

SAINT HELEN WITH A PALM IN META
- BYZANTINE ICON PAINTING

The iconographic type which depicts Constantinos and Helen with a cross is based on a legend launched by Ambrosios, the Bishop of Milan, in his funeral oration delivered on the 26th of February, 395, at the burial of the Emperor Theodosios the Great¹. According to this legend, on her journey to the Holy Land² Helen found the cross on which Jesus died.

Helen was born between 250 and 257 (?), in the Near East, in Drepanum³, a settlement in Asia Minor, in a very simple family. The latter is presumable on the basis of the fact that Saint Ambrosios calls her a “stabularia”, that is, the daughter of an inn-keeper, in his funeral oration mentioned above. Helen became the concubine (wife?) of the Emperor Constantius Chlorus, from whom in 273 in Illyria she had a son, who was to become Constantinos the Great.⁴ Constantius dismissed her from his court because of his marriage with a woman from a patrician family. After her son, Constantinos became the Emperor, Helen returned to court. In about 325 Constantinos conferred the title of the Augusta on her. Thus from the Emperor’s mother she became an Empress in her own right, one of the rulers who governed the Empire. Different sources contradict each other both on when Helen was converted to Christianity and on whether she embraced Christianity under the influence of her son or on the contrary, Constantinos became Christian following her encouragement. The Empress died in Rome, in about 330, not long after her journey to the Holy Land mentioned above.⁵

¹ „The story related by Ambrosios is very simple: the Holy Ghost inspires Helen to search for the Holy Cross. She finds three crosses and recognises the cross of the Lord by the inscription, because *Jezus Nazarenus Rex Judeorum* is written on it” [Saint Ambrosios quoted in G. Kroll, *Jézus nyomában* (Budapest, 1985), 569, footnote 278].

² The story of the journey is related by Eusebius, the historiographer of the court of Constantinos the Great, in his *Vitae Constantini* (III, 42.43), written about the life of the Emperor Constantinos in 337. Quoted in Hungarian in Vanyó L., *Katekézis, költészet és ikonográfia a 4. században* (Budapest, 1995), 184.

³ Today it is called Herkes.

⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. A. P. Kazhdan (New York – Oxford, 1991), 498.

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 909.

In the half-length portraits made during her lifetime, which her son had minted on coins, Helen is depicted similarly to the patrician women belonging to the Emperor's family: in Roman garment (tunic) and with her hair wreathing her head,⁶ or as the Augusta, or, in the painting decorating the ceiling of the palace in Trieri, with a nimbus, which is a sign of the homage paid to the Empress.⁷

In her *Byzantine portraits* she appears together with her son, with whom they form a couple as the Emperor and Empress. The development of the Byzantine iconography must have been founded on her cult. It was based on the Empress's journey to the Holy Land, which became the example of *eusebia*, that is, devotion to be followed for the elite. Thus the wife of Theodosios, the Empress Eudokia, also made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Her journey, completed in 438, was also a tribute to the memory of her great ancestor, Helen. Eudokia was present at the sanctification of churches and said her prayers at Christ's empty grave on her knees, in the manner of a "penitent maiden".⁸ By 451 the cult of Helen had been widely spread, since at the Council held at Khalkedon the bishops called the Emperor Markinos the new Constantinos, while his wife, Pulcheria, the new Helen.⁹ As a further development of the cult, in the 8th century the contemporary emperors, the couple Constantinos IV and Irene were compared to Constantinos the Great and Helen¹⁰.

The Byzantine depictions are adorned with regal attributes, what is more, they show mother and son like a real married couple, as if they were of the same age. Consequently, Helen is wearing the robes of the Byzantine Empress, that is, a khiton with an ornamented neck and a thorakion on her side. The end of the loros is hanging from her left hand. Her head is decorated by an open crown. With her left hand she is making a praying-imploing move directed at the cross, while she is touching the Byzantine cross with her right¹¹ (figure 1).

In the Meta-Byzantine period Helen's figure also appears in icon painting. A smaller amount of *Meta-Byzantine icons* show the Empress similarly to the Byzantine depictions¹² (figure 2). In the majority of the icons, however, Helen

⁶ Published in *Magyar Katolikus Lexikon*, vol. 5, ed. Diós I. (Budapest, 2000), 241.

⁷ *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie. Ikonographie der Heiligen*, vol. 6, ed. E. Von Kirschbaum, (Rom – Freiburg – Basel – Wien), 486.

