

# Under the Sign of the Cross. References to Byzantium in the Representation of Rulership at the Viennese Court in the Seventeenth Century

On 8 October 1678, the one-act *Festa musicale* »La Monarchia latina trionfante« was performed at the Viennese imperial court to mark the birth of the long-awaited heir to the throne, Archduke Joseph. In this opera, the four world empires of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans – the latter was called »Monarchia latina« here – fight over primacy. In the end, unsurprisingly, the »Monarchia latina« is victorious, and so is Emperor Leopold I, at the time the head of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which was, according to the theory of the *Translatio Imperii*, regarded as the successor to the ancient *Imperium Romanum* – or, more precisely: it was the Roman Empire<sup>1</sup>. In the opera, the victory of the Roman Empire is accompanied by a certain devaluation of the competing world empires, including the Greek Empire. According to the traditional doctrine of the four so-called World Empires, the Greek Empire means the Alexandrian Empire. At one point, however, there is a decidedly mocking allusion to the Byzantine Empire, which is thus obviously not classified as the Roman Empire but instead devalued as the degenerated Greek Empire. In the thirteenth scene, the personification of the »Monarchia Latina« sneeringly asks where faithless Greece would rule now, having itself fallen under the domination of the Ottomans or the Republic of Venice<sup>2</sup>.

This episode from a Viennese court opera shows that against the background of the theory of the *Translatio Imperii* and its implications, the late Byzantine Empire and its rulers could hardly be positive points of reference for the Viennese imperial court regarding its own representation of power. The situation was different for the period before the alleged *Translatio Imperii*, i. e., for the late Roman/early Byzantine era: as far as the early modern emperors from the House of Habsburg were concerned, the emperors who ruled during this period were without a doubt their predecessors

in office and could be considered exemplary in their capacity as Christian rulers.

The following chapter will show that the veneration of the True Cross of Christ in particular provided a point of reference for the representation of rulership at the Viennese Court. This applied to Constantine I and his victory under the sign of the cross as well as to his mother Helena, who, according to legend, had discovered the True Cross of Christ and thus made it accessible for veneration by the faithful. Against this background, Helena offered herself as an almost ideal role model for an empress, namely an empress mother. One particular empress mother, Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers, who placed herself in the tradition of Saint Helena in a specific way, will be at the center of this chapter.

Therefore, we will first introduce Empress Eleonora and explain why an *Imitatio Sanctae Helenae* was particularly appealing to her. This introduction will be followed by a number of examples to illustrate how the Holy Cross and Saint Helena were used in the representation of the empress dowager's rulership. Concluding the chapter, the final summary will discuss in particular whether and to which extent the references to the Holy Cross can indeed be regarded as references to Byzantium.

## Contexts and Backgrounds

Empress Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers or Eleonora the Younger (1628-1686) was the third wife of Emperor Ferdinand III. Like her great-aunt, Eleonora Gonzaga or Eleonora the Elder (1598-1655), the second wife of Emperor Ferdinand II, she came from the Gonzaga family, which had ruled Mantua since the fourteenth century and had been able to adorn

1 cf. Schnettger, Romanum Imperium.

2 Monarchia Latina:  
»Mà la Grecia, senza Fede,  
Ou' hor regna, oue risiede?  
O Soggiace:  
Al fiero Trace:  
O in seruaggio, à sé penoso,  
Lambe al Leon de l'Adria il piè famoso«.  
Draghi/Schmelzer, Monarchia Latina, s. p.

German Translation: Id., Römische Monarchie 24:

»Aber sagt / wo das untreye  
Griechenland nun hersch / und seye?  
Theils / O Schandel!  
Ins Türcken Hande /  
Theils / weil es müsse /  
Küst es in Adria dem Löw die Füsse«.

itself with a dukedom since 1530<sup>3</sup>. While the elder Eleonora had grown up in a Mantua that was one of the most brilliant residence cities of Italy, the Gonzaga capital was severely scarred during the youth of Eleonora the Younger due to the consequences of the War of the Mantuan Succession (1628-1631) and especially the *Sacco di Mantova*, the sacking of Mantua by imperial troops in July 1630. Like her great-aunt, Eleonora the Younger was a well-educated, learned woman who actively promoted various transalpine transfer processes and substantially contributed to the Italianisation of the imperial court. Her promotion of music and musical drama was particularly momentous. She cultivated the various forms of court opera that the elder Eleonora had brought to the Viennese court and introduced the oratorio as a new genre of sacred music<sup>4</sup>.

Like her great-aunt, the younger Eleonora remained in Vienna after her own husband's death. For both women, their widowhood actually made up the longer part of the time they spent north of the Alps<sup>5</sup>. The empress dowager usually was the second woman of the court. She had to take a back seat in rank and influence to the reigning empress consort, usually her daughter-in-law. However, due to the postponed first marriage of her stepson Leopold I, Eleonora the Younger maintained her top position during the first decade of her widowhood all the way until the arrival of the new empress consort Margarita Teresa of Spain in Vienna in 1666. Unlike her childless great-aunt, the younger Eleonora had four biological children; two of her daughters reached adulthood<sup>6</sup>.

