

ST HELENA (HELEN) MOTHER OF CONSTANTINE THE GREAT



ST HELEN'S CHURCH, YORK

Helena, or Helen, the patron saint of this church, had humble beginnings. Although no contemporary account mentions her birthplace most modern historians think that she was born in about 250^{CE} in Bithynia, an area in present day Turkey, where her son later named a city in her honour. Later on, many cities including York claimed her as their own, but there is no evidence that she visited Britain.

Helena seems to have been a barmaid or stable girl when she met Constantius, an officer in the Roman army. She had a son by him, Constantine, in about 272. Constantius had high political ambitions, and in around 288 he married the emperor's daughter. Constantius became joint emperor in turn in 305, and was in York when he died in 306 and his son Constantine was proclaimed emperor by the troops.

Constantine honoured his mother by proclaiming her Augusta, or empress, in 324. The family life of Roman emperors seems always to have been stormy, and the family quarrels which led to the violent deaths of her grandson and daughter-in-law may have strengthened a desire to leave Rome and journey to the Holy Land when she was aged about 78. Journeying to Jerusalem, even with the privileges of an empress, would have been no small undertaking and she probably went overland. She is said to have visited the Holy Places associated with Christ's life and to have founded churches in Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives. The positions of the Holy Sites were already well known, as the Emperor Hadrian had erected pagan temples over them in his attempt to stamp out the Christian religion. St Jerome reported that a statue of Jupiter stood at the site of the resurrection and one of Venus at Golgotha; these landmarks quickly showed where to dig, as the local Christians were well aware of their true significance. Helena died about 330 at the age of eighty, soon after her return to Rome.

Our connections with St Helena

Although the ancient tradition that Helena was born in York has no historical foundation, and the possibility that she visited the city is mere speculation, this church stands on a site with very real links with the saint and her times.

Just a few hundred yards to the north of the church, under the south transept of the present Minster, stood the Roman headquarters where her son Constantine was proclaimed emperor by his troops. The main road through the Roman fortress down to the river ran approximately along the line of Stonegate, just inside the line of the Roman fortress walls and near the site of the Roman gateway (where Harkers now stands), on what has always been one of the principal thoroughfares within the city. Although it is unlikely that there was a church here in Roman times, Christianity was certainly well established here during her lifetime. The year after Constantine the Great legalized Christianity within the Roman Empire in 313, York was one of only two cities from Britain to send a bishop to the Council of Arles - the first evidence for an organised church hierarchy in this country. The existence of a church dedicated to St Helen within the ancient Roman fortress is a potent reminder of this pivotal era in the history of the church in York and, it is no exaggeration to say, in Europe as a whole. Significant remains of Roman buildings almost certainly lie beneath the church.

The evidence for the church is of post-Conquest date, but it is probably of pre-Conquest origin (ie before 1066). Such an important site at the heart of the city is likely to have been developed at an early date, and the alignment of the church (at an angle to the adjacent streets) corresponds to the presumed alignment of the Anglo-Saxon Minster. St Helen was revered within the Anglo-Saxon church from at least the eighth century, and the destroyed church of St Helen Aldwark was certainly a pre-Conquest foundation.

St Helena and tradition

Years after her death, a tradition grew up that she had discovered fragments of the cross on which Christ had been crucified, and the nails by which he had been fixed to it. So she became associated with devotion and contemplation centred on the passion and suffering of Christ, but also became the patron saint of blacksmiths, divorcees and those suffering difficult marriages, archaeologists, dyers, and many others. Numerous churches were dedicated to her, especially in Yorkshire, and at least three in York itself although only this one remains. The lack of clear evidence about her origins led to many places claiming her as a native - in Britain she was said by some to be Welsh, and there was a strong tradition that she was from Colchester and the daughter of the mythical King Cole. In the Eastern church she is closely linked with her son and the life of both Helena and Constantine are celebrated jointly on 21 May, when they are honoured as equal to the apostles. In the West she was traditionally remembered on 18 August, but now more commonly on 21 May.

St Helena - an inspiration for today?