⁸ Published in C. T. Thiede and M. d'Ancona, *A keresztfa megtalálása* (Budapest, 2000), 70, with reference to Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses – Women and Imperial Dominions in Late Antiquity* (Berkely, 1982).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁰ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 909.

¹¹ For example in the mural painting from the 11th century in the Basilica of Saint Sophia in Novgorod [Н. Б. Салько, *Живопись древней Руси XI – начала XIII века. Мозаики, фрески, иконы* (Ленинград, 1982), fig. 106]. On the stauroteka made at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries in Esztergom [*The Glory of Byzantium, Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era A. D. 843-1261*, ed. C. H. Evans and D. W. Wixom (New York, 1997), fig. 81] Helen is not touching the cross, but holding both her hands in a praying position.

¹² For example „The Icon of Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen”, 18th century [M. Vassilaki, I. Tavlakis and E. Tsigaridas, *The Holy Monestery of Aghiou Pavlou*, (Mount Athos, 1999), fig. 110].



Fig. 1 Saint Helen. Part of a stauroteka 11-12th century, Esztergom, Christian Museum

Сл. 1 Света Јелена, део ставротеке, XI-XII век, Естергон, Музеј хришћанства



Fig. 2 The icon of Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen 18th century, Monastery of Aghiou Pavlou, Athos

Сл.2 Икона светог Константина и свете Јелене, XVIII век, Манастир светог Павла, Атос

loses the thorakion¹³, whereas she receives a veil appearing from under her crown,¹⁴ while a sceptre is placed in her left hand¹⁵ (figure 3). The incomplete regal garment of the Empress and the presence of new elements refer to the fading of the Byzantine archetype. On the other hand, the substitution of the praying gesture of the left hand with the sceptre diminishes the spirituality of the icon.

¹³ A Bulgarian icon from the 16-17th century, depicting Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen [A. Божков, *Българската икона*, (София 1984), fig. 129].

¹⁴ A Bulgarian icon from the 16-17th century, depicting Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen, *ibid.*, fig. 125.

¹⁵ For example the side panel of the „Icon of the New Testament’s Holy Trinity, the Crowning of the Virgin and the Saints”, 1767. *Ibid.*, fig. 23. There can also be found some depictions of Helen holding a sceptre in the material in Hungary. For example, the Helen appearing in the “Icon of the Crowning of the Virgin with Saints” made by T. Visanov (?) in the first half of the 1780s, is also holding a sceptre. She is also wearing a maphorion, apparently as a reminiscence to the usual garment of the female characters in Byzantine iconography. The artefact can be found in the Serbian Church in Pest. The Helen depicted in the “Icon of Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen” is also holding a sceptre. The artefact has a Greek inscription, it was made in about 1800 and is held in the chapel of Hungarian Orthodox Parish of Nyiregyháza.



Fig. 3 Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen. A section of the Icon of the New Testament Holy Trinity, the Crowning of the Virgin and the Saints 1767

Сл.3 Свети Константин и света Јелена. Део иконе Новозаветног светог тројства, Крунисање Богородице са свецима, 1767. год.



Fig. 4 Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen. Mitrofan zograph, a section of the Icon of the Virgin with the Child, Scenes of the Passion and Saints The beginning of the 18th century, Szentendre, Collection of Serbian Church Art

Сл.4 Свети Константин и света Јелена. Митрофан зограф, део иконе Богородице са Божјим сином, Страдање Христа са свецима, почетак XVIII века, Сентандреја, из збирке српске црквене уметности

Helen can be seen in the side panel of a large hagiographic icon painted by Mitrofan zograph¹⁶ (fig. 4), who worked in Hungary, at the beginning of the 18th century. She is depicted according to the Byzantine iconographic type, in the regal garment of the Empress, in a khiton, with a crown on her head and a loros hanging from her arm, but without a thorakion. Her shoulders are covered by a red robe bound together on her chest. This robe (a descendent of the Byzantine khlamys) emphasises her figure as opposed to Constantinos's, who is not wearing a robe over his khiton. A *palm* is placed in Helen's left hand, presumably as a symmetrical pair to the sceptre Constantinos is holding in his hand.

In the icons produced by a group of painters working in Ráckeve (fig. 5) in the second half of the 18th century, Helen is also holding a palm in her left hand. Similarly to Mitrofan, they did not work in any other country apart from Hungary.¹⁷

¹⁶ Published in Nagy M., *A magyarországi görög diaszpóra egyházművészeti emlékei I. Ikonok, Ikonosztázionok* (Debrecen, 1998), Kat. 15.