In our context, it is of particular interest that the two Gonzaga empresses had a Byzantine dynastic background, so to speak. For in the female line, they were descendants of the last Byzantine imperial house, the Palaeologos dynasty. Theodore I, a son of Emperor Andronikos II and his second wife Jolante/Irene of Monferrato, had founded the line of the Palaeologi, which had ruled over the northern Italian margraviate of Monferrato since 1338. Through the marriage of Margherita, the last princess of this Palaeologos line, to Federico II of Mantua in 1531, Monferrato (a duchy since 1574) came under the rule of the Gonzaga. This explains why the Byzantine double-headed eagle has since also adorned the Gonzaga coat of arms. For the Gonzaga princesses, Monferrato was also important, because unlike Mantua, it could also be inherited in the female line. In the early modern period, even the most dubious dynastic claims were cultivated as pretensions – which could possibly be turned into reality

under favorable political constellations. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the Gonzaga also cultivated and emphasized their descent from the last imperial dynasty of Byzantium in their own dynastic *memoria* and sought to make it politically fruitful<sup>7</sup>. The imperial ancestors were an argument that could be utilized in the disputes of rank with the other Italian dynasties. The great involvement of Vincenzo I of Mantua, the father of the elder Eleonora, in the so-called Long Turkish War (1593-1605 during which the duke himself went to Hungary, heading his troops, can also be seen in this context<sup>8</sup>. The Gonzagas' claims to the Byzantine throne are even more clearly connected with the crusade plans of Charles of the Gonzaga-Nevers line, who succeeded the extinct main line of Mantua in 1627 and who was the grandfather of Eleonora the Younger<sup>9</sup>.

For the imperial marriages of the two Eleonoras, their Byzantine backgrounds played no discernible role. When, in the context of Eleonora the Elder's marriage to Ferdinand II in 1622, panegyric poems alluded to the bride's imperial origins, they referred to her grandmothers, both of whom had been daughters of the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I<sup>10</sup>. Their vague claims to the Byzantine emperors also do not seem to have been addressed in the context of the representation of the two Gonzaga empresses. There is much to suggest that this omission was made deliberately and was connected to the fact that the Habsburgs saw themselves as Roman emperors whose top position among Christian monarchs was based on the *Translatio Imperii*, i.e. the transfer of the Roman emperors to Charlemagne and his successors in the year 800. At a time when the Habsburgs' leading position amongst the Christian monarchs was being massively challenged by Louis XIV of France, the Roman emperors and the *Translatio Imperii* became even more important for the Habsburg representation of rulership<sup>11</sup>.

In contrast, references to the late Roman/Early Byzantine Empire, i.e., the Christian Roman emperors before the *Translatio Imperii*, were quite attractive to the Habsburgs. Constantine the Great and his successors could be ideal role models for the early modern emperors (especially if they were recognized as promoters of the orthodox Christian faith). Especially Constantine was repeatedly used by the Habsburgs as a role model or presented to them as an ideal emperor. For example, on the occasion of the coronation of Ferdinand II as King of Bohemia on 4 July 1617, the feast of St Prokop, the Prague Jesuit students performed the play

3 For short biographies of the two empresses, cf. Bues, Eleonora Gonzaga; Schnitzer-Becker, Eleonora Gonzaga Nevers; Frigo, Les deux impératrices; Schnettger, Kaiserinnen.

4 Cf. Sommer-Mathis, Ballett.

5 Eleonora the Elder was married to Ferdinand II from 1622 to 1637 and lived at the imperial court as a widow until 1655. Eleonora the Younger was widowed in 1657 after six years of marriage and then spent almost three decades as empress dowager in Vienna.

6 Eleonore (1653-1697) was the wife of the King of Poland Michael Korybut Wiśniowiecki in her first marriage and the wife of Duke Charles V of Lorraine in her second marriage. Maria Anna (1654-1689) was the wife of Johann Wilhelm of Palatinate-Neuburg, the hereditary prince of the Electoral Palatinate.

7 Schweder, Theatrum 663.

8 Cf. Niederkorn, Mächte 425-435. However, Duke Vincenzo was not very successful as a commander in Hungary.

9 For the crusade plans of Charles of Nevers and Père Joseph, cf. Humbert, Charles de Nevers; Pierre, Le père Joseph.

10 Eleonora of Austria (1534-1594), the wife of Duke Guglielmo of Mantua (1538-1587), and Johanna (1547-1578), the wife of Grand Duke Francesco I of Tuscany (1541-1587).

11 The fact that the Habsburgs themselves had vague dynastic claims to the Byzantine throne is unlikely to have been of much consequence. Cf. Schweder, Theatrum 161.

»Constantinus magnus«<sup>12</sup>. Ten years later, on the visit of the now Emperor Ferdinand II, »Constantinus victor« was given, a five-act »hilaris tragoedia« attributed to Giulio Solimano, an Italian Jesuit working in Prague<sup>13</sup>. Such references to Constantine can also be traced for Emperor Leopold I, who was already compared to Constantine in 1659, at the very beginning of his reign, by the Jesuit Niccolò Avancini in his poem »Pietas Victrix sive Constantinus Flavius Magnus«<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, Leopold, like Constantine I, performed as *Advocatus Ecclesiae* in several respects, especially in his efforts for a reunion of the German and Hungarian Protestants into the Roman Church<sup>15</sup>. Parallels between the reigning emperor and his predecessor Constantine were often drawn in relation to the veneration of the Holy Cross, a flourishing post-Tridentine devotional practice. It was also adopted by the Habsburgs and grew in importance in the seventeenth century under Emperor Ferdinand II<sup>16</sup>.

For the mothers or stepmothers of the emperors, Saint Helena offered a model for their self-portrayal as a Christian, pious empress dowager that could not have been more fitting. The model was – this should be emphasized – not the historical personality Helena, about whom comparatively little is known to this day, but the Saint Helena of legend<sup>17</sup>. According to this legend, Helena was of noble birth and not a concubine, but the first wife of Constantius Chlorus, who was forced to divorce her though. In 312, the year of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, she was baptized. The core element of the legend, however, is the finding of the Cross of Christ, the most distinguished relic of Christianity, by the empress mother. The first person to link Helena with the finding of the cross was Ambrose of Milan in 395. The legend goes as follows: Helena's journey to Jerusalem takes place after Constantine experiences another vision of the cross in 333, which moves him to be baptised and to send his mother to Palestine to find the Cross of Christ. Helena – the legend con-

tinues – forces a Jew to reveal the site of the crucifixion. Here, the legend clearly has anti-Judaic overtones, for according to its account, the Jews of Jerusalem know the place where the True Cross is buried very well, but they maliciously keep it hidden from the Christians. When Helena digs at the revealed location, three crosses are found, the one of Christ and the two crosses of the criminals executed with him. Through a miracle, the raising of a dead man over whom the crosses are held, the True Cross is revealed. Helena divides the True Cross into three parts, one of which she takes to Rome while the other two remain in Jerusalem and Constantinople, respectively. So much for the Helena legend.

