrayed in a single form by any one object or category of objects. In fact, there is considerable diversity in both the visual image of Constantine and its presentation.

If one examines the origin of the sculptures, an interesting fact emerges that some of them were recurved. The original identity of these statues was not that of obscure people but of former emperors and gods. Two statues of Constantine from Bolsena have details of hair and lips, revealing that the statues originally depicted Augustus; the same happens with statues of emperors such as Trajan, Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius [8]. A colossal bronze statue of the god of the sun from Prygia long towered on a marble column in the square, with beams of light on the head symbolising the god's

identity preserved, while the face was recreated as that of Constantine [8]. Constantine's not avoiding the connection between divinity and himself has been on display from this perspective alone.

The portraits of the rulers have a strong sense of purpose both in their visual design and choice of materials. Eric Varner divides Constantine's portraits into two types: the first has similar graphic elements to those of the emperors of the first Tetrarchy, with the emperor's bearded hair styled in a militarised manner; this corresponds to around the last decade of the third to the first decade of the fourth century AD. The second type appeared in 311 AD and was created to commemorate the first quinqennalia of his reign. Constantine is depicted as younger and more idealised, with a look that closely resembles the time of Trajan and Augustus [8]. This template was used until the time of his death [8]. In this second period, Constantine clearly intended to emphasise the uniqueness of his rule rather than place himself among the many other monarchs in the eyes of his subjects. This 'inhuman' quality was partly reinforced by his never-ageing appearance in his works of art. As emperor of the Roman Empire, he inherited some of the traditions carried by this status, and his visual presentation was no exception.

The hairstyle, the crown and even the re-carving of existing statues were not Constantine's first: the colossus of Basilica Nova in the Forum Romanum is the most famous statue of Constantine, which belonged successively to Hadrian and Maxentius [8]. In both material and meaningful terms, Constantine's portraits reference the visual style of the Roman political tradition. Certainly, Constantine made trade-offs in incorporating the tradition of visual engraving derived from successive emperors into his own statues. Features from Nero's time often faced deletion in re-carving the statues, while those from Augustus-Trajan's time were deliberately retained [8]. Clearly, the reputation of the kings became an essential source of a connotation for the symbols of the images. Constantine wished to use them to portray himself and boast about himself using features from the previous kings. In the process, within expectations, he also established new conventions of his own. As mentioned earlier, the pattern of the second portrait was used from the time it was created until the emperor's death. In turn, it became the source material for his descendants and even more recent Byzantine emperors. Indeed, Constantine's descendants were so thorough about transmitting his images that it provoked some figurative confusion [9]. The formation of conventions indicates that later rulers followed the visual elements established by Constantine. This phenomenon, in fact, also reflects the historical recognition of Constantine's importance. This was a factor that favoured the construction of an emperor-centred monarchy.

The portrait of the ruler is itself a symbol of power, and this symbol of Constantine consists of various specific symbols. In his case, information such as the composition of the figure, words and symbols all become ideographic discourse. While the political propaganda of the empire certainly needs to be centred on the emperor, this emperor does not appear only in single portraits but also in group portraits and scenes. The emperor's family is the more common of the group portraits. In a relief dating from 317 to 323, the emperor is shown with his mother, wife and two sons [8]. The cult of the royal family was subordinate to the cult of the ruler, a tradition that had emerged from the Successor Kingdom in Hellenistic times. It embodied the traditional family order and signalled the stability of royal succession. Secondly, the textual content alongside the portrait is also worthy of attention. Changes in textual content may mark a change in the identity of the image's protagonist. For example, at the end of Constantine's reign, the Senate gave the emperor the title **MAXIMUS**, which was immediately reflected in the currency - the word **MAX** was added to the design of the coin [10]. The new identity was immediately known to all classes of society as the currency became pervasive in social life. It was an assertion of the authority of Emperor Constantine.

