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AN ANCIENT STATUE OF THE EMPRESS HELEN REIDENTIFIED (?)

IRVING LAVIN

During Rubens' first visit to Rome in 1601–1602, he executed three paintings, now in the hospital at Grasse, for the chapel of Saint Helen in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme.¹ The church embodies part of a Constantinian imperial palace, and the chapel dedicated to St. Helen, Constantine's mother, was supposed to have been installed in her own chamber. Two of Rubens' paintings, the *Raising of the Cross* and the *Crowning with Thorns*, decorated the lateral walls of the chapel, while the third, which shows Helen holding the True Cross, hung over the altar. When the pictures were removed toward the middle of the eighteenth century, the altarpiece was replaced by an antique statue (Fig. 1) restored to represent St. Helen in a kind of composite imitation of Rubens' figure (Fig. 3) and that by Andrea Bolgi in Saint Peter's (1629–1640; Fig. 4).² It is possible, however, that Rubens' and Bolgi's figures may themselves have been related to the ancient one, to which, even discounting the restorations, they seem to bear more than a generic resemblance in pose and drapery arrangement.

The unusual, if not unique,³ circumstance of placing an ancient statue on a Christian altar may be explained in this case by a passage in one of the manuscripts of Pirro Ligorio (1513/14–1583) describing an excavation of the mid-sixteenth century in the garden behind the basilica of Santa Croce.⁴ Ligorio reports that statues of Constantine and his sons were found, as well as one of Helen together with its base. The base (Fig. 2), which contains an important dedicatory inscription to the empress, was placed in the church, where it flanks the entrance opposite

the altar of the Saint Helen chapel.⁵ There is no subsequent record of the statue,⁶ but there are good reasons to suspect that it is identical with the one placed on Saint Helen's altar two centuries later. The figure answers perfectly to Ligorio's description: ". . . she was dressed in a long stole down to the feet, and palliated, that is, with a beautiful mantle about . . ." The statue suits the base neatly with respect to size (they are reproduced in approximately the correct relationship in Figs. 1 and 2).⁷ The top of the base has two depressions spaced diagonally as if to receive a figure with its left foot forward, in close correspondence with the pose of the statue.⁸

The inscription on the base makes it possible to date the dedication rather closely. It refers to Helen as the grandmother of Constantine II and Constantius II, both of whom are called *caesar*. Constantine had two other sons: Crispus, the eldest, who was killed in 326 A.D., and Constans, the youngest, who was appointed caesar in 333 A.D.⁹ The absence of their names in the inscription fixes those years as the *termini post* and *ante quem*. The year of Helen's own death, whether 329 or 336–337, is uncertain;¹⁰ the earlier date would narrow the range still further.

The statue is authentically classical in style and there is little possibility that it was produced in the early fourth century, even during the phase of classical revival that seems to have emerged during Constantine's reign (306–337).¹¹ It was probably an earlier work reused. In any case, a close parallel is provided by the famous seated figure, the so-called *Agrippina*, in the Capitoline Museum, which has recently been shown to be a portrait of Helen.¹² The Capitoline figure is also strongly classical in style, and revives a much earlier type.¹³

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1 C. Ruelens, *Correspondance de Rubens*, Antwerp, 1887, I, 41ff.; M. Rooses, *L'oeuvre de Pierre-Paul Rubens*, Antwerp, 1889, II, 281f.; M. de Maeyer, "Rubens in de Altaarstukken in het Hospitaal te Grasse," *Gentse Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis*, 14, 1953, 75ff.

2 R. Besozzi, *La storia della basilica di Santa Croce in Gerusalemme*, Rome, 1750, 83f.; S. Ortolani, *S. Croce in Gerusalemme (Le chiese di Roma illustrate*, No. 6), Rome [n.d.], 61. The restorations are described in F. Matz and F. Von Duhn, *Antike Bildwerke in Rom*, Leipzig, 1881ff., I, 153, No. 584, and P. Zancani Montuoro, "Repliche romane di una statua fidiaca," *Bullettino della commissione archeologica comunale di Roma*, 61, 1933, 37 n. 18.

The relationships between these works are discussed by the writer in *Bernini and the Crossing of Saint Peter's* (Monograph of the College Art Association of America), in press.