Empress Eleonora the Younger was not the first empress to show extraordinary devotion to the Cross of Christ, as Eleonora the Elder already had had a relic of the cross in her possession. In her will, she left this relic, which had been sent to the imperial court by Wallenstein, to her stepson Emperor Ferdinand III<sup>18</sup>. There are also hints that imply she felt close to Empress Helena or was associated with her. In the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua, there is a portrait of her as Empress Helena with the cross (fig. 1). However, Helena's role model does not seem to have had any real, formative significance for her. In his biography of Eleonora the Elder published in 1656, which to a certain extent replaced the funeral sermon the empress had forbidden to be held in her will, the Jesuit Herman van der Horst names various saints to whom the deceased had felt particularly attached or with whom he compared her. Helena does not appear in this tableau, while Saint Pulcheria, the sister of Emperor Theodosius II, who was famous for her education and wisdom, does. Van der Horst praises the piety and education that prevailed at Eleonora's court. In fact, he claims that her court was »not other called than the court of Saint Pulcheria«<sup>19</sup>. In fact, Pulcheria was another woman from the late Roman/Early Byzantine imperial court who could serve as a model for early modern princesses<sup>20</sup>.

12 cf. Seifert, Feste 293/468; Seifert, Theateraufführungen 854/964; Kemper, Hof 248-272. This performance may be understood as an attempt to provoke the Protestant Bohemian estates. Cf. Mat'a, Phasma Dionysiacum Pragense 73-75.

13 cf. Seifert, Metrik 832/156; Seifert, Theateraufführungen 855/965; Kemper, Hof 273-313; Kemper, Konstantindramen.

14 Kemper, Konstantindramen. – Allusions to Constantine can also be found in the fine arts, for example in a Roman cabinet of splendour which Emperor Leopold I received as a gift in 1677. Cf. Telesko, Kreuzreliquie 199 n. 23. Later emperors, too, referred to the example of Constantine. For instance, the *dramma per musica* »Costantino« was performed in 1716 on the occasion of the name day of Empress Elisabeth Christine, the wife of Emperor Charles VI. Cf. Seifert, Aufführungen 497/21.

15 cf. Schnettger, Kirchenadvokatie.

16 For the post-Tridentine veneration of the Holy Cross in general, cf. Heussler, De cruce Christi; for the devotional practice of the Habsburgs, Telesko, Kreuzreliquie 208-216. Several publications may be named in this respect, e.g. Vernulaeus, Virtutes; Crux Victrix; Caussin, Magnus Constantinus. The latter two writings were Jesuit dramas performed at the Gymnasium Landsberg and the Vienna Jesuit Professed House, respectively. Cf. Schumann, Sonne 308; Klecker, Konstantin; Telesko, Kreuzreliquie 199f.

17 On Empress Helena cf. Pohlsander, Helena; Hillner, Helena Augusta, for the early reception 247-348. For the legend of Saint Helena, cf. Drijvers, Helena

Augusta. For a concise overview on the life of Helena as well as the legend of Saint Helena, cf. Clauss, Frauen 355-357. 364f. 368f.

18 »Alla Maestà dell'imperatore, signor figlio nostro amatissimo, lasciamo anche la croce di legno della santissima croce di Nostro Signore ligata in oro con lettere et quattro zaffiri all'antica, et questa croce fu mandata dal duca di Frilandt, quando si trovava in guerra alla Maestà dell'imperatore, nostro signore et consorte di gloriosa memoria«. Bues, Testament 349. Cf. ibid. 327.

19 »nicht anderst als der H. Pulcheriae Hoff genennet«. Horst, Tugendten 31.

20 cf. Angelidi, Pulcheria; Busch, Frauen 110-135. – Interestingly, in a biographical homage to the Duchess Mary of Mantua, commissioned by her daughter, Empress Eleonora the Younger, the court of Theodosius II is also used as a point of comparison: »lo souente hò sentite persone molto saue dire, che nella Corte di Madama di Mantoua si poteua mettere à seruire vna Donzella nobile, come se si collocasse in serbo vna fanciulla entro vn'osseruante Monasterio: potendosi con verità il suo Pallagio rassomigliare nella disciplina del Gineceo ad vn Chiostro ben regolato, come della Corte di Teodosio il minore scrisse già Socrate l'Istorico Cristiano«. Manni, Ristretto 19. Another parallel is not mentioned here: Just as Pulcheria opened the way to the imperial throne for Markian through her marriage, Maria facilitated the Gonzaga-Nevers' accession to power in Mantua through her matrimony with the hereditary prince of Nevers.





**Fig. 1** Lucrina Fetti (c. 1590 - c. 1673), Portrait of Eleonora Gonzaga as Saint Helena, Palazzo Ducale Mantua. – (Photo Sailko, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

## Empress Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers and Saint Helena

However, the significance of Saint Helena for Empress Eleonora the Younger was extraordinary. For the first fifteen

years of her presence at the Viennese court, no specific bond between Eleonora and the mother of Constantine can be discerned. However, in 1663 Girolamo Ercolani dedicated the work »La reggia delle vedove sacre« (»The Palace of the Saint Widows«) to Eleonora. Ercolani seems to have orientated his work clearly towards the empress dowager, considering he opened the circle of widowed princely saints with Helena and ended it with Eleonora's own great-aunt, Empress Eleonora the Elder<sup>21</sup>. These two empresses thus formed the framework, as it were, for the other saint princesses, among whom ancestors of Eleonora from the House of Gonzaga can also be found.

