

Boxing Helena
Thoughts on a Late Roman Sarcophagus
in St Peter's Basilica (Rome)

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ABSTRACT

According to the tradition recorded by Delbrück (1932), Ceccelli (1924), and Casciola (1913), the porphyry sarcophagus within the altar of St. Simon and Jude Thaddeus in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, containing the eponymous martyrs, once belonged to the empress Helena (d. 360), wife of the apostate emperor Julian (331-363), and was initially found in the mausoleum-cum-church of Santa Costanza. This paper looks at the evidence for that assertion.

Keywords: St. Peter's, Santa Costanza, Helena, Julian, Sarcophagus, Porphyry.

In the left transept of St Peter's in Rome is an altar initially dedicated to St. Simon and St. Jude Thaddeus, since rededicated by John XXIII to St. Joseph. A curious characteristic of this altar is that it contained within it is a porphyry sarcophagus, a portion of which is viewable through a grill. The sarcophagus, which housed the remains of the saints mentioned above, Simon and Jude, is made of porphyry, and this fact should immediately strike one as interesting, as that particular stone was, in Late Antiquity, the exclusive preserve of Roman emperors and their immediate families.

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This sarcophagus has largely gone undiscussed, perhaps due to its relative inaccessibility. Delbrück (1932),¹ citing Ceccelli (1924),² in turn citing Casciola (1913),³ attributes it as being that of Flavia Julia Helena (m. 355, died 360), the wife of the emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus, ‘Julian the Apostate’ (331-363), who reigned as Caesar of the West from 355 to 360, and Emperor from 361 until his death. Although none of these authors offers concrete evidence for this attribution, circumstantially, the identification fits well.

The date of the sarcophagus’s removal from Santa Costanza is difficult to ascertain. Delbrück, following Ceccelli and Casciola, gives the date as 1606, although Ringbom, citing Frutaz, says 1605.⁴ This is about the date the marble acrostic dedication to Constantina in the adjacent *coemeterium* (cemetery) basilica of Sant’ Agnese is believed to have been destroyed.⁵ Rice also says 1605, citing Grimaldi.⁶ It seems to me, however, that it is just as plausible that the sarcophagus might have been removed around the time Santa Costanza was consecrated as a church before 17 March 1256, when Pope Alexander IV dedicated the altar to Constantina in the presence of the entire curia.⁷ The installation of an altar would likely have necessitated the removal of the sarcophagus. Constantina’s sarcophagus had already been removed sometime between 1467 and 1471 and installed in Rome’s Piazza San Marco, returned to Santa Costanza in 1471 before eventually being taken to the Vatican Museums, dragged by forty oxen in 1790.⁸ The installation of Helena’s sarcophagus in the altar took place in 1605/6 when Paul V undertook massive renovations of St Peter’s interior, removing all trace of the old basilica, incorporating *spolia* from other buildings regarded as less significant,⁹ the altars already having been constructed by Clement VIII.¹⁰

Frustratingly, history tells us very little of Helena, not to be confused with the canonized mother of Constantine I of the same name. Julian has little to say about her despite his prolific surviving literary output. The brief entry in *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (I. 409-10) gives all the known information. Helena and Julian were paternal first cousins. They married shortly after Julian’s proclamation as Caesar in the West by then-sole emperor Constantius II, cementing a dynastic alliance. According to Ammianus, Helena relocated to Gaul with Julian, giving birth to a son who did not survive infancy. This and a miscarriage in 357 Ammianus are attributed to doubtful poison attacks by his Eusebia,

Constantius' wife (16.10.19). Helena is noted as present in Rome in 357 at the *Vicennalia* (twentieth anniversary of rule) and associated games of Constantius II, celebrating his twenty years as Augustus (*Amm.* 16.10.18). On this occasion, Constantius moved his court from Milan to the ancient capital of the empire, following the examples of Diocletian and Constantine I in their respective *Vicennaliae*.

By 360, Julian had reached a truce with the Alamanni and brought peace to Rhenish Gaul, cementing his military reputation. At the same time, Constantius II was engaged in hostilities with the Sassanids in the seemingly endless Romano-Persian wars. Julian's peace in Gaul enabled Constantius to transfer troops from there to the Persian borders. This led to one of the units, the *Petulantes*, to rebel and proclaim Julian their Augustus, eventually to be joined by the rest of the Gallic units. Julian reluctantly accepted his proclamation as Augustus in early 360. In his "Letter to the Senate and People of Athens," Julian mentions Helena as being alive at the time of the proclamation, apparently with him or nearby in Gaul, though he claims to have slept alone (*Ep. ad Ath.* 284c).

