

St. Helena, Discoverer of the True Cross (250-330) by A.R. Birley

Helena, later known as Flavia Julia Helena Augusta, mother of Constantine the Great, was credited after her death with having discovered the fragments of the Cross and the tomb in which Jesus was buried at Golgotha.

Helena was born at Drepanum in Bithynia, later renamed after her Helenopolis, about the year 250. Of humble origin, Helena was employed as a *stabularia*, which might be rendered as 'barmaid' or the like. She became the wife or perhaps the concubine of a soldier of Balkan origin named Flavius Constantius, to whom she bore one child, a son named Constantinus, on February 27, probably in the year 272, at Naissus (Nis). Constantius became an officer and then governor of Dalmatia, before being appointed Praetorian Prefect by the emperor Maximian in about A.D. 289. On 1 March 293 Constantius was raised to the rank of Caesar, i.e. deputy emperor, and was obliged to divorce or set aside Helena in order to marry Maximian's daughter Theodora. Thereafter Helena disappears from view for many years. She reappears after Constantine had become emperor in the west and had taken control of Rome. There she was presented with the Sessorium, an imperial palace outside the city walls. She devoted some attention to this building, having its baths restored on a lavish scale and giving it a new water-supply with its own aqueduct, subsequently named Aqua Augustea. Constantine's biographer, bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, reports that she was converted to Christianity by her son. She received the title 'Most Noble Lady' (*nobilissima femina*) at latest in A.D. 318 and coins with her name and this title, and her portrait, were struck in modest quantities. Shortly after Constantine gained control of the whole empire in A.D. 324, Helena, together with Constantine's wife Fausta, were raised to the rank of Augusta. She took the imperial names Flavia, generally abbreviated Fl., and Julia.

Inscriptions from the bases of statues in her honour call her 'Our Lady Flavia Augusta Helena' or 'Our Lady Fl. Jul. Helena, Most Pious Augusta' and coins bearing her name and portrait were now issued in greater quantities. It is no doubt significant that on one inscription, set up by a high official, Helena is explicitly described as 'most chaste wife of the late emperor Constantius' (*divi Constanti castissimae coniugi*), as if to dispel rumors that she had only been Constantius' concubine. It is likewise surely no coincidence that Constantine included women who worked in taverns (*dominae tabernae*) among those protected by his stern anti-adultery legislation. In other words, his mother may have been only a *stibularia*, but the profession was not to be treated as effectively equivalent to prostitution.

In A.D. 326 Constantine's eldest son—and only child by his first wife Minervina—Crispus, who had already been raised to the rank of Caesar, was suddenly sentenced to death by Constantine and executed at Pola in Istria. The real reasons for Crispus' condemnation will no doubt never be known. Sources hostile to Constantine claim that his stepmother Fausta had fallen in love and that when Crispus repulsed her advances she accused him of attempted rape. This version is doubtless invented, for the simple reason that Crispus had been in the west, at Trier, while Fausta was with Constantine in the east. However, Fausta may well have played a part in turning Constantine against her stepson, in the interests of her own sons. Hence it is no surprise that when Constantine arrived in Rome ten days after Crispus' death, on 15 July 326, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his first assumption of the purple, Helena intervened. She appeared before Constantine dressing in mourning clothes and either revealed to him facts that he did not know or at any rate planted the seeds of suspicion against Fausta. Shortly afterwards Fausta was suffocated in the steam room of the palace baths, having evidently decided on suicide.

Helena now had no rival as the First Lady of the empire. Constantine would soon rename her birthplace Drepanum after her and another Helenopolis was created in Palestine. Indeed, shortly after these violent deaths in the imperial family, Helena set out on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Her prayers at the holy places were publicly presented, in the version of Eusebius as

an act of thanksgiving for the triumph of the Christian empire, 'for so great a son, the emperor, and his most pious sons' – the Caesars Constantine II and Constantius II. St. Ambrose would later call her journey 'the pilgrimage of an anxious mother'. Traveling via Syria, she came to see for herself the churches which Constantine had ordered to be built in Jerusalem and to pray there for her son. Faust's mother Eutropia also found her way to Jerusalem (but there is no indication that the two traveled together). The whole imperial court had returned to the east by the spring of A.D. 327 and Helena's journey probably began in that year, no light undertaking for a woman in her late seventies.

Her journey was very much a royal passage. The cities through which she traveled benefited from her largesse, as did the soldiers. Besides this, she exhibited specifically Christian beneficence, providing money and housing for the poor, releasing prisoners, and restoring exiles. 'Even in the smallest towns' she did not overlook the churches, Eusebius. However it seems that she was in some way snubbed at the great metropolis of Antioch by its bishop, Eustathius, who perhaps disparaged her lowly origins. The real problem was doubtless a matter of theology. Helena particularly venerated the memory of Lucian, a priest of Antioch martyred at Nicomedia in A.D. 312. Lucian had been the teacher of Arius, whose doctrines had already begun to create discord within the church, which the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 had not really resolved. Eustathius was an uncompromising upholder of orthodoxy, who had banished those in his clergy suspected of Arianism.

Eusebius of Caesarea, who probably met Helena during her stay in Palestine, was, by contrast, an admirer of Arius. He stresses Helena's piety, her frequent attendance at church and above all her endowment and rich adornment of churches. Constantine's church-building programme included Mamre, where God had appeared to Abraham, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and, outside Palestine, the places where the early martyrs were revered. The founding of the church at Mamre is associated with Constantine's mother-in-law Eutropia. Helena played a significant role in building the churches at Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives, which

Constantine personally dedicated a few years later, to honour the memory of his mother.