The starting point for what could be called an *Imitatio Sanctae Helenae*, however, was an accident: in the night from 2 to 3 February 1668, a fire broke out in the new building of the Leopoldine Wing of the Vienna Hofburg, which was almost completed at that point. Empress Eleonora, her daughters and her ladies-in-waiting, who were already living on the third floor of the new palace wing, were saved. The material damage, however, was immense<sup>22</sup>.

In 1669, the Jesuit Giovanni Battista Mann<sup>23</sup> published an official report, so to speak, on the foundation of the Order of the Star Cross, an order of Catholic noblewomen that still exists today. It was called into being by Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers following the Hofburg fire<sup>24</sup>. According to Mann's report, the empress dowager knew of no greater concern following the disastrous fire than to find a relic of the cross that had been lost in it. Thus – according to Mann – she joined a long line of noble women who distinguished themselves by their devotion to the Cross of Christ. Among these, the holy Empress Helena could claim the most excellent rank as the great mother of an even greater son, who, with considerable effort and expense, excavated the Saviour's cross and erected a church worthy of imperial splendor in its honor<sup>25</sup>. Helena's example was now followed by another who resembled her not only in her veneration for the cross but also in her name. This similarity of name is much clearer in Italian – Ele[o]n[or]ja – than in German or English<sup>26</sup>. Manni thus equates, so to speak, the miracle of the discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem by Helena with the rediscovery of the relic of the Cross in the burnt ruins of the Viennese Hofburg by Eleonora<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, he also establishes a connection between the rediscovery

<sup>21</sup> cf. Ercolani, *Reggia*.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Jeitler, *Brände*; Karner, *Der Leopoldinische Trakt* 392 f. In the literature, the exact dates for the Hofburg fire differ slightly.

<sup>23</sup> Giovanni Battista Manni (1606-1682), a gifted preacher and author who was widely read until the 19<sup>th</sup> c., came from Modena. He was called to Vienna by the Empress Dowager Eleonora the Younger. Cf. Al Kalak, *Un gesuita* 1087 f.

<sup>24</sup> Manni, *Radunanza*. The writing of Manni was soon translated into German. The German version was reprinted several times. Al Kalak regards this publication, which was dedicated to the Queen of Poland Eleonora, the elder daughter of Empress Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers, as a »passaggio decisivo nel consolidamento del rapporto« between the Jesuit and the empress dowager. Cf. Al Kalak, *Un gesuita* 1090. In the dedication, Manni paid tribute to Queen Eleonore as the daughter of Ferdinand III, an »altro Constantino« (unpaginated). In an address to the Ladies of the Star Cross, Manni recalled that, according to the testimony of Saint Paulinus de Nola, veneration for the Cross had been

exceedingly great among the Christian nobility »ne' migliori secoli antichi« (unpaginated). Shortly after the publication of the writing on the Order of the Star Cross, Manni strengthened his relationship with the Empress Dowager Eleonora through the aforementioned writing commissioned by her on the life of her mother, Duchess Mary of Mantua (cf. note 20). Later, he published several sermons that he had delivered before Empress Eleonora the Younger. Cf. Al Kalak, *Un gesuita* 1090 f. For the Order of the Star Cross in general, cf. Wiesflecker, *Sternkreuz-Orden*.

<sup>25</sup> »[...] la Imperatrice Santa Elena gran Madre di maggior Figliuolo, che con tante fatiche, e con tante spese dissotterrò la Croce del Salvatore, & a' suoi onori fabbricò un superbo Tempio degno della Imperiale Magnificenza«. Manni, *Radunanza* 22.

<sup>26</sup> Manni, *Radunanza* 22.

<sup>27</sup> Manni, *Radunanza* 22 f. 26.



ery of the relic of the cross and the recovery of the True Cross from the Sassanids by Emperor Heraclius in 629<sup>28</sup>.

After various reports on earlier miracles of the cross, Manni turns to the (then) present day by explaining that the House of Habsburg has also possessed a great treasure in the form of a cross since time immemorial, created from two fragments of the True Cross, which was held in great honour by Maximilian I and the subsequent emperors, but especially by Ferdinand III, who always carried it with him<sup>29</sup>. In order to ease the pain of his stepmother Eleonora over the loss of her husband Ferdinand's son and successor, Leopold I entrusted her with this relic, which he himself held in the highest esteem<sup>30</sup>.

Manni then describes the fire at the Hofburg and places particular emphasis on how intensively and persistently Eleonora had searched for the relic of the Cross in the ruins while she was indifferent to all the other lost treasures. According to Manni's report, it was only thanks to the empress dowager that the relic of the Cross was found again after five days, miraculously unharmed by the flames. Eleonora immediately had the Bishop of Vienna state that this was indeed a miracle<sup>31</sup>. Following this, Manni gives a detailed account of the founding of the Order of the Star Cross in memory of this miracle and thus turns to the actual subject of his writing, again emphasising the role of the Empress Dowager Eleonora, who successfully lobbied the Pope and the Emperor for confirmation of her founding<sup>32</sup>.