The next mentions we find of Helena are in Ammianus and Libanius, which describe her as already being dead by late 360, shortly after the celebrations marking the *Quinquennial* (fifth anniversary) of Julian's accession to Caesar, as her remains are stated to have been sent to be interred with her sister Constantia's (*Amm.* 21.1.5, 25.4.2; *Lib. Or.* 18.179. 38.3. 8 and 11). The marriage doesn't appear to have been particularly passionate. As mentioned above, Julian alleged that he slept alone on the campaign, Ammianus states that Julian remained celibate after Helena's death (4.2), and Libanius claims that Julian regretted marrying as otherwise he would have been chaste his entire life (*Lib. Or.* 18.178). As Barnes observes, Ammianus shows very little interest in Helena, mostly concentrating on Julian and Eusebia.¹¹ The *Liber Pontificalis* describes Helena as a devout Christian and follower of the Nicæan Creed, though confuses her with her sister, calling her "Constantia Augusta" (37.4) – a mistake repeated by Sozomenos in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* (5.2.20) in the first half of the fifth century – which, perhaps, if those were the sources the Vatican was relying on, explains why her sarcophagus was targeted for repurposing as a martyrrium. Constantina was revered as a saint, and Julian was reviled for his apostasy. Helena's alleged devoutness might have been overlooked.

By no means was this kind of repurposing of sarcophagi, particularly porphyry ones, unusual for the Vatican. The most famous example is undoubtedly the baptismal font in St Peter's, constructed on the inverted lid of what is said to be the emperor Hadrian's sarcophagus. Others include: the sarcophagus enclosed in the altar of St Martinian and St Processus in the south transept of St Peter's;¹² the sarcophagus housing the remains of St John and St Paul, forming the altar at the Basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo al Celio, Rome; and the sarcophagus containing the remains of St Bartholomew, forming the altar at S. Bartolomeo all' Isola, Rome. This also raises the question of which members of the imperial family these superfluous porphyry sarcophagi belong to and where they were initially located.

Most of the saints to whose remains¹³ the Vatican has granted this singular honour were early martyrs, for whom the blood red of porphyry and elevated dignities might be regarded as especially appropriate. In the mid-ninth century, the remains of St Ambrose, although not a martyr but highly venerated as one of the four traditional Doctors of the Church, were laid with those of martyrs St Protasius and St Gervasius in a porphyry sarcophagus in the basilica of Sant' Ambrogio in Milan. Later, it was sunk into the floor and covered over, and it was not to be rediscovered until 1864 during renovations.¹⁴ With the progress of Christianity, the stone representing imperial divus (political divinity) came to represent Christ's divinity as king of heaven. Similarly, this is, perhaps, an evolution of the Roman funerary altar in which the deceased's ashes were placed. Duchesne calls the internment of saints in this manner "*une liturgie exclusivement Funéraire*" (an exclusively funerary liturgy).¹⁵

From what little can be seen of what shall henceforth, for the sake of simplicity, be referred to as Helena's sarcophagus, the coffin is extremely simple, apparently unornamented beyond a much later inscribed and gilded dedication to Saints Simon and Jude and shaped like a bathtub with rounded ends and straight sides. This suggests the form known as the *lenos* or "wine tub" type of sarcophagus traditionally associated with Dionysian or vintage decorative motifs and lion heads (symbolic of spouts), emerging in the second century. Although of pagan origin, the metaphor is appropriate for Christian burials, given the association with vintage and vine metaphors in Holy Scripture. No Dionysian decorations are visible on

the St Peter's Helena sarcophagus; however, this may be resolved by its hypothetical original location in Santa Costanza, as we shall see.

According to Ammianus Marcellinus, upon her death in Gaul, Helena's body was transported to Julian's villa on the Via Nomentana in Rome, where her sister Constantina was already interred (21.1.5). Santa Costanza is generally accepted as having been constructed as a mausoleum for Constantina at that site. Therefore, it would be logical to infer that Helena would have been interred there also. As wives, sisters, and daughters of emperors, it was only appropriate for them to have been interred in porphyry. Assuming Constantina, as the first sister to die in 354, was interred in the impressively carved sarcophagus originally located in the large niche directly opposite the entrance to Santa Costanza and now in the Vatican Museums, that does raise the question of where this second sarcophagus might have been located.

Johnson has shown that, as with the Pantheon, there was an interest in using natural light in symbolic, calendrical, and architectural ways in Christian mausolea at this time.¹⁶ A recent study of the light effects in Santa Costanza demonstrates that for most of February, the oblique sunlight shining in from the windows on the south side of the building illuminated the area around the entrance.¹⁷ The February date connects with the nine days of the annual Parentalia festival (February 13-21) held in honor of deceased family members and their ancestors. Roman mausolea hosted the remains of multiple family members and were often a social focal point for family and friends. This was even more so in the case of imperial mausolea, where there was a cultural expectation of the public performance of imperial power. The Mausoleum of Hadrian housed many subsequent emperors and empresses, as did the Mausoleum of Constantine I in Constantinople Istanbul and later those of the so-called Mausoleum Sant' Aquilino in Milan and the Mausoleum of Honorius in Rome.¹⁸ This is significant in the context of a later intervention, which may explain where the Helena sarcophagus was located.