Constantine's statues came in a variety of materials, and they appear in a wide range of contexts. Because of the ease and strength of stone, large sculptures or reliefs of people were often made in stone and built for important purposes, such as commemorating a victory. Constantine is said to have commemorated his victory over Maxentius by erecting a statue in the downtown area of Rome with an inscription emphasising that 'I HAVE ALSO RESTORED THE SENATE AND ROMAN PEOPLE TO THEIR ANCIENT DIGNITY AND SPLENDOUR' [10]. Similarly, Constantine

established the custom of having his statue marched in the parade on the anniversary of the foundation of Constantinople and made it a rule that the emperor in office should bow to it [11]. Such behaviour was undoubtedly inconsistent with the fundamental position of the Christian classics, which forbade idolatry. Precious metals had a tradition of being used as currency, and so images of people in gold were often circulated throughout society along with gold coins. The Roman monetary system, established by Constantine in 312 on the gold standard, facilitated this flow. As raw materials for jewellery, precious metals and precious and semi-precious stones were often made into minor figures to be attached to jewellery or other objects of decorative or authoritative symbolism. They were often given as private gifts, and the flow spanned both private and public spaces [9]. Constantine's omnipresence even involved churches, where the emperor's image became a means of displaying Christian miracles. At Edessa in 496, the city's inhabitants celebrated the end of the drought in an indulgent manner that led them to defy the Christian creed; Constantine's statue 'expressed discontent' by releasing the cross from his hands for three days [11]. Although this anecdote takes place well over a century after the emperor's death, the significance of his image still provides authority for the 'revelation'.

As mentioned in the introduction, the features and laws mentioned in the previous section were all to serve Constantine's political objectives. Among the many scenes of use, the image of Constantine is highly public, accompanied by symbols of a Christian nature, and worshipped in specific rituals. Based on this alone, it cannot be concluded that what occurred with Constantine was a ruler cult. The strong relationship between images and religion, and the cult of the ruler, can be traced back to ancient Greek culture. Therefore, whether there are relations between the images of Constantine and the existence of the 'ruler cult' should be examined in the context of Greek culture, which is the content of the next part of this article.

3. The Image of Rulers, Ruler Cult, and the Gene of Ancient Greek Culture

From the previous examples, it is indisputable that Constantine used the visual medium to reinforce a sense of presence actively. This section will discuss the Greek roots of this behaviour and whether image worship was involved. Using images to represent worship was not the invention of the Greeks; it existed as far back as the ancient Mesopotamia civilisation. Nevertheless, for Byzantine and present-day historiographical constructions, the discussion of the issues dealt with here is more urgent and immediate than that of the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamian in terms of the cultural DNA of ancient Greece. The culture of ancient Greece and the Hellenistic period has a direct line of succession to the Roman Empire and the Byzantine period that followed it, so this paper deals with something other than earlier periods.

The dominant role of images as a medium for the phenomena of 'cult' is a characteristic of Greek culture. The ancient Greeks had a great passion for portraying images of the gods. In the Homeric epics, the idea of the gods, expressed through language, has become highly symbolic. In poetry and plastic art, the beauty of the gods' bodies, faces, clothing, and ornaments is set out in considerable detail. The more socially and culturally specific the gods, the more detailed the settings [12]. These settings reflect the ancient Greeks' extreme enthusiasm for imagining the gods' appearance. Artworks depicting gods as objects and mythological stories were extremely common in ancient Greece, and the interiors of temples were decorated with human-like images of gods and goddesses. However, how can the centuries-long gap between this period and Byzantium prove that the Byzantine iconographic tradition derives from the cultural DNA of ancient Greece? The Hellenistic period is crucial to the answer to this question.

Greek culture spread alongside Alexander's conquests during this period, expanding its influence on the one hand and combining with local cultures to create new local cultures. Due to the economic and cultural advantages that the Greeks had during this period, the output of Greek culture far outweighed the input. The export of visual styles, too, was among them. A typical example is Gandhara Buddhist art, which was influenced by the Hellenistic style. Moreover, some of the

kingdoms of successors of the Hellenistic period had a rather positive attitude towards culture and art. The most famous of the Hellenistic period, and the closest to the Roman and Byzantine civilisations that followed, was the Ptolemaic dynasty. The Ptolemaic kings followed the example of not only other Hellenistic cities but also Athens itself in achieving artistic glory [13]. They patronised the arts and built various statues. In places like Pergamon and Antioch, where there was no competition from the established artistic style of Egyptian art, Greek art flourished even more, producing masterpieces such as the 'Altar of Pergamon' [13]. Under these conditions, the Greek pictorial tradition was preserved. In the Roman period, pursuing and studying Greek visual art was a social phenomenon. Rome developed the mosaic form from the Greek tradition and copied Greek statues so extensively that a significant number of the Greek statues that still exist today are Roman copies.