Eusebius reports that Jesus' birthplace was 'adorned by the pious Empress with wonderful monuments, as she adorned the holy grotto there in manifold fashion' (3).

Helena's name is associated in the history of the Church with the legend that she found the True Cross on which Jesus was crucified. The increased reverence for the Cross as a symbol of Christian belief during the Constantinian period naturally played a role here. But neither the author of the Pilgrimage from Bordeaux of A.D. 333, nor Eusebius, who died in A.D. 339, refers to relics of the Cross. The former mentions only the rock of Golgotha, the holy Sepulchre, and the new basilica of Constantine. All the same, a few years later the bishop of Jerusalem, Cyri, refers several times in his *Cathechetical Lectures* (A.D. 350) to pieces of wood from the cross being already scattered around the Mediterranean lands. Certainly, as early as A.D. 359 a church in Mauretania had a collection of relics which included a fragment of the cross. Further, Cyril, in his letter to Constantius II, explicitly dates the discovery of the cross to the reign of Constantine, when, through the favour of God, 'the holy places which had been hidden were revealed'. It was clearly through the belief that the fragments were discovered by the building operations at Golgotha that resulted in the 'Invention (discovery) of the Cross' being celebrated at the same time as the festival for the dedication of Constantine's new buildings, the Encaenia. The point is made by the pilgrim Egeria in the 380s: 'the Encaenia are celebrated with the highest honour, because the Cross of the Lord was found on that same day' – namely September 14 (the day was later changed in the west to May 3, and the Invention of the Cross continued to be remembered on that day until 1960). Regular veneration of the relics was established by the church in Jerusalem soon after this and St. Jerome would discuss the *lignum crucis* in a sermon preached at the Encaenia.

The circumstances of the discovery and Helena's role in it were evidently beginning to crystallize in both east and west well before the end of the fourth century. St. John Chrysostom, comments ca. A.D. 390 on the actual crucifixion, as described in John's Gospel (19.17-19): 'And

he went out, bearing the cross for himself, unto the place called The place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha: Where they crucified him, and with him two others, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst. And Pilate wrote a title also, and put it on the cross. And there was written, JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.’ After the burial of the cross, so John Chrysostom, ‘it was likely that it would be discovered in later times, and that the three crosses would lie together; so that the cross of Our Lord might not go unrecognized, it would, firstly, be lying in the middle, and secondly it was distinguished by its inscription – whereas the crosses of the thieves had no labels.’ Clearly the story was known that the True Cross had been recognized because of its inscription.

Some five years later St. Ambrose of Milan delivered the funeral oration for Theodosius the Great (25 February A.D. 395). Referring to Theodosius’ Christian predecessors, Ambrose of course gives prominence to Constantine, whose mother, ‘Helena of sacred memory,’ the *bona stabularia*, who visited the *stabulum* where the Lord was born. She had been moved by the Holy Spirit to search for the Cross: ‘she opened up the earth, scattered the dust, and found three crosses in disarray.’ In this version the True Cross was not, as Chrysostom claims, lying still in the middle, but it could be identified by its inscription. Ambrose dwells, further, on another aspect, the nails of the Crucifixion, which Helena sent to Constantine, one to for his diadem, the other for his horse’s bridle—thus fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah (14.20): ‘In that day there shall be upon the bells of the horses, HOLY UNTO THE LORD.’

Two years later (A.D. 397), a prominent churchman, Rufinus of Aquileia, returned to Italy after nearly twenty years on the Mount of Olives at Jerusalem. In this Ecclesiastical History there is a full scale account of Helena’s discovery. He dates her journey to the time of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325). Inspired by divine visions she came to Jerusalem and made enquiries from the inhabitants about the site of the Crucifixion. It was, she learned, under the pagan temple of Venus, which she ordered to be demolished. When the three crosses were excavated, the bishop of Jerusalem, Macarius, proposed a sure means of confirming which was the True one. They

were taken to the bedside of a distinguished lady who was dangerously ill. As the bishop prayed for a revelation, the touch of the True Cross immediately cured her. Helena at once ordered the construction of a magnificent basilica above the spot where the cross had been found. Rufinus also knows the story of the nails, and adds that a piece of the cross itself was sent to Constantine at Constantinople. Rufinus further reports how Helena waited at table on the consecrated virgins she encountered at Jerusalem. Later sources have her founding a nunnery at the holy places.

The story continued to be elaborated by subsequent ecclesiastical historians—Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, in due course by Gregory of Tours. New details appear. It was a Jew named Judas who pointed Helena to the place—he was duly converted and indeed became bishop of Jerusalem (To be martyred under Julian the Apostate). The True Cross not merely cured a very sick woman—it raised someone from the dead. At Rome, Constantine’s Sessorian basilica, duly endowed with relics of the cross, would become the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme and perpetuate the memory of Helena’s miraculous find. It was left to Geoffrey of Monmouth in the eleventh century to propagate the story that Helena was the daughter of a British king, Coel of Kaelcolim or Colchester, after whose death the Roman general Constantius seized that throne and married Helena, whose “beauty was greater than that of any other young woman in the kingdom.’ In the twentieth century Evelyn Waugh published an historical novel, *Helena* (1950), making full use of all the legendary material.

The appearance of the real Helena is known only from the coinage and from cameos, mosaics and a wall-painting in the Constantinian palace at Trier. In the later she is shown with a veil and grey hair. On the coins her hair is tied in a knot at the nape of her neck and she wears a pear necklace, earrings, and a diadem. Helena died at Rome, probably ca. 330, not long after returning from her pilgrimage, aged about eighty. She was laid to rest in a newly built basilica on the Via Labicana.

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