The feasts of the Order of the Star Cross show a clear reference to Byzantium. Evidently, the first feast of the Order had to be the Feast of the Finding of the Cross. The statutes of the Order issued by Empress Eleonora make extensive reference to Empress Helena or, more precisely, the legend of Saint Helena. The recovery of the True Cross by Constantine's mother, who was already in her eighth decade, is dated to the time after the conclusion of the Council of Nicaea. The Feast of the Finding of the Cross is celebrated by the Order of the Star Cross on 4 May according to the calendar of the Latin Church; the statutes of the Order, however, refer to the fact that the Greek Church celebrates this feast on 14 September<sup>33</sup>. The second feast of the Order takes place on this date, namely the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross in memory of the recovery of the True Cross from the Persians by Emperor Heraclius in 629, of the miraculous victories over

the »infidels« and of the fact that the emperor himself carried the cross on his shoulders as if in triumph<sup>34</sup>. The third feast of the Order was a movable one: Good Friday. Here, Manni again makes a reference to Byzantium: at that time, a celebration was held in Constantinople around the middle of Lent to venerate the part of the True Cross that Helena had given to Constantine. According to the testimony of John Chrysostom, however, a veneration of the cross also took place on Good Friday – and it was precisely this model that the third feast of the Order took up<sup>35</sup>. Finally, every year on 6 February, the commemoration of the miraculous rescue of the relic of the Cross from the fire of the Vienna Hofburg and its recovery was celebrated<sup>36</sup>. Another reference to the late Roman/early Byzantine period can be found in the motto of the Order of the Star Cross: »Salus et Gloria«, which quotes a famous gold solidus of Emperor Justin.

The Order of the Star Cross was clearly placed in the tradition of the Habsburgs' veneration of the Holy Cross by its founder and also in Manni's writing. But Mantuan references are also unmistakable. Thus, the Order's emblem was heraldically designed as a combination of the Mantuan bar cross and the single-headed Mantuan eagle<sup>37</sup>.

With the Order of the Star Cross, whose protectorate and presidency she took over with papal and imperial approval, Empress Eleonora created a new instrument of spiritual representation and patronage exclusively at her disposal, precisely at the time when, as a result of the first marriage of her stepson Emperor Leopold I, she lost her rank as the first woman of the court and had to take a back seat to the Empress Consort Margarita Teresa<sup>38</sup>. The festivities of the Order were integrated into the festive calendar of the imperial court and developed into highlights of the representation of the empress mother's devotion as well as into focus points for remembering the late antique/early Byzantine Christian emperors and empresses, which was understood as part of the empress's own history.

However, the *Imitatio Sanctae Helenae* by Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers was not finished with the foundation of the Order of the Star Cross. The context of the founding of the order also includes the fact that around 1668, the empress dowager commissioned Carpofoforo Tencalla to redesign the chapel of St Peter Canisius in the Jesuit church at the imperial court, the actual church of the Order of the Star Cross.

28 cf. ibid. 26 f. Manni then reports, citing Euagrios Scholastikos' account of the Persian Wars, that the inhabitants of Apamea, after Antioch had already been taken by the barbarians, had averted danger by processions of the Cross. For the historical background of the 7<sup>th</sup> c., cf. Drijvers, Heraclius; Borgehammar, Heraclius.

29 cf. Manni, Radunanza 30-32.

30 »... la Maestà dell'Imperator LEOPOLDO degno Figliuolo di sì gran Padre bene mostrò quanta stima facesse della Imperatrice ELEONORA, poiche per mitigare in parte l'acerbezza della di lei Vedouità, fece forza à se medesimo, privandosi di questa Reliquia da lui tenuta in somma veneratione, e in sua mano depositolla«. Manni, Radunanza 32.

31 cf. Manni, Radunanza 33-36.

32 cf. Manni, Radunanza 37-53.

33 cf. Manni, Radunanza 66-68. The anti-Judaic components of the legend of Saint Helena are also reproduced, such as the concealment of the cross and

the conversion of the Jew Judas, the later Saint Quiriacus. Overall, the reader is assumed to be familiar with the legend.

34 cf. Manni, Radunanza 69 f. Following the recovery of the True Cross, Heraclius is said to have brought it to Constantinople. In a triumphal procession on 14 September 629, he had it carried before him.

35 cf. Manni, Radunanza 75 f.

36 cf. Manni, Radunanza 100.

37 cf. Manni, Radunanza 198.

38 In order to secure his claims to the Spanish inheritance, Leopold I postponed his (first) marriage until his cousin and niece, the Infanta Margarita Teresa, had reached a marriageable age of 15. The procurator wedding took place in Madrid at Easter 1666. The new empress did not arrive in Vienna until December 1666.

Tencalla's frescoes show Saint Helena actively and personally caring for slaves and the poor. A special reference to the founder, as well as to the ruling dynasty as a whole, is established by the fact that Helena wears the so-called Rudolfine house crown of the Habsburgs<sup>39</sup>.

Like her great-aunt, Empress Eleonora the Younger was a dedicated patron of court music and musical theatre. She staged numerous operas in honour of the emperor and various family members. During Lent, she regularly performed sacred oratorios, a new genre whose establishment in Vienna was largely due to her influence<sup>40</sup>. Remarkably, a Helena oratorio, composed on a libretto of Pietro Guadagni dedicated to the empress dowager, was performed as early as Lent 1668, a few weeks after the Hofburg fire and the 'miracle' of the recovery of the relic of the Holy Cross<sup>41</sup>. Apart from the narrator («Testo»), an angel and the choir of angels, only two people appear in the short oratorio: Helena («S. Elena») and Emperor Constantine («Costantino»). The libretto presupposes knowledge of the legend of Saint Helena, which it reproduces and interprets in extremely concise form. In the first part, Helena as the «beautiful Amazon of Christ» («Bell'Amazone di Christo») decides to set off for the Orient to snatch the true cross from the ignominious («empi»). Constantine gives his blessing to this plan and encourages his mother to wrest the cross from the barbarians («barbari») <sup>42</sup>. The second part of the oratorio is dedicated to the actual finding of the cross and the reactions to it. Two elements are remarkable here: First of all, Constantine admits to his mother that she outshines him in glory. For while he had indeed defeated Maxentius in the sign of the cross, she had renewed the torment of the underworld – meaning that by finding the True Cross and thus opening the way to the right veneration of the Holy Cross for the faithful, Helena had, so to speak, renewed the redemptive work of Christ<sup>43</sup>. The second remarkable element is that at the very end of the oratorio, it says that the cross must illuminate every place and always remain intact, on earth, in water, in air and in fire – an easily understandable allusion to

the «miracle» of the relic of the cross that had survived the Hofburg fire unscathed<sup>44</sup>. This makes it clear that the praise formulated earlier is not only directed at Saint Helena, but also at her successor Eleonora, who also made a significant contribution to the proper veneration of the Cross.