Mackie proposed that the patron of Santa Costanza could have been Julian and that it had been built for his wife Helena.¹⁹ I am persuaded by Kleinbauer's proposal that it was more likely that Santa Costanza was founded late in the reign of Julian's predecessor Constantius II (regnant 337-361) and was, therefore, as has traditionally been believed, designed as

a tomb for Constantina.²⁰ Constantius II had a demonstrable interest in architecture, completing many projects associated with his father Constantine, such as Old St Peter's in Rome, Constantine's own circular mausoleum in Constantinople, and the nearby cross-shaped Church of the Holy Cross. He also is believed to have completed the octagonal Great Church at Antioch (dedicated 341) and the Anastasis Rotunda at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (c. 340-50), the latter, like Santa Costanza, having a double shell construction with an internal ambulatory, albeit an incomplete circle. It is also difficult to see how Julian would have had the time to supervise such a construction, being otherwise occupied with border battles and only having sole rule with absolute authority and access to the necessary resources for under two years.

After, and not long after the original construction, a window on the south wall of Santa Costanza was blocked up, and a rectangular light well tower (*lucernario*) with rectangular windows was attached to the drum, extending from the height of the lower roofline to the beginning of the curve of the dome and interrupting the mosaics of the annular ambulatory.²¹ This redirected sunlight to illuminate an elongated oval of rose granite set flush in the floor perpendicular to the wall. Delbrück identifies this as the likely original site for the sarcophagus, given its dimensions of 3.20×1.50m.²² The width is identical to that of the sarcophagus. The length of the sarcophagus is challenging to determine because of its concealment in an altar, but it is likely somewhat shorter. In this position, beneath the light tower, Cecchelli says the altar was placed in 1256,²³ which would lend weight to my hypothesis that Helena's sarcophagus was probably removed shortly before then.

This oval slab could have supported the St Peter's Helena sarcophagus in terms of hue, size, and shape. It seems entirely plausible that Julian might have added the tower in the short time of his imperial reign to make this sarcophagus more prominent without totally obscuring that of Constantina. It is perhaps unsurprising that Julian might make use of sunlight in this way given his veneration of Helios as the Sun god of the official state cult, the abstract ruling deity of the Platonic heaven of ideal forms, and also as the less-well-understood underworld Helios-Mithras (Cf. Julian *Or.* 4, "To King Helios"). We might also note that a *lenos*-style sarcophagus seems particularly appropriate to famous vintner-themed inhabited vines depicted in the mosaics decorating portions of Santa

Costanza's ambulatory vault. While Constantina's sarcophagus is alive with inhabited vines, the St Peter's Helena sarcophagus, by contrast, alludes to the setting more subtly through shape and the wine-like color of porphyry alone.

Another factor to consider is that the elaborate ornamentation of Constantina's sarcophagus resembles the fragment suggested as belonging to that of her father, the emperor Constantine the Great, kept at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Cupids, vines, and vintage scenes dominate. The sarcophagus of Constantine's mother Helena, though bearing a military scene (suggesting it was initially intended for a male) rather than vintner imagery, is of similar size and shape. All three are large, rectangular sarcophagi of the gabled Asiatic type. It may perhaps be inferred that they were all of one job lot or carved to resemble each other. By contrast, St Peter's Helena sarcophagus, more in the metropolitan Roman vein, bears a closer resemblance to the one in front of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, which is traditionally said to belong to Julian. This rather plain sarcophagus with four attached round shafts and a semicircular lid is described as "cylindrical" (*κωνιδροειδής*) in the tenth century *De Cerimoniis aulae byzantinae* (2.42). The eleventh-century historian Georgios Kedrenos in his *Synopsis historion* states that Julian's "wretched body was taken to Constantinople and placed in a cylindrical porphyry sarcophagus" (1.539).

Delbrück likewise describes St. Peter's sarcophagus as cylindrical, perhaps with *De Cerimoniis* and Kedrenos in mind. Vasiliev definitively accepts the cylindrical sarcophagus in Istanbul as being that of Julian and suggests that an inscription mentioned by both Kedrenos and John Zonaras in his twelfth-century *Epitome historion* (13.18, 23-25) might have been removed by Julian's successor Jovian.²⁴ Delbrück accepts the sarcophagus as belonging to Julian and attempts to identify it as being Ptolemaic Egyptian in type while unable to offer any comparative examples.²⁵ The Ptolemaic era granite, so-called "Black Sarcophagus," discovered in Alexandria in 2018, to much media fanfare, perhaps comes closest in resemblance. One also cannot help but notice a certain architectural appearance to the Julian sarcophagus, resembling an apsidal basilica with abutting turrets. On the other hand, the Julian sarcophagus might also suggest a compromise between styles, which might result if someone more

used to carving the gabled Asiatic sarcophagus were instructed to create something resembling the description of Helena's plain Roman *lenos* type.

