Symbolic Liturgical Connections and Popular Veneration in Late Antiquity

Sharon Bozorgi

Cl C Independent Study
Dr. Scott Johnson
Fall 2016
Symbolic Liturgical Connections and Popular Veneration in Late Antiquity

Beginning in the fourth century, Constantine the Great both directly and indirectly influenced the eventual Christian conversion of the Roman Empire. Subsequently the discovery of the True Cross by his pious mother, Helena Augusta, encouraged the creation of legends surrounding the finding of the relic. The True Cross continued to be held in high regard as a physical object of veneration through the early seventh century: specifically by the Emperor Heraclius who commenced a military campaign against the Sasanian Persian Empire in order to recover the cross. During the same period the Virgin Mary, or Theotokos, became an object of popular veneration in cult worship and was presented to the people through iconography. The True Cross and imagery of the Virgin were established in late antiquity as key symbols of Christian victory over death, and of the Roman Empire’s victory over its enemies. These two together found joint expression in the early seventh century as imperial symbolism of Christian power in the eastern Mediterranean.

I. True Cross

It has been recorded that in AD 312 Constantine the Great received a vision prior to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge against Maxentius.¹ This account was documented by early historians such as Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius. Following their works, other cultures in late antiquity transcribed their own accounts of Constantine’s vision. It is important to recognize

the symbolism of the cross in all versions of the legend. Eusebius describes Constantine’s vision in his work, *Life of Constantine*: “he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light.”

Constantine’s vision identifies for many his conversion to Christianity. He promoted his policy of Christianity after he gained sole power in AD 324. The Emperor’s conversion resulted in demonstrations of his newfound faith through the building of churches across the empire. Jan Willem Drijvers argues that through his reforms, Constantine demonstrated his intention of converting the Roman Empire into a Christian state.

Legends of Constantine’s vision expanded and even reached the surrounding enemies of the Roman Empire: the Goths and Sarmatians, who also developed their own version of the myth. In those accounts Constantine’s vision is described as “a miraculous light that shone above him in the shape of the cross and letters written by stars whose reading taught him: in this [sign] you will conquer.” Drijvers acknowledges the significance of the symbolism of the cross in his work, “The Power of the Cross: Celestial Cross Appearances in the Fourth Century.” He states that both legends represent the cross as a symbol of victory. “This cross brings Constantine his victory over his barbarian enemies.” Drijvers also theorizes that the eventual discovery of the

---


5 Ibid., 56.

6 Ibid., 57.


True Cross by Constantine the Great’s mother, Helena, represented the defeat of Christian enemies.\(^9\) The tradition of the cross as a symbol of triumph would later influence the military leader Heraclius in the seventh century.

Later legends claim that Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, discovered the True Cross sometime between the years AD 326 and 328, which was followed by her pilgrimage to Palestine in AD 333.\(^\text{10}\) The first source that gives a full account of the discovery of the Cross by Helena is Ambrose’s *De Obitu Theodosii*, composed in AD 395.\(^\text{11}\) Her finding and journey coincided with the “period of the Constantinian building [of] the Holy Land.”\(^\text{12}\) Prior to Helena’s pilgrimage, there is no documentation regarding her whereabouts or her ideals about Christianity. Yet, concerning Helena’s religion, E. D. Hunt speculates that her devout Christian views may have been prompted by witnessing, along with her son, the unleashing of persecution against the Christians, and by observing the mistreatment of the Christians by the Emperor Diocletian.\(^\text{13}\)

During her pilgrimage she travelled with the name Augusta. It was a name she had been honored with in celebration of Constantine’s success at Chrysopolis in AD 324.\(^\text{14}\) After Helena’s

---


\(^\text{11}\) Ibid., 95.


\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 30.
discovery of the True Cross, she was celebrated as an equal partner to her son, and was awarded equal titles. Furthermore, Helena came to be considered as the exemplary Christian empress.