During the 1683 Lent, the empress dowager again performed an oratorio of Helena, this time composed by Giovanni Battista Pederzuoli<sup>45</sup>. This second oratorio of Saint Helena was thus performed in the year of the second siege of Vienna by the Turks, at a time when the outbreak of a major war against the Ottoman Empire was already foreseeable<sup>46</sup>. Once again, the focus is on Helena's discovery of the True Cross, and once again the Helena legend is assumed to be well-known. However, the theme is realised quite differently than in 1668. The focus is less on the empress's physical departure for Jerusalem and more so on her spiritual struggle. Accordingly, apart from Helena herself, no historical figures appear – not even Constantine – but rather allegorical figures symbolising the good and evil powers: divine love («Amor Divino»), faith («la Fede») and the choir of angels («Coro d'Angioli») on the one hand, the devil («Plutone»), the mortal sin of fear («il Timore, Vizio infernale») and the choir of demons («Coro di Demonii») on the other<sup>47</sup>. In the first part, Helena, strengthened by divine love and faith, struggles to set out in search of the Cross of the Saviour without letting fear dissuade her from this decision. The first part of the oratorio ends with the following cry: «My steadfastness will conquer the fear of terrible danger»<sup>48</sup>. This can certainly be understood as a call for courage in the face of the acute danger of war.

In the second part, the announced victory over the infernal powers takes place through the discovery of the True Cross. But the victory has two other levels: Firstly, it is about the victory of the believing soul over sin. Secondly, the victory over the very earthly threat of the infernal power («potenza infernal») of the Ottomans is implied. The oratorio ends with Helena and the good powers singing «He who serves heaven knows how to rule hell»<sup>49</sup>.

39 cf. Telesko, Kreuzreliquie 203f. (with further references). It should also be noted that in the Kirche am Hof there was also a chapel of St Aloysius, the family saint of the Gonzaga dynasty. On a pillar of this chapel hung a Baroque copy of the image of Our Lady of Old Brno, which was considered to be the work of St Luke and whose finding was also attributed to St Helena. Cf. Kaufmann, Wandbespannungen 21.

40 cf. Deisinger, Oratorien; Deisinger, Tricarico; Deisinger, Aufführungen.

41 cf. Guadagni, S. Elena. On the title page, the single-headed Mantuan eagle is depicted twice. Pietro Guadagni wrote several opera and oratorio libretti for the Imperial court, where he also served as deputy resident of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Cf. Seifert 1619-1792, 602. The composer of the oratorio «S. Elena» is unknown. Perhaps it is Pietro Andrea Ziani, at the time the chapel master of the empress dowager.

42 cf. Guadagni, S. Elena, Parte prima, unpaginated.

43 «Ben son' io quàggiù felice;

Per la nobil mia Vittoria:

Ma di gloria

Tù mi auvanzi ò Genitrice.

Aprir fei con questo segno

A' Massentio il precipito:

Ma supplatio

Tù rinovi al cupo Regno».

Guadagni, S. Elena, Parte seconda, unpaginated.

44 «Illustrar deui ogni loco,  
Erestar[ sic!] mai sempre illeso

In Terra, in Acqua. in Aria, è in mezzo alFoco[sic!]

Guadagni, S. Elena, Parte seconda, unpaginated.

45 cf. Federhöfer-König, Pederzuoli; Deisinger, Pederzuoli. The librettist of this oratorio is unknown.

46 cf. Eickhoff, Venedig 366-368.

47 Pederzuoli, S. Elena.

48 «Vincerà la mia costanza il timor di reo periglio». Pederzuoli, S. Elena, unpaginated.

49 «Chi serve al Ciel  
sa dominar l'inferno». Pederzuoli, S. Elena, unpaginated.

Ibid., Parte seconda, unpaginated. – The theme of the finding of the Holy Cross by Empress Eleonora is also used in other oratorios, e.g. in Savini / Draghi, Potenza della Croce, where in the second part the personification of fire laments that the relic of the cross escaped destruction in the fire of the Hofburg.

«Mà che vedo? Oh me misero!

Della Gran LEONORA un picciol legno

Prefigge alle mie furie e fine e segno» (unpaginated).

Emperor Heraclius was not referred to in a sacred oratorio, but in the opera »L'Eraclio«, which was performed at the Munich court in 1690 in honour of Leopold I. The emperor was on his way back from Augsburg then, where his eldest son, Archduke Joseph, had been elected and crowned King of the Romans – and thus established as his father's successor as Roman Emperor. The libretto – one of the stories of mistaken identity common to Baroque court opera, in which historical figures interact in a completely fictitious plot – has as its subject the deposition of the usurper Phokas by Heraclius, who in the opera is the son of the legitimate Emperor Maurikios deposed by Phokas<sup>50</sup>. The subject – succession of the legitimate heir to the throne – fits the context of Archduke Joseph's election as King of the Romans. Even though the war against the Persian Empire is not addressed directly in the opera, the educated audience was undoubtedly aware that Heraclius had won victory over the Sassanids following his accession to the throne. The dedication to Emperor Leopold establishes the connection with the Great Turkish War, which had already been going on for seven years in 1690, when it expresses in full confidence that just as Heraclius had regained the throne of the Eastern Roman Empire, Leopold was destined to win back the kingdoms and Empires hitherto oppressed by tyranny<sup>51</sup>. This theme is taken up in the *Licenza* following the conclusion of the proper opera plot. In it, we can find not only praise being heaped on Leopold and Joseph, but a statement of confidence that even the »shameful peoples« would be forced to praise his name after their subjugatio<sup>52</sup> – a wish for further victories over the Ottoman Empire that is not difficult to decipher<sup>53</sup>.