¹⁷ For example "The Crowning of the Virgin with Saints and the Crucifixion", in about 1770 [Nagy M. (1998), Kat. 52]; „The Icon of Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen”

The palm has been used as a symbol in the Christian world since the time of early Christians. Its significance as a symbol is also well-known in the Meta-Byzantine period, which is testified to by the eighteenth-century depictions of saints and martyrs holding a palm.¹⁸

The palm-branch or the palm-tree is a many-layered primaevial symbol, which Christians borrowed from the Ancients and the Jewish heritage¹⁹. The origins of the different layers of its symbolism can be traced back to the specific features of the tree itself.

The palm-tree, as it is well-known, never sheds its leaves, it is a magnificent evergreen. Following from this attribute, says Plutarch, man considers it a suitable symbol for expressing *victory*.²⁰ For this reason the palm-branch became an essential accessory of Ancient triumphal processions. This is the reason why Jesus is greeted with palm-branches on his triumphant entry to Jerusalem (Jn 12,12-13).

In Christian thought the palm-branch, as a symbol referring to victory, is relevant in the sense of the *victory gained over death*. It is in this sense that its evergreen leaves were used by early Christians as a funereal symbol²¹. This



Fig. 5 Saint Constantinos and Saint Helen. A painter from Ráckeve, a section of the Icon of the Crowning of the Virgin with Saints and the Crucifixion c. 1770, Miskolc, Hungarian Orthodox Museum

Сл.5 Свети Константин и света Јелена. Иконописац из Ракеве, део иконе Крунисања Богородице са свецима и Распећа, око 1770. год., Мишколц, Мађарски музеј православља

from the second half of the 1760s [Nagy M. (1998), Kat. 43]; “The Crowning of the Virgin with Saints and the Scenes of Jesus’ Life” from the second half of the 1770s [Nagy M. (1998), Kat. 58]. etc.

¹⁸ For example Saint Demetrios in Zaharij Orfelin’s engraving, 1764 [Д. Давидов, *Српски бакорези 18. века* (Нови Сад, 1983), fig. 22]. Even rulers, such as Saint Stephen of Dečan and the Tsar Saint Lazarus, appear with a palm in H. Žeфарović’s *Sztematográfia* [О. Микић, Д. Давидов and Д. Стојановић, *Дело Христофора Жефаровића* (Нови Сад, 1961), figs. 97, 98]. The general cause for the proliferation of depictions of this type in the 18th century can be located in the strengthening of Baroque influences on Meta-Byzantine painting and of the narrative quality of icons starting from the 17th century. The present article cannot aim at a more thorough-going study of this phenomenon.

¹⁹ Vanyó L., *Az ókeresztény művészet szimbólumai* (Budapest, 1988), 110.

²⁰ Cf. a reference in J. C. Cooper, *An illustrated encyclopaedia of traditional symbols* (London, 1987), 125.

²¹ Cooper (1987), 125. The author publishes – without any reference to its date or place – a depiction of a stylised palm-leaf with the word ΒΙΚΤΩΡΙΑ under it on an Early Christian gravestone.

meaning of the palm is so dominant, that the *palmette*, a motif formed from palms and known in the Greek land since the 8th century BC, was regarded as a symbol of *eternity*²² and was related to *Paradise* by Christians. Thus in Ezekiel's vision (Ez 40,26) the pillars of the temple in the Holy City are decorated with "palm trees".

In the fifth-century mosaic of the cupola of the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna and in the sixth-century mosaic frieze of the Church of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo the palm trees, among which apostles, and both male and female martyrs are marching, also symbolise a paradisiac environment. The symbolism of Paradise and the victory gained over death is also intertwined in the catacomb painting in which the Dove-Holy Ghost is holding a palm in its beak.²³

The symbolic meanings of the palm-branch mentioned above are connected with each other in relation to the Virgin Mary in a book written by Saint Meliton in the 4th century.²⁴ Before her death an angel appeared to Mary saying the following words:

"Lo, saith he, a palm-branch which the Lord hath sent thee from Paradise for thee to have it carried before your coffin when in three days from now on thou shall be carried into the heavens from your body"²⁵. Saint Meliton also describes how the palm branch, blazing forth a great light after the departure of the angel, was carried by the Apostle John before Mary's coffin.²⁶

Victory is, in the Christian interpretation, nothing but resurrection and the road leading to it is full of suffering. In fine arts the palm in the hands of *martyrs and saints* refers to salvation gained through suffering. The literary basis of these depictions is the *Book of Revelations* (Rev 7,9), in which John sees a "great multitude" of the saved in Paradise, as they are "standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands".