Constantine is identified as one of the first historical persons who portrays the True Cross as a symbol of triumph. Others, such as Cyril of Jerusalem, also demonstrated this use of the True Cross during the mid fourth century. He called upon the symbolism of the True Cross in order to achieve his efforts and to cement his power as bishop of Jerusalem. Cyril had been born in Jerusalem in the early fourth century, and was later appointed as presbyter by the bishop Maximus. Cyril was sent into exile multiple times by his opponents in the Arian party, after conflicts concerning his orthodoxy. Later in life, Cyril’s struggle for power and the promotion of Jerusalem were often complicated due to his strained relationship with Arian emperors, even after his return. It is important to note Cyril’s targeted goals. Drijvers imagines Cyril aimed for the “recognition of Jerusalem’s pre-eminence as an apostolic see in the church province of Palestine but also in the Christian world as a whole, the obtaining of metropolitan rights, as well as the creation of a profoundly Christian Jerusalem.”

Cyril of Jerusalem emphasized the glory of the cross within the catholic church by writing a letter to Emperor Constantius II describing a cross appearing across the sky above

---


18 Ibid., 80, 81.

19 Ibid., 85.
Jerusalem. This event is noted to have taken place on the 7th of May, in AD 351: “there appeared a luminous cross in the sky above Golgotha which extended as far as the Mount of Olives.” According to Jan Willem Drijvers, Cyril alleges that he wrote the Arian Emperor, despite their previous conflicts, in order to provide conclusive proof of support for Constantius’s rule and military campaigns. This was Cyril’s attempt to create a stronger connection between the Christian emperor and Jerusalem. “For Cyril, the Cross was special to Jerusalem and a vital part of his theology.” Drijvers goes as far as speculating that Cyril possibly concocted his story about the cross to “demonstrate God’s special care for Jerusalem” with the victorious sign. This would distinguish his own specific episcopal outlook. Drijvers continues by stating that the True Cross was prominent in the liturgical worship of Jerusalem and Cyril was responsible for the development of this observance.

Many myths surround the discovery of the True Cross by Helena. Also known as the *inventio crucis*, the myths have three separate trajectories: the Helena legend, the Protonike legend, and the Judas Kyriakos legend. All of these versions were “originated, developed and circulated between the second half of the fourth and the first half of the fifth century C.E.”

---

20 Ibid., 86.


22 Ibid., 135.

23 Ibid., 135.

24 Ibid., 136.


26 Ibid., 89.

Stefan Heid argues that stories of the True Cross developed as a way for pilgrims to display their devotions, yet Hunt believes that the legends were created in order to provide a connection to Constantine’s buildings and the presence of the cross in Jerusalem.\(^{28}\)

There is a question as to how Helena came to be involved in the legends of the finding of the True Cross. Jan Willem Drijvers claims that the original legend was developed in the second half of the fourth century.\(^{29}\) Furthermore, Drijvers discredits the Helena legends entirely. He states that if Helena had any part in the discovery of the True Cross, Cyril would have mentioned this fact in his *Catecheses*, and in his letter to Constantius II.\(^{30}\) Either legends of the finding of the cross with the involvement of Helena had not been in circulation during the time, or simply, Cyril did not know about them.\(^{31}\) Yet, Drijvers states that it was on account of Helena’s travels to Jerusalem, her connection with Constantine’s construction of churches across the Roman Empire, and the general known fact of her piety, that led to the popularity of her legends.\(^{32}\)

The True Cross had become a “simultaneous symbol of the new religion’s victory over death and of the regenerated empire’s victory over its enemies.”\(^{33}\) After the installation of the relic in the Great Church, the court of Emperor Justin II attempted to combine adoration for both

---


\(^{29}\) Ibid., 138-139.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 140.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 140.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 119.

the emperor and the cross. In this effort the Emperor’s court also established a future movement towards the worship of relics in the veneration of the city.

II. Theotokos

The cult of the Theotokos, or Virgin Mary, arose early in the fifth century at the Council of Ephesus and placed the Virgin as a symbol of devotion for her devout followers. The term *theotokos* literally means “God-bearer,” yet today it is sometimes translated as “Mother of God.” Michael P. Carrol argues that the emergence of the cult during the time was the “result of an interaction between the Church hierarchy and one fairly large segment of the Church’s new constituency.” Carrol further states that as long as the cult did not challenge any of the “central Christological doctrines of Christianity,” then the church would have deemed the cult to have been a positive sect of Christianity: further establishing the people’s dedication to the religion.