The prohibition of idolatry in the Jewish and Christian classics is a counterexample. The Old Testament says, "And God spoke all these words, saying, ... Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God" (Ex. 20:1-5)[14]. The Byzantine emperor could not have drawn his sustenance for ruler images from Christianity, which forbade idolatry. Moreover, it is true that the emperor promoted the cult of the emperor's image and existed in pre-Christian Rome. The Roman worship of the emperor's images, and indeed of himself, comes directly from the Hellenistic era. Moreover, the cult of the ruler can be traced back to ancient Greek culture.

In the Greek tradition, the boundary between God and man was not insurmountable. Since at least the time of Homer, the Spartans had referred to the people they admired as "the divine man" (σεῖος/θεῖος ἀνήρ); Pindar, Isocrates and Empedocles of Sicily had all expressed their views on this unclear boundary. Hero cult directly manifests this ambiguous boundary, acting out the downgrading and generalisation of the term's meaning. Furthermore, the deification of living kings was not the first of its kind in the case of Alexander the Great. The fact that the Syracusan tyrant Dionysus I had claimed himself as the god with whom he shared his name is evidence that the deification of monarchs was not entirely an import from Eastern culture in Alexander's time [15]. This was a far-reaching event, and Dionysus I was not the only ruler to do so. Alexander, an essential figure in the history of the development of the ruler cult, practised the cult on himself to maintain rule and strengthen centralised power. However, Greek city-states spontaneously pursued the early cult of kings, predating the monarchy's Macedonian acceptance of the claim [15]. From this perspective, if one must divide ancient Greece from the Hellenistic era, then the monarchical cult tradition of the Roman imperial era, derived from Hellenistic civilisation, can be regarded as a remnant of ancient Greek culture. Philosophy also backs this opinion. Logos, a concept that appeared in the thought of Greek philosophers from the time of Heraclitus onwards, was a way of explaining the world. The idea of the Logos directly influenced the writing of the New Testament and even more so as the Fathers, well-educated in Greek philosophy, entered the process of constructing the Christian theological system. The Christianity of Constantine's time was based on such a foundation, and the result of this influence was even directly linked to politics. Father Origen saw a connection between God and secular rulers, with the emperor as a reflection of the supreme authority of Jesus Christ, the power to establish and maintain order. Eusebius, whom he profoundly influenced, also held this idea, even though he was struck by the questioning of the Trinity in Origen's thought. This idea aligned with the trend towards greater imperial and centralised power during this period and thus was shared by Constantine. The status of Constantine as a 'saint and 'Moses on earth', although differing in form from the typical ruler cult of the Hellenistic period, is essentially similar in terms of the worship of the ruler.

4. Conclusion

In general, the deification of rulers through images was typical in Constantine's case to sanctify imperial power by deifying the emperor to consolidate their rule. Visual art, such as statues and paintings featuring images of the emperor, played an important role in the deification of the emperor. Many iconic visual elements, such as religious and political symbols, were used to portray the emperor in a secular sense. Their extensive use in places such as currency, public buildings, and monuments also highlighted the powerful presence of the emperor in the empire. The design and use of these images were very strictly controlled by the will of the emperor himself. Constantine established a new tradition of visual representation that essentially set the pattern for the pictorial representation of the monarchical cult in the early Byzantine period. The visualisation of the sacred elements was the means by which the mechanism of the deification of imperial power was realised. This, along with the tradition of ruler cult, was rooted in the culture of the ancient Greek and Hellenistic periods and, through the development of the Roman imperial period, entered the cultural DNA of Byzantium. It can therefore be argued that the genes of Greek culture were deeply rooted in Byzantine sources in terms of Constantine's use of his own visual images. This connection is reflected in the attitude of the ruler and the people towards the cult of the god-like ruler and in the history of religion and philosophy. Constantine's use of his own image reflects the Greek roots of the empire.

The limitations of this article are apparent. Due to space constraints, only one or two examples can be listed when illustrating the phenomena of various images, which obviously cannot be directly referred to as the study of conventions. Perhaps the more significant shortcoming is that it is not comprehensive enough to analyse only from the image when exploring the 'roots of Greek culture in the Constantine era'. However, aside from these controversies, the relationship between Byzantium and ancient Greek culture deserves more attention.

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