Consequently, Meta-Byzantine icon painting placed a symbol in Helen's hand which was *fairly wide-spread in her time*. It appears in the most ancient literary works with a Christian content and in fine arts, however, Byzantine art did not connect this symbol with Helen.

Helen is mentioned as a saint even by her contemporaries: Ambrosius in his funeral oration quoted above calls her "a dowager whose memory is sa-

²² Hoppál M., Jankovics M., Nagy A. et al. *Jelképtár* (Budapest, 2000), 174.

²³ Vanyó L. (1988), fig. 35.

²⁴ K. Tischendorf, *Apocalypses, Apocryphae* (Hillesheim, 1966), 113-136. In Hungarian published as „Szent Melitónnak, Szárdesz püspökének könyve Szűz Mária mennyekbe való átviteléről,” *Apokrifek*, szerk. Vanyó L. (Budapest, 1980), 353-364. The apocryphal text, which was allegedly written by Meliton, who lived in the 2nd century [Vanyó L., *Az ókeresztény egyház irodalma* (Budapest, 1980), 275], was originally in Greek and has survived in a fifth-century Latin translation.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 354-355

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 360. Mary was praying to the Lord so that the power of hell would not do her harm on Mount Olive with this blazing palm-branch in her hands. The text also claims that after Mary's ascent to Heaven the blazing palm-branch also worked a miracle, it healed blind people.

cred”²⁷. Eusebius entitles her a “thrice blessed woman”.²⁸ The church actually sanctified Helen,²⁹ therefore the symbolism of the palm-branch, which is characteristic of martyrs, becomes her. Apart from this *general symbolism* the emblem of the palm, however, is much more tightly attached to Helen *historically*. As such, it refers to her heroic deed of finding Christ’s cross. The Empress launched the cult of the cross with this, which contributed to a great extent to the fact that the Christian religion and church organisation became the cohesive force of a vast empire covering the whole of the known world.

In the first centuries of Christianity the palm-branch was the attribute of those who had *completed a pilgrimage* to the Holy Land. They were called “palmer”, that is, pilgrims who returned from the Holy Land with a palm.³⁰ Even Chaucer mentions palmer in *The Canterbury Tales*:

“Then folk do long to go on pilgrimages/ And palmer to go seeking out strange strands”.³¹

The Empress herself also travelled to the Holy Land as a pilgrim, and not an ordinary one at all. As Eusebius, her contemporary, documents, she approached holy places with the utmost *respect*, “she had rendered due reverence to the ground which the Saviour’s feet had trodden, according to the prophetic word which says ‘Let us worship at the place whereon his feet have stood’”.³² He also describes how Helen practised the virtue of *charity* on her pilgrimage: “on the occasion of a circuit which she made of the eastern provinces, in the splendour of imperial authority, she bestowed abundant proofs of her liberality as well on the inhabitants of the several cities collectively”, on private people and on soldiers, “[B]ut especially abundant were the gifts she bestowed on the naked and unprotected poor”³³ and she was unsparing of donations for the erection of basilicas in sacred places.³⁴

The Empress’s other virtue, her *Christian submission*, is testified to by Rufinus of Aquileia: “she also showed another sign of her *piety* in the town: she invited the virgins devoted to God for lunch and she is said to have received

²⁷ Quoted in Hungarian in *Szentelek Élete*, szerk. Diós I. (Budapest, 2001), 593.

²⁸ Eusebius, *Vitae Constantini* III, 46. Quoted in Hungarian in Vanyó L., (1995), 186. English trans. on the basis of *Medieval Sourcebook: Eusebius of Caesarea, The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*, trans. Paul Halsall).

²⁹ In the Eastern Christian Church her memorial day is on the 21st of May, together with Constantinos, while in Western Christianity it is on the 18th of August.

³⁰ J. C. Cooper (1987), 125.

³¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, modern English trans., ed. Sinan Kökbugur.

³² Eusebius, *Vitae Constantini* III, 42. Quoted in Hungarian in Vanyó L. (1995) 184. English trans. on the basis of *Medieval Sourcebook: Eusebius of Caesarea, The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*.