The Theotokos image manifested itself as a symbolic protector of Constantinople: specifically in the year AD 626, when the city was seized by both the Avars and the Persians. Averil Cameron states: “her icon saves the people; she herself, they knew, had fought alongside


35 Ibid., 160.


38 Ibid., 83-84.

39Ibid., 84.
them in the battle.”

Cameron notes the intervention of the Virgin Mary during this time through the *History of Theophylact Simocatta*:

> [God] by the welcome intercession of his undefiled Mother, who is in truth our Lady Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary, with his mighty hand saved this humble city of his from the utterly goddess enemies who encircled it in concert.

As the popularity of the Virgin grew, she was depicted in “apse decoration and panel paintings” as a symbol of victory for the people of Constantinople.

The Theotokos even obtained her own hymn, the Akathistos, symbolizing the steadfast growth of the people’s devotion to her since the Council of Ephesus, where she received the title of Theotokos. Additionally, an exemplary hymn was written by the Latin author Corippus in the sixth century. It is a direct prayer to the Virgin Mary herself. Cameron observes that Corippus strays away from the tradition of standard Latin hymns in his writing, thus expressing himself fully in his religious ideals. Cameron also observes that the Theotokos is presented in Corippus’ hymn as a “divine personage” in the style of a Latin epic. This was similar to Virgil’s

---


44 Ibid., 82.
Venus appearing to Aeneas.\textsuperscript{45} In addition, within a few years after the Council of Ephesus, Mary had a church in Rome dedicated to her.\textsuperscript{46}

Those who praised the Theotokos became connected with the politics of the Roman Empire through the Emperor Maurice (AD 582-602).\textsuperscript{47} The Emperor started a new trend of unconventional Christian rites performances in order to reassure the people that “God was on the side of the Roman Empire.”\textsuperscript{48} Maurice’s attention to the cult of the Theotokos additionally helped expose his rule to the admiration of the populace.\textsuperscript{49} He even founded liturgical feasts and processions to honor the Virgin.\textsuperscript{50} Averil Cameron agrees that Maurice “evolved a style of governing which integrated the imperial court with contemporary taste, and which gave the Byzantine monarchy sufficient sense of identity and single-mindedness to enable it to ride out coming blows of ever-increasing magnitude.”\textsuperscript{51}

While the Western world celebrated the Theotokos, celebration of the Virgin as “queen” was not known in the East. Yet, due to a recently discovered mosaic in Durazzo, Albania, there is a suggestion that the cult was starting to make an appearance in the East by the end of the sixth


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 159.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 160.


Further East, the Theotokos came to the attention of the Shah of the Sasanian Persian Empire, Khusrau I. This is recorded in the History of Theophylact, which is the main surviving source for the Roman-Persian wars of AD 572-91. Theophylact records that Khusrau I had told Bishop Probes of Chalcedon that he had received a prophecy from the Virgin Mary, promising Khusrau I “victories comparable to those of Alexander the Great.” While Theophylact mainly gathered historical content from the works of John of Epiphania, the source of Khusrau’s prophecy is unknown. Yet the record of the Shah’s prophecy yet again displays they Virgin Mary as not only a protector, but also as a symbol of victory.

After the fifth century, the cult of the Theotokos continued to grow with emphasis on her “miraculous virginity and her divine motherhood.”

III. Sasanian Persian Empire

The Sasanian Persian Empire ruled in the East in Late Antiquity. According to James Howard-Johnston, the Empire had continuously confronted the Roman Empire since AD 224. The Sasanians maintained an ideological clash with the Western world when it came to politics, yet they each respected one another’s military strength. Howard-Johnston speculates that their deteriorating relationship was due to the fact that each empire in turn took advantage of the

---


54 Ibid., 241.

55 Ibid., 241.


temporary weakness or distraction of the other. They went on the set out large-scale attacks and attempted to recruit nomadic allies against one another.\textsuperscript{58}

James Howard-Johnston claims that the only “continuous indigenous historical narrative” that survives from the Sasanian period is the \textit{Khwadaynamag}, otherwise known as the “Book of Lords.”\textsuperscript{59} It is assumed that the book has been preserved since the reign of Khusrau I, who most likely commissioned the text. While it is regarded as a historical source, the \textit{Khwadaynamag} also appears to have been used as propaganda for the Shah.

