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The Iconography of Imperial Power: Charlemagne as New Constantine

Around the mid-eighth century, especially during the pontificate of Stephen II (752-757) and Paul I (757-767) was notably promoted the cult of St Sylvester, responsible, according to the hagiographic tradition handed down by the *Actus Sylvestri*, for the conversion of Emperor Constantine. The story was used by the popes eminently for two purposes: as support for the struggle against eastern iconoclasm and, especially, as an instrument of legitimation of the temporal power of the Church of Rome. In this political context, in fact, scholars place the writing of *Constitutum* or *Donatio Constantini*. Within these historical events Pope Stephen II transformed an imperial mausoleum near St Peter's in a chapel dedicated to St Petronilla, decorated with the stories from Constantine's life and reserved for private worship of the Carolingian kings. In 778 Pope Adrian I in a letter celebrated the Frankish king as "new Constantine". During the pontificate of Leo III two most significant monumental achievements were commissioned, with Charlemagne as the protagonist of the iconographic program in a setting that reflects the ideology of papal power: the *Triclinium Leoninum* in the Lateran and the apse mosaic of the church of Santa Susana. The Constantinian model, by contrast, not only bowed to the political and religious demands of the pontiffs, but also acted as an iconographic source for the exaltation of the Carolingian dynasty, whose rulers, identified with the first Christian emperor, sought to emphasize their role in defense of faith against the Islamic threat. This phenomenon includes two crucial episodes in Carolingian mitogenesis: the discovery of the tomb of Charlemagne by Otto III in 1000 and his canonization in 1165.