3 W. Amelung, "Di statue antiche trasformate in figure di santi," *RM*, 12, 1897, 71ff.

4 "Cavandosi alle spese di monsignor Sebastiano Gualtieri vescovo Viterbense dalla parte di dietro dell'Horto di Santa croce in Hierosolyme, in certi belli edifici rovinati, vi furono trovate le statue et della Diva Helena, et del grande Constantino et de figliuoli armate et quella della Helena era vestita d'una stola longa insino alli piedi et palliata cio'è con un bello mantello attorno . . . La base ridotta nella chiesa di santa croce." (R. Lanciani, *Storia degli scavi di Roma*, Rome, 1902ff. III, 163)

On Bishop Gualterio cf. G. Signorelli, *Viterbo nella storia della chiesa*, Viterbo, 1907ff., II, pt. 2, *passim*; H. Jedin, *Krisis und Wendepunkt des trienter Konzils (1562/63)*, Würzburg, 1941, 1ff.

5
DOMINAE•NOSTRAE•FL•IVI
HELENAE PISSIMAE•AVG•
GENETRICI•D•N•CONSTAN
TINI MAXIMI VICTORIS
CLEMENTISSIMI SEMPER
AVGVSTI AVIAE CONSTAN
TINI ET CONSTANTII BEATIS
SIMORVM AC FLORENTIS
SIMORVM CAESARVM

IVLIVS MAXIMILIANVS•VC•COMES
PIETATI EIVS SEMPER DICATIS•

CIL, VI, pt. 1, 235, No. 1134; VI, pt. 4, fasc. 2, 3079, No. 31243; A. M. Colini, "Horti spei veteris, Palatium Sessorianum," *AttiPontAcc*, 3rd ser., *Memorie*, 8, 1955, 147, fig. 12.

6 In recent guides it is sometimes stated that the Santa Croce statue was found at Ostia; this is based on a misreading of Ortolani, *S. Croce in Gerusalemme*, 61, who notes that it belongs to a common Juno type, of which one example was found at Ostia in 1858 and acquired by the Vatican (cf. W. Amelung, *Die Skulpturen des vaticanischen Museums*, Berlin, 1903ff., I, 98f., No. 83, pl. 13); on the type, cf. Zancani Montuoro, "Repliche romane di una statua fidiaca."

7 Statue: 198cm to top of head; base: 135cm high x 99cm wide x 74cm deep.

8 The figure's left foot and the underlying half of the plinth are original. I imagine that originally metal clamps projected from the underside of the plinth beneath the feet, and fitted into the depressions in the top of the base. Depressions of this kind occur frequently on ancient statue bases.

9 Cf. *RE*, IV, 2, 1723, and IV, 1, 948, respectively.

10 See the references given by R. Calza, "Cronologia ed identificazione dell' 'Agrippina' capitolina," *AttiPontAcc*, 3rd ser., *Memorie*, 8, 1955, 131 n. 71.

11 Cf. A. Rumpf, *Stilphasen der spätantiken Kunst* (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen. Geisteswissenschaften. Abhandlung. Vol. 44), Cologne and Opladen, 1957, 12ff.; I. Lavin, "The Ceiling Frescoes at Trier and Illusionism in Constantinian Painting," to appear in *DOPapers*, 21, 1967.

12 Calza, "Cronologia ed identificazione dell' 'Agrippina' capitolina," 107ff.

13 The suggestion recently advanced (H. von Heintze, in W. Helbig, *Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Altertümer in Rom*, 4th ed., Tübingen, II, 1966, No. 1326, 153f.), that the Capitoline statue itself may be an earlier work into which the portrait head of Helen was inserted, seems to me quite unjustified. The sculpture is virtually identical in type, treatment of drapery and portrait head to the seated figure of Helen in the Uffizi, where the head and body are carved from the same block (cf. G. A. Mansuelli, *Galleria degli Uffizi, Le sculture*, Rome, 1958–61, II, 131 No. 171).

1



2



3



4



1. Ancient statue restored as St. Helen. Rome, Santa Croce in Gerusalemme
2. Base of a statue dedicated to the Empress Helen (from a cast). Rome, Santa Croce in Gerusalemme (photo: Museo di Roma)

3. Rubens, *St. Helen* (formerly in Rome, Santa Croce in Gerusalemme). Grasse, Hospital (photo: Archives photographiques, Paris)
4. Andrea Bolgi, *St. Helen*. Rome, Saint Peter's (photo: Anderson)