During the early sixth century, tolerance of the Christian faith was present in Persia due to the peace treaty in AD 526 between the Sasanian King Khusrau I and Justinian.\textsuperscript{60} The treaty guaranteed a freedom to Christians so that they could practice their religion in the Persian Empire. The same freedom was given to the Zoroastrian Persians in the Byzantine Empire.\textsuperscript{61} Yet the Sasanian Persian Empire maintained a strict Zoroastrian faith in late antiquity. Any attempt at conversion to Christianity was strictly forbidden.\textsuperscript{62} Nevertheless, Khusrau II (AD 590-628) maintained a pro-Christian attitude. This is documented in the works of the Byzantine historian, Theophylact Simocatta. Khusrau II believed that he owed his rule to the Roman Christian Emperor Maurice, and in return he allowed the Christians to build churches in Persia and adopt

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58} James Howard-Johnston, “State and Society in Late Antique Iran,” in \textit{The Idea of Iran: The Sasanian Era}, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 121.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 119.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, \textit{Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 226.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 225-226.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 226.
\end{itemize}
the Christian faith. Once more, an extraordinary fact concerning Khusrau II was that he married a Christian woman himself. Her name was Seirem, or Shirin. Their relationship was soon the source of many Persian romance tales. Ultimately in the following century, the East-West conflict grew prior to the reign of Emperor Heraclius. The phase of deterioration between the empires is known to have ended in AD 502: when Kavad I launched an attack against the Romans in western Armenia and northern Mesopotamia. James Howard-Johnston concludes that this was a way for the Shah to re-assert his authority and interest on a “common foreign enterprise.” This clash concluded in another rift between the Persians and Romans: resulting in the eventual capture of the True Cross by Sasanian commander Romiuzan in AD 614.

It is documented that the main goal of the Sasanian commander Romiuzan was to transport the True Cross to Ktesiphon. This account is documented by ancient historian al-Tabari, in his work the *Annals*. This work has been used as a principle source for the history of the Sasanian Empire.

---


66 Ibid., 63


68 Ibid., 230.

In the spring of AD 626, Khusrau II confidently believed that victory was within his reach in his battle against Heraclius.\textsuperscript{70} Therefore the Shah prematurely commissioned various monuments across the Sasanian Persian Empire in order to celebrate and commemorate his victory. A large “rock-cut screen, its preparation more advanced” in comparison to other monuments is seen at Naqsh-i Rustam (pictured below).\textsuperscript{71}

While there is no evidence linking the site to Khusrau II, James Howard-Johnston believes that only Khusrau II would have commissioned and left an incomplete relief so grand. This is significant because if Khusrau II did commission one of the unfinished reliefs at the cite, then it can suggest his trust in the premonition of victory presented to Khusrau I by the Virgin Mary.


\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., IX 95.

\textsuperscript{72} Bozorgi, Sharon. \textit{NAQSH-I RUSTAM}. July 2016, Shiraz, Iran.
IV. Heraclius

According to Drijvers, the long reign of Heraclius from the years AD 610-641 consisted of one of the most important turning-points in history. While this generation witnessed the end of Antiquity, Heraclius succeeded in military achievements that defeated the Sassanian Persians and restored the True Cross back to Jerusalem.\(^73\)

Prior to the reign of Heraclius, various campaigns had already been conducted against the Sassanian Persian empire: Justin II (AD 565-78), Tiberius (AD 578-82), and Maurice (AD 582-602).\(^74\) In AD 602, Emperor Maurice was overthrown and put to death by Phocas, who was a military officer supported by Balkan troops.\(^75\) In September of AD 608, Heraclius set out a coup against Phocas.\(^76\) Phil Booth analyzes the two directions the coup proceeded in: first, Heraclius went across the sea to the capital; second Nicetas, his cousin, proceeded to seize Alexandria in order to deprive Constantinople of the grain supply.\(^77\) Heraclius became Emperor in October of AD 610, and Phocas was killed.\(^78\) These accounts were documented by the Greek historian Menander Protector.\(^79\)


\(^75\) Ibid., 195.

\(^76\) Phil Booth, Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 50.

\(^77\) Ibid., 50.


