CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL PROLOGUE:
WOMEN OF THE HOUSES OF
CONSTANTINE AND THEODOSIOS

The first centuries of the Roman Empire witnessed important developments in the role and representation of the empress, but the powerful empresses of the Houses of Constantine and Theodosios during the fourth and fifth centuries provide the precedents most relevant to early Byzantine women’s patronage and other public displays of authority. Livia (58 B.C.–A.D. 29), the wife of the first Augustus, looms large as a paradigm for Roman women, whether imperial or not. Livia’s patronage in Rome inspired women’s patronage throughout the Empire, such as that of Eumachia of Pompeii. The very presence of women in public monuments is constitutive of the imperial period, for in the Republican era only Cornelia, as the mother of the Gracchi, had a public statue. Domitia offers another important first-century example of a Roman empress who wielded authority quite independent of her husband. Eric Varner recently demonstrated that a new diademed portrait type was introduced a mere two weeks after her husband’s accession to the throne. This portrait type continued to be promulgated after her banishment on charges of adultery. After perhaps hastening Domitian’s demise, Domitia escaped the ignominy of her husband’s damnatio memoriae and continued to be represented during the reign of Trajan.

Late antique antecedents also show consistent patterns in the patronage and self-representation of imperial women. They gravitated toward traditional Christian philanthropia, often establishing poorhouses, hospitals, and religious establishments. These projects were perhaps seen as extensions of typical Byzantine women’s interest in their families and immediate communities. In addition to these charitable enterprises, some of the period’s most remarkable buildings were funded by Augustae.

A. McClanan, *Representations of Early Byzantine Empresses*
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Elements of the representation of the imperial family also depend on the heritage of the Roman imperial ruler cults. Simon Price discusses the phenomenon of the ruler cult in Asia Minor using cross-cultural comparisons, and provides several pertinent antecedents for the use of imperial images in the early Byzantine era. Whereas the Hellenistic ruler cults depended on royal initiative, the Augustan era cults rose up in the provinces from a broader base of support. After Augustus, extravagant individual imperial cults evolved into general cults of the Sebastoi. In the Latin West, the focus centered on specific deified deceased rulers; in contrast, the ruler cults of the Roman East lavished their attention on the living members of the imperial house. Thus the public celebration of the ruler’s family was more acceptable in the East in this early period. Local Roman officials sometimes imposed the Latin model on their local subjects, so the governor in Ephesus altered the choir of Livia to reflect her apotheosis. One of the most useful aspects of Price’s work is that he goes beyond strict dichotomies once posed both between popular and elite as well as public and private domains. The supposed skepticism of educated Roman society distorts our notion of the audience of the imperial cults in a way that also colors how we commonly understand the reception of the medieval imperial house. The image of imperial women in turn accrues meaning from multiple contexts in medieval society.

The Christianization of the imperial cult was gradual. The first Christian emperor, Constantine the Great, granted several Umbrian towns their request to hold games and build a temple to his family, though as a nod to the newly accepted religion, he added a new stipulation—no sacrifices could occur in the temple. These imperial images seem almost ubiquitous. The imperial cult in a very familiar form continued to thrive under the first Christian rulers; for example, Theodosios issued laws forbidding pictures of actors and charioteers in the public places where imperial images were consecrated. The law codes repeatedly reinforce the notion of the singular respect owed to the imperial person and representation. The fifth-century Vita of Saint Thekla provides further evidence for the diffusion of the imperial image in the thriving imperial cult in Asia Minor. When assaulted by a priest in the imperial cult, young Thekla wrenched away so violently that the emperor’s image on his crown was damaged. That accidental slight to the imperial cult was seen as so egregious that it served as the grounds for her martyrdom. This almost incredible prestige attached to the imperial image takes another aspect in the reverence with which imperial women such as Helena were held.

Helena (d. between A.D. 330–336), the mother of Constantine the Great, stands as the first, and arguably most revered, Christian imperial woman. While even her most famous act—the discovery of the True