When the opera »L'Eraclio« was performed, Empress Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers had already died and her daughter-in-law Eleonore of Palatinate-Neuburg had taken over the patronage of the Order of the Star Cross<sup>54</sup>. The fact that the foundation of the Order of the Star Cross and, in this context, the *Imitatio Sanctae Helenae* were of extraordinary importance to Empress Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers is still evident in the funeral sermons held in her honour in Vienna and Mantua following her death on 6 December 1686.

In his funeral sermon held on 9 January 1687 in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Vienna, the Jesuit Antonius Waggin gives

a detailed account of the founding of the Order of the Star Cross. In this context, he praises the deceased empress as the »other Helena«. A little later, he calls her the »Cross-loving Helena« and at the same time emphasises in which respect the new Helena, in his opinion, equals the old Helena<sup>55</sup>. In the care of the poor, she had even surpassed Helena: According to the testimony of Rufinus and Eusebius, Helena donated clothes to poor »spiritual virgins«. Eleonora, however, personally washed the feet of twelve poor women on Holy Thursday and provided them with plenty of household goods, alms and clothes, which she even had made herself<sup>56</sup>.

On 16 January 1687, Mantua, too, saw a Jesuit hold a funeral sermon in honour of Eleonora. Like Waggin, Nicolò Forti glorifies the deceased empress as the new Helena. He also especially praises her for her veneration of the Holy Cross and goes into detail about the founding of the Order of the Star Cross. Like Waggin, Forti compares the two empresses in favour of Eleonora: The one had found the cross in the earth, the other in the fire; the one had raised it to her diadem, the other to the stars<sup>57</sup>.

In addition to such parallels, however, there are also clear differences between the sermons. In Forti's funeral sermon, there are two references to Byzantium that do not appear in Waggin's sermon: Firstly, he places Eleonora's death in the context of the Great Turkish War, regretting that she had died just at the time when Buda was conquered, Belgrade was about to fall and Byzantium was threatened<sup>58</sup>. Moreover, he names the symbolic Byzantine »capital« of the Gonzaga as a major reason for the marriages of the emperors of the West to Gonzaga princesses, for he claims that they had absorbed the precious last spirits of life of the Eastern Empire through Margherita Paleologa's marriage to Federico Gonzaga<sup>59</sup>. Forti thus explicitly places the deceased empress in a dynastic relationship to the Byzantine Empire, which was essential for her family of origin but was not allowed to play any role for the House of Habsburg, into which she had married. This reference to Byzantium, which remained unconsidered in the context of the empress's representation of power in Vienna, of course, could be duly appreciated in the Mantuan funeral sermon, over which, to a certain extent, the Gonzaga held the sovereignty of interpretation.

50 cf. Bernabei, L'Eraclio, Argomento (unpaginated).

51 »Ella è destinata a riacquistarsi i Regni e gl'Imperi infin'ad hora dall'atruì tirannide oppressi«. Bernabei, L'Eraclio, Dedication (unpaginated).

52 »L'empie Genti  
Vinte e dome  
Son costrette ne lamenti  
Il suo Nome à celebrar«. Bernabei, L'Eraclio 84.

53 Incidentally, this hope united the emperor and his son-in-law, the Bavarian Elector Max II Emanuel, who for a time held the supreme command in the war against the Ottomans.

54 cf. Schmid, Eleonore Magdalena 173 f.

55 Waggin, Ehren-Krantz, unpaginated.

56 cf. Waggin, Ehren-Krantz, unpaginated.

57 »Oh' mancaua anche questo, che LEONORA Imperadrice d'Occidente mouesse lite ad Elena Imperadrice d'Oriente sopra l'inuention della Croce; vna la trouò sotterra, l'altra nel fuoco; vna l'esaltò sul diadema della sua fronte, l'altra l'innalzò fino alle stelle«. Forti, Nelle pompe funerals, unpaginated.

58 »[...] quando vide la Cattolica Fede assisa sulle rovine di Buda espugnata, intimarle cadute à Belgrado, e minnciar le stragi à Bisantio«. Ibid.

59 »Per me credo, che il prouedere di Spose all'Imperio d'Occidente sia vn censo d'Honore a' Gonzaghi; fondato su'l capitale d'hauere in se riceuuti gli vltimi pretiosi spiriti dell'Imperio d'Oriente, in Margherita Paleologa moglie del Duca Federico il fedele«. Ibid. The Gonzagas' claim to the eastern imperial crown (admittedly hardly realisable) was still known in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. Schweder, Theatrum 663.



## Conclusion

It was above all the common ground of Christian emperorship that made references to Byzantium possible and attractive within the framework of the representation of rulership by the Habsburg emperors in the early modern period. In view of the idea of the *Translatio Imperii*, which was essential for the Habsburg emperors' self-image, such references were only conceivable for the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period. For from 800 onwards, according to the theory of translation, the only legitimate Roman emperor was in the West. Like Constantine for the emperors, his legendarily exalted mother Helen played an important role as a role model for the women of the imperial family, and especially for the empress dowager Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers, who virtually portrayed herself as the new Helen. Such references to Constantine and Helen were significantly facilitated by the flourishing veneration of the Holy Cross in post-Triden-

tine Catholicism in general, and in the Habsburg Empire in particular. Emperor Heraclius was also honored for recovering the True Cross, although he did not achieve a status comparable to that of Constantine or Helen. This is also true for other personalities such as Emperor Theodosius II or his sister Pulcheria.