\(^79\) Ibid., 192.
Booth speculates that Persian forces most likely took advantage of Heraclius’s rebellion against Phocas in order to cross the Euphrates in AD 610 and invade provinces along the Mediterranean.\(^{80}\) In AD 611, Persian forces under the leadership of Khusrau II captured Caesarea in Cappadocia.\(^{81}\) They seized Jerusalem and took with them the True Cross, making it a great defeat for the Romans. In response, Heraclius began preparing his campaign against the Persians by gathering a large army and melting down church treasures. These valuables included a “bronze ox that stood in the Forum Bovis in Constantinople.”\(^{82}\) Furthermore, with his newly obtained alliance with the Turks, Heraclius was able to embark for Persian territory.\(^{83}\)

While heading towards Persia, Heraclius carried with him an icon of the Virgin Mary. Walter E. Kaegi states that the Emperor’s act displayed the embodiment of the “growing significance of veneration of icons and the growing importance of the cult of the Theotokos.”\(^{84}\) The Virgin, or Theotokos, showed that Heraclius was campaigning with the “aid of God.”\(^{85}\) Averil Cameron also consents to the fact that the Virgin Mary was used by Heraclius in order to display the “general leading of the inhabitants of Constantinople to victory.”\(^{86}\)

Emperor Heraclius’s faith in the protection of the Virgin during his campaign against the Persians is well-documented. One source which displays his confidence in the Theotokos is the

---

\(^{80}\) Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 88.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 88.


\(^{83}\) Ibid., 197.


\(^{85}\) Ibid., 113.

speech of Theodore the Synkellos for the siege of Constantinople in AD 626.\textsuperscript{87} Kaegi states that while the source is “admittedly an embellished piece of rhetoric, it does contain valuable material concerning events and their framing and exposition.” \textsuperscript{88}

Raising his hands to heaven he cried out to the Lord, “You, Lord, who see and know everything, know that to you and to the Virgin [the one willingly giving birth] I have entrusted my children and the city and you people who inhabit it…guard for me according to your law the city undamaged and unharmed, which I have committed to the strength of your power and that of the Theotokos, the mother of grace.\textsuperscript{89}

Patriarch Sergios, an official for Heraclius, is also known to have carried the icon of the Virgin “around the city walls and through the city as a supernatural defense.”\textsuperscript{90}

Averil Cameron expands upon the indifference of the Persian nobles during the Roman campaign. In AD 628, with Khusrau defeated, Heraclius successfully recovered the True Cross.\textsuperscript{91} Khusrau was put to death and replaced by his son, Kavadh Shiroe. The Shah’s successor attempted to negotiate with Heraclius the return of the cross to the Persian military general who had led the original attack upon Jerusalem, Shahrbaraz.\textsuperscript{92} Ultimately, Kavadh claimed Heraclius as “the most clement Roman emperor, our Brother” and Heraclius was then able to return


\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 7.


\textsuperscript{91} Averil Cameron, \textit{The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395-700} (New York: Routledge, 2012), 197.

\textsuperscript{92} Phil Booth, \textit{Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 156.
triumphantly to Jerusalem with the True Cross. Khusrau II had previously approached Emperor Maurice in the same manner, or a comparable *captatio benevolentiae*, in order to gain a mutual respect and understanding of the emperor. The peace treaty between the Romans and the Persians was sealed in AD 628. While there is no source with the exact terms of the *foedus*, Dignas and Winter explain in their book *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals*, that Theophanies Confessor in AD 800, who had completed the historical chronicle of Georgics Synkellos, hinted at some of the treaty terms. For example, it is learned that Heraclius allowed the Persians in Roman territory to safely return to the Sasanian Empire, under the supervision of his brother, Theodore.

After the recovery of the cross in AD 628, Emperor Heraclius took on the Greek title of *basileus* to celebrate his triumph. During the same year, the Persian leaders were able to reach an agreement: “Shahrbarz would cede the Eastern Roman territories that Khusrau had conquered and, furthermore, restore the Cross to Roman hands.” Phil Booth notes that while these terms were not recorded, it can be inferred. In the July of AD 629, the arrangement between

---


95 Ibid., 150.

96 Ibid., 150-151.


98 Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 156.