³³ *Ibid.*, 44. Quoted in Hungarian in Vanyó L. (1995), 185. English trans. on the basis of *Medieval Sourcebook: Eusebius of Caesarea, The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 43. Eusebius describes, how „she dedicated two churches to the God whom she adored, one at the grotto which had been the scene of the Saviour’s birth; the other on the mount of his ascension” (English trans. on the basis of *Medieval Sourcebook: Eusebius of Caesarea, The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*).

them with such respect, that she even robed herself in the garment of a maid and served the water for washing their hands, the food and the drinks herself. The mother of the imperial ruler of the whole world thus had become the servant of Christ's servants".³⁵

Helen's personality traits revealed during her pilgrimage and documented by the sources above laid down the foundation for her later sanctification.

It is well-known about the palm-tree that it also bears fruit in its old age, and fairly good ones. Consequently, it can be interpreted as a symbol of *long life and active old age* in the context of human qualities.³⁶ Sources document that Helen completed her pilgrimage in 326,³⁷ in her late 70s. Nevertheless, Eusebius relates that she "had hastened with youthful alacrity to survey this venerable land"³⁸.

In this context the palm refers to one of Helen's personality traits, her youthfulness and dynamism in old age. This quality characterises neither all the pilgrims, nor all the martyrs and saints to whom Christian iconography has attached the symbol of the palm. Thus in this sense the palm is Helen's *personal attribute*, similarly to its other sense, according to which it refers to the victory gained by finding the cross.

As a personal attribute, the palm-branch has a further aspect related to Helen. Ethnology regards every branch as a tree. Trees give life. For this reason a branch with leaves in a woman's hand is a symbol of fertility and motherhood.³⁹ Thus the palm appears again as Helen's personal attribute, since among the female saints depicted with a palm in her case *motherhood* is also important because of her famous son.⁴⁰

In the Byzantine depictions serving as the prototype of Meta-Byzantine iconographic compositions the Empress is making a praying-imploring move directed at the cross either with her left or with both her hands. The disappearance of the praying gesture from Meta-Byzantine icons might suggest the presumption that her figure loses the spiritual content expressed by this gesture. However, the extraordinarily close connection of the palm and Helen outlined

³⁵ Szentek Élete (2001), 592-593.

³⁶ J. C. Cooper (1987), 125.

³⁷ *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (1991), 909.

³⁸ Eusebius, *Vitae Constantini III*, 42. Quoted in Hungarian in Vanyó L. (1995), 184. English trans. On the basis of *Medieval Sourcebook: Eusebius of Caesarea, The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*.

³⁹ "In many ancient depictions it is a female figure identified with the tree of life itself who is holding a branch with leaves, but to be more exact one could actually claim that the branch is growing out of their body as a proof of their fertility" [Hoppál M., Jankovics M., Nagy A. et al. (2000), 17]. The unclothed female figure who is feeding an eagle from a saucer in one hand, depicted on pot number 7 of the golden treasures of Nagyszentmiklós from the end of the 10th century, is also holding a branch with leaves in the other [László Gy. and Rácz. I., *A nagyszentmiklósi kincs* (Budapest, 1977), fig. 23].

⁴⁰ It must be mentioned, that Constantinos regarded Helen as a good mother, since he awarded the title of the Augusta to her, and even changed the name of her birthplace, Drepanum, into Helenopolis out of respect for her [*The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (1991), 909].

above reveals a number of her personality traits in which the symbology carried by the praying gesture is also expressed. For this reason the absence of the deeply significant Byzantine gesture does not give rise to a sense of lack.

The attachment of the manifold emblematic meanings of the palm to Helen's figure poses the question of the interpretation of the *crown* adorning the Empress's head. The crown is an inevitable attribute of both the Byzantine and the Meta-Byzantine compositions. The symbolism of the palm-branch and the crown is closely intertwined in early Christian art: in the mosaics of the cupola in the Arian baptistery in Ravenna and in the mosaic frieze of the Basilica Sant' Apollinare Nuovo the apostles and martyrs marching among the palms are holding crown-wreaths.

The word "crown" originates from the Latin *corona*, which means both a crown and a wreath. In the sense of a crown it can be interpreted as a regal attribute. In the sense of a wreath it refers to belonging to heavens, *being devoted to God*.⁴¹ Following from Helen's life – symbolised by the palm – and her Christian character, it is rather her being chosen and devoted to God than her wearing a regal attribute which are the primarily dominant meanings of the crown she is wearing, which is open to heavens⁴². It is nothing but the attachment of the palm to Saint Helen's image which makes the revelation of a number of features of her life and personality in the figure depicted with regal attributes possible.