The nearest contemporary account of Helena is to be found in the life of her son Constantine written by Eusebius in about 337. There he says there that *'she became under [Constantine's] influence such a devout servant of God that one might believe her to have been from her very childhood a disciple of the Redeemer of mankind'*. Of her pilgrimage he records that *'she resolved to bring to God, the King of Kings, the homage and tribute of her devotion'*.

Somewhat later, in about 403, Rufinus described Helena as *'a woman matchless in faith, devotion and singular generosity'*.

From these two sources we may glimpse something of Helena's life as a Christian.

Christianity was spread rapidly by the first apostles and by the beginning of the fourth century about half the population of Asia Minor where Helena was born were Christians. For most of Helena's life Christianity was under persecution from the Roman Empire. Conversion would not have been a public affair and converts probably met in private for prayer to God and fellowship with one another.

How was Helena attracted to Christianity? Eusebius claims that she was influenced by her son Constantine, but describes her as a woman of outstanding intellect. Was it her intellect that led her to accept Christianity with its central message of the loving and reconciling God as revealed by Jesus Christ, who taught us to live by faith in him and in love and peace with our neighbour? As a way of life, did this make more sense than the then predominantly secular world of pagan ritual and international hostility? For those who could accept it, the doctrine of the Cross would have had a powerful attraction.

Whatever the circumstances or motivations that led to Helena's conversion her public life as mother of Constantine, first as Nobilissima Femina until 324 and then as Augusta until her death, shows Helena to be a devout woman working in partnership with Constantine to promote Christianity

Legend believes Helena to have been baptised by Pope Silvester, but no date is given. Baptism would have been an indication of her faith in the living God, and a re-birth by the gift of the Holy Spirit, into a new life with Christ with the promise of salvation. It would have marked her entry as a believer into the Christian community. But believers would have not have had the freedom to exercise the faith in public until 313 when Constantine issued the Edict of Toleration and Christianity was treated with favour. Helena would then have been aged 63. Indeed, it could be that she did not become a Christian until after that date.

Helena as a disciple of Jesus Christ The word in use then (as now), applied to Helena, meant that she was an adherent of Jesus

Christ as leader of thought or action, thus in her own life, a follower by thought, word and deed of all He had taught. Many of the texts on which our understanding of Christianity is based had been written and studied by this time.

Helena faithful and devoted. A convinced disciple of our Lord, Helena would have believed in His teachings and His purpose here on this earth as our Saviour. Both Eusebius and Rufinus convey the impression of Helena as a woman of steadfast faith and action supported by a spiritual need for regular prayer and Christian worship which may have driven her desire to found churches. In 325 the Council of Nicea formulated one of the core creeds of Christian faith.

Helena as a servant of God. Helena was motivated to live a Christ-centred, active life in the service of others, with an awareness that Christ had entrusted the practicalities of His teaching to all his disciples after Him.

Helena - a generous woman. Blessed with imperial wealth Helena did not keep it to herself, understanding the concept of stewardship. Nothing was held back when the need was great.

Helena - a pilgrim. We cannot be certain why Helena went on a pilgrimage to Palestine. Christians may travel to sacred places as an act of devotion, to experience the places that Jesus went to during His earthly life, to feel closer to Him. For Helena it may have been an outward demonstration of her love of Christ.

Privately, she may have wished to show her gratitude to God for her longevity and other blessings of her life, such as her son Constantine and the protection he gave her. It may also have shown her reliance on God – a need we all have.

Today our whole life may be seen as a pilgrimage or spiritual journey, as by prayer, worship and meditative reading of the scriptures we may deepen our faith and experience a deeper relationship with the loving God. Looking at Helena's earthly life can we see something of *her* spiritual journey that may be helpful to us?

Some traditional prayers

Supposedly written by Helena on thinking about the Wise Men:

For his sake,
who did not reject your curious gifts of gold,
frankincense and myrrh,
pray always for the learned, the oblique,
and the delicate.
Let them not be quite forgotten at the throne of God,
when the simple come into their Kingdom.

Asking for her help:

Glorious Saint Helen, our protector,
please intercede from heaven on my behalf,
I venerate your name and ask you
to grant me the grace to imitate you,
the strength in my soul and feelings to invoke you,
so that I may thank you for bringing aid to me.

*This last prayer is from the book 'Saints, the Chosen Few' by
Manuela Dunn-Mascetti (Labyrinth 1994)*