99 Ibid., 156.
Shahrbarz and Heraclius was completed with a marriage between the General’s daughter and the Emperor’s son.100

After Heraclius’s restoration of the True Cross to Jerusalem, poets composed works that described the importance and theological meaning of this event. Booth specifically quotes the work of George of Pisidia; a court poet who recorded the importance of the restoration of the True Cross in his work *On the Restoration of the Cross.*101 “Now, O emperor, you hold the power of mystic rule among us, and all the country, city, and cosmos exalt with one voice the grace bestowed upon you.”102 George of Pisida praises Heraclius in this sentence for returning the True Cross. The court poet also explains how the return of the sacred relic reunited the people.

V. Iconography

Ancient icons are known to have been used in the late fifth and early sixth centuries.103 These icons were known as *Acheiropoieta,* or “images not made by human hands.”104 It was believed that the productions of holy images were established as miraculous manifestations of divine power.105 For example, iconographies of the Virgin Mary were utilized by the Roman Emperor Heraclius as a “kind of battlefield palladium” during the military campaigns against the Sasanian Empire.106

100 Phil Booth, *Crisis of Empire: Doctrine and Dissent at the End of Late Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 159.

101 Ibid., 159.


104 Ibid., 30.

105 Ibid., 30.

106 Ibid., 30.
When the Virgin Mary was first declared as the Theotokos at the Council of Ephesus, it was claimed that “through her the Logos was incarnated.”107 Logos is equivalent to God, who was “there from the beginning.”108 Philo of Alexandria had believed that Logos (reason) was a way for God to act in the physical world.109 Yet, when analyzed in John 1:1, Logos is thought to be the “divine principle of reason that gives order to the universe and links the human mind to the mind of God.”110 Nike Koutrakou claims that even in the most formal texts, the Virgin played a major role:

If anyone does not admit the Ever-Virgin Mary to be primarily and truly the Mother of God and higher than all things created both visible and invisible and with genuine faith does not implore her intercession, sinc she has freedom of speech with the son who was born of her, let him be anathema.111

Yet, Nike Koutrakou argues that the “exploitation of the images of the Virgin Mary” before and after iconoclasm represents a “link between the theological arguments and the political and state objectives of the era.”112

---


109 Ibid.


The worship of iconography was interrupted by an era known as Iconoclasm, which began in AD 680. During this time holy images were ordered to be destroyed, because they were believed to have been heretical. In the iconoclast definition, representation of the Logos was forbidden. Angeliki Lymberopoulou claims that iconography prior to the iconoclastic period falls into different classes: “surviving known icons, references to acheiropoieta, allusions in contemporary written sources, and the wider range of religious images in mosaic, fresco or other media in addition to the panel paintings on wood.”

VI. Conclusion

The Christian religion became standard in the Roman Empire after the initial influence of Constantine the Great in the fourth century. The legends of the finding of the True Cross by the Emperor’s mother, Helena Augusta, encouraged the popular veneration of physical objects in the period of late antiquity. The True Cross continued to be revered through the seventh century. It was also in this period that the cult of the Theotokos and worship of the Virgin Mary was established. The Sasanian Empire captured Jerusalem, under the leadership of Khusrau II in AD 614. This prompted an opposing military campaign against the Persians by the Roman Emperor Heraclius. During his campaign, Heraclius symbolically used iconography of the Virgin Mary as a source of protection and successfully recovered the True Cross in AD 628.

Heraclius was not the only emperor to have interpreted divine symbolism as a sign of protection and victory. Legend says that Constantine originally had a vision of a cross before the

---

115 Ibid., 53.
battle of the Milvian Bridge, prior to his Christian conversion. Even the Persian Shah, Khusrau I
claimed that he had a vision of the Virgin Mary claiming to him his success against the West.

It is apparent that both the True Cross and imagery of the Virgin Mary were established in
late antiquity as key symbols of Christian victory over death, and of the Roman Empire’s victory
over its enemies. Together they found joint expression in the early seventh century as imperial
symbolism of Christian power in the eastern Mediterranean. Later in the seventh century,
veneration of icons and holy images were interrupted by the period of Iconoclasm. This era
lasted only until the mid-ninth century when icons were established again as key elements of
veneration within the Orthodox church.
Bibliography


Bozorgi, Sharon. *NAQSH-I RUSTAM*. July 2016, Shiraz, Iran.