The theory of translation also explains why the genealogical connection between the Gonzaga empresses and the last Byzantine imperial dynasty does not seem to have played any role in the representation of the Viennese court, indeed it does not seem to have been discussed at all. In this case, it can be assumed that the silence was deliberate. For these dynastic connections were undoubtedly known, and in Mantua they were certainly used as an argument for the special dynastic dignity of the Gonzaga. In Vienna, however, such considerations had to take a back seat to the overriding motive of the *Translatio Imperii* and the exclusivity of the Habsburgs' own Western Roman Empire.

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## Summary / Zusammenfassung / Résumé

### Under the Sign of the Cross. References to Byzantium in the Representation of Rulership at the Viennese Court in the Seventeenth Century

It was above all the common ground of Christian emperorship which made references to Byzantium possible and attractive for the early modern Habsburg emperors within the framework of their representation of imperial rulership. In view of the idea of the *Translatio Imperii*, which was essential for the self-perception of the Habsburg emperors, such references were, however, only conceivable for the early Byzantine period. Because according to the theory of the *Translatio Imperii*, from the year 800 onwards, there was only one legitimate Roman emperor: Charlemagne and his Frankish and respectively German successors while the later Byzantine emperors were diminished as »unfaithful« Greeks.

By contrast, some members of the imperial dynasties of the fourth, fifth, sixth and the seventh century played a certain role in the Habsburg representation of imperial rulership. Whereas Constantine served as a model for a Christian emperor, his legendarily exalted mother Helen was an important point of reference for the women of the imperial dynasty. Emperor Heraclius, the recuperator of the True Cross from the Sassanids, was honoured, too, although he did not attain a status comparable to Constantine and Helen.

The paper draws special attention to the empress dowager Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers (1628-1686), an important personality at the Viennese court in the second half of the seventeenth century. She virtually staged herself as the new Helena by founding the Order of the Star Cross in 1668, after a »miracle« connected with a relic of the Holy Cross.



## Unter dem Zeichen des Kreuzes. Bezüge zu Byzanz in der Herrschaftsrepräsentation am Wiener Hof im 17. Jahrhundert

Vor allem die gemeinsame Grundlage des christlichen Kaisertums machte Bezüge zu Byzanz für die frühneuzeitlichen Habsburger Kaiser im Rahmen ihrer Darstellung der kaiserlichen Herrschaft möglich und attraktiv. Angesichts der für das Selbstverständnis der Habsburger Kaiser wesentlichen Idee der *Translatio Imperii* waren solche Bezüge jedoch nur für die frühbyzantinische Zeit denkbar. Denn nach der Theorie der *Translatio Imperii* gab es seit dem Jahr 800 nur noch einen legitimen römischen Kaiser: Karl den Großen und seine fränkischen bzw. deutschen Nachfolger, während die späteren byzantinischen Kaiser zu »untreuen« Griechen degradiert wurden. Demgegenüber spielten einige Mitglieder der Kaiserfamilien des 4., 5., 6. und 7. Jahrhunderts eine gewisse Rolle in der habsburgischen Darstellung der kaiserlichen Herrschaft. Während Konstantin als Vorbild für einen christlichen Kaiser diente, war seine legendär verehrte Mutter Helena ein wichtiger Bezugspunkt für die Frauen der Kaiserdynastie. Auch Kaiser Herakleius, der das Heilige Kreuz von den Sassaniden zurückeroberte, wurde verehrt, obwohl er keinen mit Konstantin und Helena vergleichbaren Status erlangte.

Besondere Aufmerksamkeit widmet der Beitrag der Kaiserinwitwe Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers (1628-1686), einer wichtigen Persönlichkeit am Wiener Hof in der zweiten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts. Sie inszenierte sich selbst als neue Helena, indem sie 1668 nach einem »Wunder« im Zusammenhang mit einer Reliquie des Heiligen Kreuzes den Sternkreuzorden gründete.

## Sous le signe de la croix. Références à Byzance dans la représentation du pouvoir à la cour de Vienne au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle

C'est avant tout le fondement commun de l'empire chrétien qui rendait les références à Byzance possibles et attrayantes pour les empereurs Habsbourg du début de l'époque moderne dans le cadre de leur représentation du pouvoir impérial. Cependant, compte tenu de l'idée de *translatio imperii*, essentielle à l'identité des empereurs Habsbourg, de telles références n'étaient concevables que pour la période byzantine primitive. En effet, selon la théorie de la *translatio imperii*, il n'y avait plus qu'un seul empereur romain légitime depuis l'an 800: Charlemagne et ses successeurs francs respectivement allemands, tandis que les empereurs byzantins ultérieurs étaient relégués au rang de Grecs » infidèles ». En revanche, certains membres des familles impériales des IV<sup>e</sup>, V<sup>e</sup>, VI<sup>e</sup> et VII<sup>e</sup> siècles jouèrent un certain rôle dans la représentation habsbourgeoise de la souveraineté impériale. Alors que Constantin servait de modèle pour un empereur chrétien, sa mère Hélène, vénérée comme une légende, était une référence importante pour les femmes de la dynastie impériale. L'empereur Héraclius, qui a reconquis la Sainte Croix des Sassanides, était également vénéré, même s'il n'a pas atteint un statut comparable à celui de Constantin et Hélène.

Cet article accorde une attention particulière à l'impératrice douairière Éléonore Gonzague-Nevers (1628-1686), personnalité importante de la cour de Vienne dans la seconde moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Elle se mit en scène comme une nouvelle Hélène en fondant l'Ordre de la Croix Étoile en 1668, après un »miracle« lié à une relique de la Sainte Croix.