While the attribution is hardly inevitable, the simplicity of the sarcophagi of Julian and his wife seems in keeping with Julian's inclination towards asceticism. Ammianus Marcellinus makes Julian's modesty a reoccurring theme in his history (15.8.8), noting Julian's rigid temperance as though living under sumptuary laws (16.5.1) and his eschewing of rich fare in favor of soldiers' rations while on campaign in Gaul (16.5.3), though observing that it did not endear him to his subjects (22.14.3). Libanius remarks on the simplicity of Julian's tastes (*Or.* 18.131). Gregory of Nazianzus mentions Julian's asceticism, though he scorns it as performative (*Or.* 4.71). Ammianus notes that Julian's first internment at Tarsus was buried with simple rights (*humili pompa*), which he had ordered himself (23.2.5).²⁶

It looks pretty likely that Julian would have ordered a similarly simple and humble internment for his wife, which would explain the simplicity of her sarcophagus, although it must be noted that the other examples of porphyry sarcophagus within altars are likewise very plain aside from ornamental carved ring huckles, and their sides slope outward in a more distinctively "bathtub" like shape. Very little work has been done on this repurposing of porphyry sarcophagi, which is disappointing given that with sufficient research, it might be possible, given their obvious imperial connection and the resources of the Vatican archives, to make an educated guess as to whom they might have originally belonged to.

As it stands, given that a reasonable case can be made for this sarcophagus initially belonging to a nameable imperial personage at a significant phase of Late Antiquity, it seems rather strange that so little has been written about it or that in recent times, no effort has been made to image the sarcophagus non-invasively. Such an undertaking might tell us a lot more about Helena, Julian, and the funerary practices of the Constantinian dynasty, and it could provide a better understanding of how Santa Costanza would have looked like a functioning mausoleum.

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¹ Delbrück 2007, p. 168-9.

² Cecchelli 1924, p. 25.

³ Casciola 2016, p. 102.

⁴ Ringbom 2003, p. 30.

⁵ ICUR VIII 20752 = ILCV 1768.

⁶ Rice 1998, p. 244; Grimaldi 1972, p. 69-74.

⁷ Frutaz 1960, p. 201.

⁸ Constantina Sarcophagus, Vatican Museums. Available at <https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-clementino/sala-a-croce-greca/sarcofago-di-costanza.html> [Accessed 12 September 2024].

⁹ See Rice 1998, p. 34 ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 36.

¹¹ Barnes 1998, p. 122-3.

¹² Pope Paschal I (817–824) translated the remains to a chapel in the old Basilica of St. Peter, and these were later interred in porphyry on the altar in the new Basilica in 1605, so around the same time as Helena. Paul V arranged Sts Martinian and Processus and St. Simon and Jude Thaddeus in opposing positions to suggest a balanced symmetry of these four crucial saints.

¹³ A whole body (*corpus*) is technically not considered a relic. Hence, it is not appropriate to call these sarcophagi reliquaries.

¹⁴ Sant’Ambrogio website, available at: <https://www.basilicasantambrogio.it/storia> [Accessed 12 September 2024].

¹⁵ Duchesne 1889, p. 422.

¹⁶ Johnson 2009, p. 176; Hannah and Magli, 2009, p. 486–513.

¹⁷ Carnevale and Monaco 2019 p. 67-81. The small windows over the ambulatory were later additions.

¹⁸ Johnson 2009, p. 200-2.

¹⁹ Mackie 1997, p. 383-406.

²⁰ Kleinbauer 2017, p. 55-70; Kleinbauer 2006, p. 125-45, esp. 131-9. Rasch dates the rotunda to the 340s and Arbeiter the mosaics to 370; Rasch and Arbeiter 2007, p. 89, 147. Mark J. Johnson’s review of Rasch and Arbeiter agrees with Kleinbauer’s hypothesis; *AJA Online Reviews* 113.1 (Jan. 2009).

²¹ Johnson 2009, p. 144-5. For the light tower, see Rasch and Arbeiter 2007; Ringbom 2003.

²² Delbrück 2007, p. 169.

²³ Cecchelli 1924, p. 24.

²⁴ Vasiliev 1948, p. 20.

²⁵ Delbrück 2007 p. 14, 27, 227.

²⁶ For a thorough history of Julian’s remains, see Pająkowska-Bouallegui and Szuster-Tardi 2019.

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