The Constantine and Zoe Mosaic

Lilly Jones
Utah State University

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The Constantine and Zoe Mosaic

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Abstract

In this case study I will go over the history behind the Constantine and Zoe mosaic in the Hagia Sophia, why it was hidden for so long, and the multiple theories behind its alterations. I will also cover the history of Zoe and her many husbands and why altering the mosaic would have been necessary to show history and they wanted it to be remembered. There is not the same record of events in Byzantium like we have today, history was written by the powerful and important to write to narrative they wanted. Because of the clues left behind we can decipher what might have happened.

Article

Byzantine Emperor Constantine I commissioned the Hagia Sophia in 360 C.E. as a palace church. It was destroyed and renovated several times, but retains its design and prominent architecture from Emperor Justinian's significant overhaul of the church in 537 C.E. He had materials brought in from all over the Byzantine empire; marble from Anatolia and Syria, bricks from North Africa, and 104 columns for the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, all to create one of the grandest churches Byzantium had ever seen. To finish the extensive building, the walls were covered in mosaics made with silver, glass, gold, and terra cotta to create the intricate Byzantine mosaics that are so recognizable today.

In 1435 C.E. the Ottomans captured Constantinople, renamed the city Istanbul, and gave the Hagia Sophia a new purpose. Mosaics featuring Christian ideology were covered and panels or medallions were hung featuring the names of Allah and other noteworthy Islamic figures. Hagia Sophia served as a Muslim Mosque until 1935 when the Republic of Turkey decided to make it a museum and conservation work began. As they rolled away carpets and chipped off the plaster from the walls, mosaics that were hidden away for centuries were uncovered. This included the mosaic panel of Constantine IX and Zoe and the captivating history of its renovations and alterations, changes we know about because of the recessed pieces and border around the figures (reference Figure 1). It is not the typical mosaic of Christ crowing Zoe and Constantine IX, but instead they are shown holding gifts to give to him. Romanos is shown holding the apokombion, a bag of money representing his donation, and Zoe is holding a chrysobull, a document that is proof that the donations would continue. All three figures are facing completely forward, Constantine IX and Zoe only slightly turned toward Christ to show his importance, and he is open to the emperor drawing your attention back to him. The emperor's face was changed at least once, possibly two times, to depict each of Zoe's three
husbands. With a plethora of theories, historians still argue why the mosaic of Constantine and Zoe in the Hagia Sophia (figure 1) was altered like it was, but there is one point everyone can agree on. Zoe had more than the culturally accepted amount of husbands and the mosaic reflects that.

Mosaics are visual evidence and documentation of marriage in a time when marriage licenses or pictures of couples in front of the building they were married in did not exist. Kalavrezou says, "the three marriages of Zoe represent almost all the possible illegal and uncanonical ways one can go about contracting a marriage in Byzantium. Zoe's marriages move or develop from simply problematic to the clearly illegal and uncanonical, culminating with her marriage to Constantine IX"\(^2\). Zoe has been wrapped in mystery, illegal activities and accusations and has been compared to Marie Antoinette in her style of living\(^2\). Her first husband, Romanos, was already married so he and Constantine VIII schemed to send his previous wife off to a monastery, completely legal if she went willingly, which has yet to be proven. Zoe was only a widow for hours before she married her second husband, Michael IV, a "handsome young man with whom Zoe was infatuated with" with rumors swirling that Romanos was drowned under suspicious circumstances. The last, still pictured in the mosaic shown in figure 1, is Constantine, who moved his mistress into the palace not long after their marriage\(^4\).

With a large donation from Constantine, not just a massive sum but a promise of more, it gave the church the funds to "beautify" the building and add the new emperor to the mosaic. As shown in figure 2, the cubes in all three faces are larger than in the rest of the piece and are more sunken into the wall's surface\(^1\). Along with the border and cracking around their faces, these issues clarified that all three faces had been altered. The thought is Constantine used the power from the donation to have to mosaic changed to show himself, although with as big of a contribution as he made scholars wonder why he did not just commission a new piece altogether.

Even with all this information, the question remains why was Zoe's and, more importantly, Christ's face altered? This is a topic that has been mulled over for years with plenty of theories to companion them. Some say the artist wanted them to all match stylistically when adding Constantine's face. Others argue the mosaic was defaced and broken by intruders to the church. Maybe Zoe did not like the way she was represented, consumed with her appearance, and wanted a more visually appealing caricature of herself\(^4\). Yet another theory is it was destroyed by Michael V; Michael IV and Zoe's adopted son smashed her face in the mosaic after she ran from Constantinople\(^1\). No matter what you find most probable, the question remains as one of history's secrets we might never uncover.
Figures

"Hagia Sophia - mosaic" by Chris Bertram is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0
"Jesus" by Nick in exsilio is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Bibliography

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