

The Life of Saint Helena of Constantinople, Empress of the Roman Empire

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Helena, who would become a saint and an empress of the Roman Empire, was born a humble innkeeper's daughter sometime between 246 to 250 AD. It is possible she was born in the city of Drepana in the Roman Province of Bithynia.¹ Her son, the Emperor Constantine I, would later rename the town Helenopolis, but it is not known if he did this to honor her birthplace or to honor her.

Much like Theodora, the wife of Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, another empress who also came from humble beginnings, there were rumors that Helena had worked as a prostitute in her father's inn. For the most part, however, Helena was not subject to the scathing treatment that Theodora received from historians (especially Procopios). She had the good fortune that the historian who first wrote about Constantine, and hence about her, was Bishop Eusebius of Caesara, whose eulogy of the Emperor is overly fawning to the point of being inaccurate. Helena was also the mother of an emperor as opposed to an upstart wife and was also seen as a religious woman, who would later be sainted. Both of these factors would contribute to a more merciful treatment.

Helena met Constantinus Chlorus, a successful Roman general, probably when he was stationed near Bithynia. It is not known whether she was his wife or his concubine, but she bore him a son Constantine around the year 272. Constantinus continued his triumphant rise in the

¹ Bithynia stretches east from Constantinople, comprising two thirds of the southern shore of the Black Sea. Drepana is within 30 miles of Constantinople.

military, which also led to political fame, and by 289 he was married to Theodora, the daughter (or stepdaughter) of the Emperor Maximian. This marriage would prove beneficial to Constantinus as he would later be named Caesar (a junior emperor). Helena, scorned and set aside, seemed doomed to obscurity.

In the year 306 when Augustus Constantinus (as Augustus he had become one of two senior emperors) dies on campaign near current York, England, the army declares his son his successor. Sometime in his reign Constantine brings Helena back to court and by 321 she appeared in a family portrait.² Constantine proved an able general and politician and by 312 he emerged as the sole emperor of the Roman Empire after a civil war between the junior and senior emperors. His victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge was credited to an image of Christ and soon after the war he converted to Christianity.

The year 325 was a very busy one for Constantine. He chose the town of Byzantium as new Rome³, he named both his mother and his wife as Augusta which made each of them an Empress, and he convoked the Council of Nicaea, a council of bishops held to settle differences in church doctrine. He kept the bishops over after the council and held a *vicennalia*, a celebration of his twenty years on the throne. This celebration normally would have been held at Rome and the Romans were not happy that he held the ceremony elsewhere. To appease them, in January of 326 he returned to Rome to repeat the celebration there. He brought most of his family with him on what would prove to be a fateful trip.

² "Helena" entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, pg. 909

³ It would become Constantinople.

Constantine's wife Fausta was a stepsister to Theodora, who had married Constantinus, which did not please Helena. Fausta was not happy that Helena was elevated to Augusta along with her. There was also tension of some sort between Constantine and his oldest son, Crispus, whom he had earlier named a Caesar. In what has been described as "the worst Christmas romance novel ever,"⁴ Constantine murders his son and then his wife. The underlying reasons are still subject to speculation.

It is believed that Helena may have been involved in Fausta's death and in 327 she embarks on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Was this an act of atonement? We will never know, but it was a high-profile event. Bishop Eusebius noted that she was over 70 at the time. She is considered the first recorded Christian pilgrim.⁵ She had ample money given by her son to provide funds for several holy shrines and churches in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. She went about doing good works and is even credited with finding the True Cross, pieces of which were given as gifts by Constantine and later emperors.

Helena never returned to Constantinople, but her pilgrimage inspired others to go to the Holy Land and was beneficial to Constantine's reputation. She spent the end of her life in Rome and after her death in 330 her son had her buried in a mausoleum he had commissioned in Rome, which became known as the Mausoleum of Helena.⁶ Her residence in Rome was consecrated as the Basilica of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem and part of the True Cross is one of the relics held

⁴ Lecture by Dr. Charles E Muntz on August 28, 2017 for Byzantine History (HIST 4103) at the University of Arkansas

⁵ Norwich, *Byzantium, The Early Centuries*, pg. 909

⁶ The building has collapsed and Helena's sarcophagus is currently in the Vatican Museum.

there. She is venerated as a saint, along with her son, though she was designated a saint before saints were canonized by the Pope, and there is a shrine to her in St. Peter's Basilica.

Implications for the SCA

First, Helena and her son could be a pattern for an early period mother-son reign. I would hope that one would want to downplay the fact that Helena probably was complicit in her daughter in law's death, but their lives could be used for ideas for a reign. Helena's life can also be used for persona building. Of special interest to an aging recreationist group are the facts that her life got more interesting as she got older and she lived a long life. She was a world traveler – we know she traveled to Rome, Constantinople, the Holy Lands, and possibly Great Britain. She was an Empress, but she was also a role model in her time.