In conclusion it can be claimed that Meta-Byzantine icon painting, by attaching the palm to Saint Helen, retrieved a symbol which was wide-spread in the time of the Empress, but was not connected with her figure either by her contemporaries, or by Byzantine artists. It has been shown that it is not only the *general symbolism* of the palm related to martyrs and saints which is relevant in Helen's case. They can be said to have an extraordinary connection, since the symbolism of the palm is also *historically* related to Helen's personality. What is more, in the scope of significance surrounding the palm Helen's different characteristic features and personality traits are revealed, which makes it possible to regard it as her *personal attribute* and as such, unique in Byzantine art.

It is exactly the application of the many-layered symbolism of the palm with reference to Helen which is the novelty brought about by the Meta-Byzantine icons depicting Saint Helen with a palm in comparison with their Byzantine prototypes.

⁴¹ Hoppál M., Jankovics M., Nagy A. et al. (2000), 124-125. In the *Bible* the wreath is the reward for a life devoted to God, a symbol of eternal life (Rev 2,10). In Christian iconography saints and martyrs receive their wreath from Christ (in the mosaic of the apse of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna Jesus himself is handing over a wreath to Martin), as a sign that they have gained victory – to which it refers – not only as a result of their individual efforts, but also thanks to the help of Divine Grace [Vanyó L. (1988), 119-120]. It is for this reason that the saints in the mosaics of the Arian baptistery and the Basilica of San' Apollinare Nuovo are offering their wreath to Christ as a sign of their submission.

⁴² It must be noted that in Byzantine representations the emperors and empresses originally wore an open crown, a so-called circle. Such crowns can be seen on the head of Constantinos Monomakhos and Zoe in the eleventh-century mosaics of the tribune in Hagia Sophia. From the 12th century, however, the emperors wear a closed crown reminiscent of a mitre, while the empresses keep wearing an open one (for example Ioannes Comnenos II and his wife Eirene in the mosaic of the tribune in Hagia Sophia from 1118).

Марија Наџ

СВЕТА ЈЕЛЕНА СА ПАЛМОМ У ПОСТ-ВИЗАНТИЈСКОЈ УМЕТНОСТИ

Света Јелена се у византијској уметности углавном појављивала на фрескама и ставротеклама, приказана како стоји десно од византијског крста, који је могао бити и до величине човека, додирујући га својом десном руком, одевена у владарску одору са хитоном, лоросом, торакионом и круном.

У поствизантијском периоду, њена фигура се јавља и на иконама. До XVIII века сликана је по византијском моделу, али обично без торакиона. Након тог периода, њен лорос је поједностављен а његов крај уклоњен из њене руке, док су уз њен лик такође насликани мотиви као што су туника, мафорион, вео и жезло ван византијског архетипа.

На неким сликама она у левој руци држи грану палме, за шта – према мојим сазнањима – не постоји аналогни византијски архетип лика Јелене.

Хришћанство је наследило симболизам *палмине гране* и палминог дрвета из античке уметности и придодало нове слојеве његовом значењу. Оваква слика Јелене са палмином гранчицом у руци уклапа се у мноштво светаца и мученика који су у XVIII веку све чешће на иконама и гравурама бивали приказивани са палмом. Међутим, како се види из њеног житија, симболика палме је у лику царице много снажнија него што је то случај са другим свецима и мученицима у уметности XVIII века.

Стављањем палмине гранчице у руку свете Јелене, поствизантијско сликање икона је повратило симбол који је био широко распрострањен за живота царице, али га са њеним ликом нису повезивали ни њени савременици ни уметници византијског периода. Показало се да се у случају Јелене не ради само о *општој симболици* палме која се везује за мученике и свеце. Може се рећи да ту постоји посебна повезаност, будући да се симболика палме и *историјски* односи на личност Јелене. Штавише, у опсегу значења која се дају палми откривају се различите Јеленине карактеристичне особине и црте њене личности, што нам омогућава да палму сматрамо њеним *личним атрибутом* а, као такву, чини је јединственим примером у византијској уметности.

Управо је примена вишеслојне симболике палме у односу на Јелену она новина коју доносе поствизантијске иконе свете Јелене са палмом у поређењу са њиховим византијским прототиповима.