We can document travel because we know pilgrimages to the Holy Lands were popular since the area became a tourist attraction after her visit. The flow of pilgrims increased the importance of the Greek language, which had diminished in importance as the Syriac language had displaced it. The pilgrim Egeria around the year 400 tells us that there are enough Greek speakers who also know some Latin that the area is also a welcome place for them to visit.⁷

People with Roman and Greek personas can use her life to incorporate travel into their personal histories based on documentable journeys.

Helena herself is depicted in popular culture through the sixteenth century so she could be an inspiration for art, artifacts, prose, and poetry throughout the SCA period. The Wikipedia page

⁷ Mango, *Byzantium, The Empire of New Rome*, pg. 19

on Helena has several examples of images made of Helena which could be used as a starting point for research. Relics she brought back could also inspire artistic recreations of fourth century curiosities. In a somewhat morbid twist, her skull, and later her entire body, are claimed as relics in Trier and Venice.⁸

Finally, one must mention embroidery. I found no evidence that Helena practiced embroidery. The earliest surviving pieces of Byzantine embroidery date to the twelfth century.⁹ Helena can be seen on embroidery of the early fifteenth century. She and her son are pictured on two Byzantine saccoi.¹⁰ A sacco is a tunic with wide short sleeves worn by Orthodox clergy. These saccoi were a present sent to Moscow between 1416 and 1418. On the Great Saccos Constantine and Helena are part of a large scene depicted in elaborate goldwork on the front of the garment and on the Little Saccos they are seen on one of the sleeves.¹¹

Helena lived a long life and triumphed over her humble beginnings. As a mother she was cast aside for a woman who was politically connected, yet she ended her life a diplomatic asset for her son and a role model for early Christian pilgrims. She was created a saint, ensuring her influence would endure after her death. She is the patron saint of difficult marriages, divorced people, converts, and archaeologists.

⁸ She apparently had multiple body parts if we are to believe that her body is in a sarcophagus in Rome. Oddly enough this wasn't mentioned in her lifetime that I can find.

⁹ Johnstone, *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Johnstone used the spelling saccoi/saccos in her 1967 text but in a 2004 publication of the Metropolitan Museum of Art sakkoi/sakkos is the preferred spelling.

¹¹ Johnstone, pg. 96-97.

Bibliography

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"Helena." *Wikipedia*. Retrieved June 25, 2020, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helena_%28empress%29

Johnstone, Pauline. *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery*. London: Alec Tiranti, 1967

Mango, Cyril. *Byzantium, the Empire of New Rome*. New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1980.

Norwich, John Julius. *Byzantium, The Early Centuries*. London: Viking, 1988

Muntz, Charles E. Class lecture on August 29, 2017 in HIST 4103, Byzantine Empire History, University of Arkansas

Exhibit catalogs with images of objects from time of Helena

Albani, Jenny and Eugenia Chalkia, eds. *Heaven & Earth, Cities and Countryside in Byzantine Greece*, in two volumes. Athens: Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture and Sports, 2013.

Lazaridou, Anastasia, ed. *Transition to Christianity, Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd – 7th Century AD*. New York: Onassis Foundation USA, 2011.

Weitzmann, Kurt, ed. *Age of Spirituality, Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979. Available online at

https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Age_of_Spirituality_Late_Antique_and_Early_Christian_Art_Third_to_Seventh_Century

The above catalogs have pictures and descriptions of items that artisans would find useful for inspiration and documentation for recreating items that would have been used in the time of Helena.

Appendix

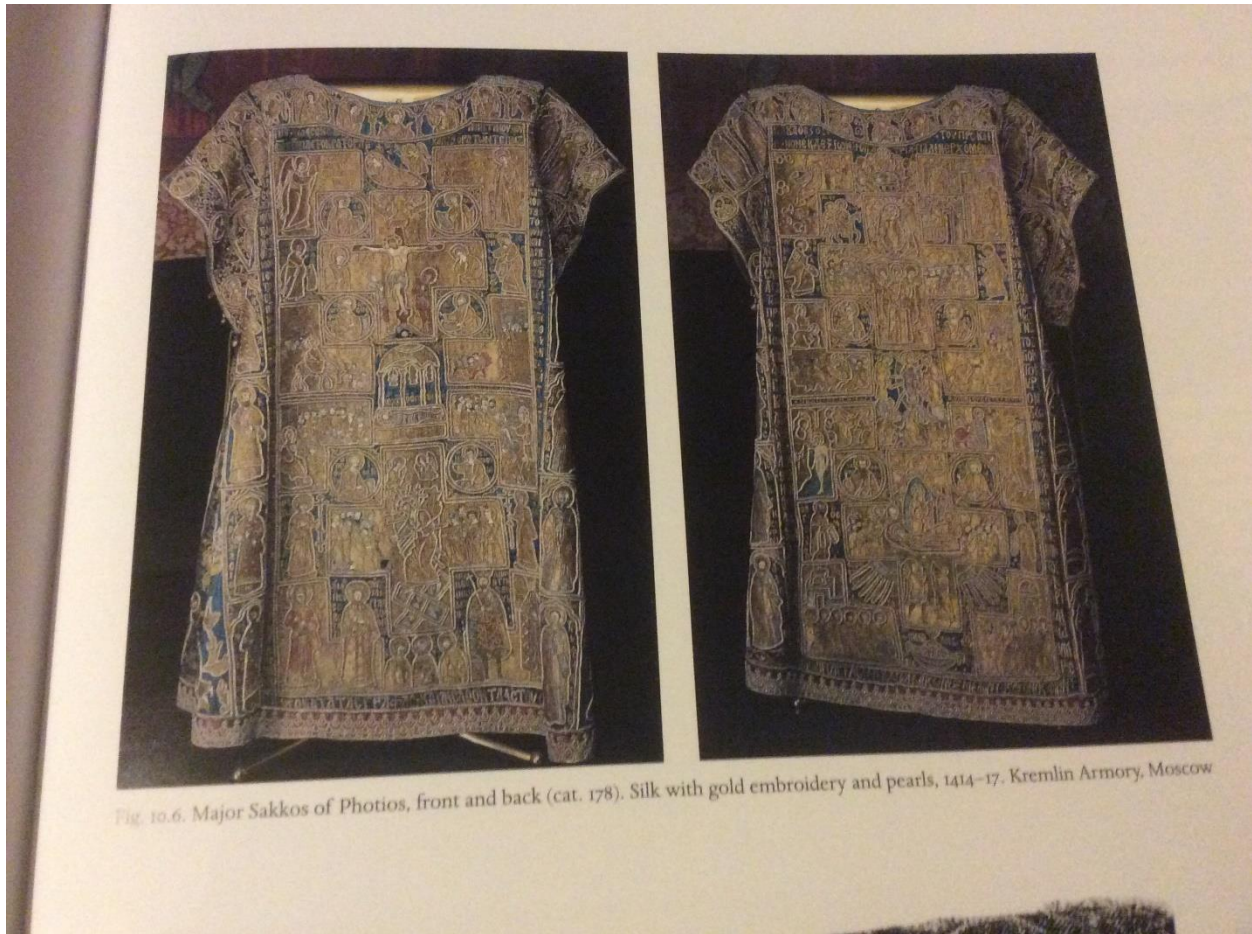


Fig. 10.6. Major Sakkos of Photios, front and back (cat. 178). Silk with gold embroidery and pearls, 1414–17. Kremlin Armory, Moscow

Image of the Major Sakkos. Helena and Constantine are on the front of the garment, on the either side of the arms of the lower cross. They are holding pieces of the True Cross. They were described thus on page 96 of *The Byzantine Tradition in Church History*.

Image is found on page 299 of *Byzantium, Faith and Power (1261 – 1557)*, a publication issued in conjunction with an exhibit of the same name held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from March 23 through July 4, 2004

Evans, Helen C., ed. *Byzantium, Faith and Power (1261 – 1557)*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004

Johnstone, Pauline. *The Byzantine Tradition in Church Embroidery*. London: Alec Tiranti, 1967

Inspiration for paper



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The Morgan Library & Museum



_medievalart Today is Good Friday, the Christian feast which commemorates Christ's death on the cross. This relic of the True Cross – the wooden cross on which Christ is believed to have been crucified – is housed in the magnificent 'Stavelot Triptych' in New York's Morgan Library & Museum. Since its miraculous discovery by St Helena – the mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great – in fourth-century Jerusalem, the wood of the True Cross has been venerated as a supremely sacred relic. Over the centuries, a series of Byzantine Emperors distributed fragments of the cross as diplomatic gifts. The relics in the Stavelot Triptych are believed to



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Post

On April 10, 2020, my daughter went into labor and went to the hospital. While waiting to hear that she had delivered a child, I was browsing Instagram. The Entry for *medievalart* for that day was this striking image. I vaguely remembered hearing Helena mentioned in passing in a Byzantine history class and realized I knew very little about her. I kept scrolling back to this image and decided I wanted to learn more about the fabled St. Helena.

The rest of the description is as follows:

... have been given to Abbot Wibald of Stavelot during a diplomatic mission to Constantinople in 1155/1156. In the goldsmiths' workshop at Stavelot, the Byzantine reliquary was incorporated into a much larger retable triptych replete with precious gems and large enamels telling the history of the relics. The last abbot of Stavelot fled the French Revolution with the triptych in his possession in 1792. It was bought by J. Pierpont Morgan in 1910 and is now in the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. •

[#truecross](#) [#goodfriday](#) [#easter](#) [#easterweekend](#) [#relic](#) [#reliquary](#) [#medievalart](#) [#middleages](#)

Photos: Morgan Library & Museum, New York