

Julia Hillner: *Helena Augusta. Mother of the Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press 2023 (Women in Antiquity). XXXIII, 394 p., 47 ill., 1 family tree, 8 maps. £ 64.00/\$ 99.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-087529-9.

Flavia Iulia Helena is best remembered for an act she did not commit: the discovery of the True Cross. The late Roman, Byzantine and western medieval traditions about Helena's *inventio crucis* are immense, both in textual sources, in a variety of languages, and in material culture (e.g. statues, paintings). Her discovery of the cross earned her the epithet *sancta* in both the Latin and the Greek church – in the latter almost always together with her son Constantine. However, Julia Hillner's monograph is not about the rich legendary Christian traditions concerning Helena, found everywhere from Syriac-speaking northern Mesopotamia to Britain, but instead focuses on her historical life.¹

When I was invited to review Hillner's study, I was hesitant to accept because Helena was part of my life in the early stage of my academic career, and I regularly returned to her later on. As author of one of the, in Hillner's words, "stellar academic monographs" (p. 1) on Helena, she has perhaps become too familiar a figure to me to allow me to give a fair judgment on a new Helena monograph.² Nevertheless, I accepted out of a curiosity to find out what new could be said about Helena's life. And Hillner's book has new things to say. When I wrote my Helena book as my PhD thesis back in the 1980s, no modern studies about Helena existed; she was discussed in most depth in studies about her son Constantine. Two books in particular encouraged me to study Helena at the time: Ramsay MacMullen's monograph about Constantine and the chapter on Helena in David Hunt's book on pilgrimage

1 Hillner wrote a blog entitled "Writing Helena" while she was researching her Helena book: <https://writinghelena.wordpress.com/>.

2 J. W. Drijvers: *Helena Augusta. The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross*. Leiden et al. 1992 (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 27). I revised and augmented some of my views in *Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Myth: Some New Reflections*. In: *Millennium* 8, 2011, pp. 125–174. In recent decades other studies about Helena have appeared. To name just a few: H. A. Pohlsander: *Helena. Empress and Saint*. Chicago 1995; H. Heinen: *Konstantins Mutter Helena: de stercore ad regnum*. In: *TZ* 61, 1998, pp. 227–240; A. Harbus: *Helena of Britain in Medieval Legend*. Cambridge 2002; I. Lasala Navarro: *Helena Augusta. Una biografía histórica*. Diss. Zaragoza 2009.

to the Holy Land in the fourth and fifth centuries.³ MacMullen entwined fact and fiction about Helena which seemed wrong to me. Hunt's book was a great inspiration although I am convinced that Helena's journey to Palestine was not a pilgrimage. In my Helena book I tried to clearly distinguish between historically reliable sources on the one hand, and legendary material on the other. That resulted in a study divided into two parts: the first part describes what we actually can know about Helena's life, and the second part focuses on the origin, diffusion and function of the legend of Helena's discovery of the Cross in the fourth and fifth centuries. I must admit that at the time I found the legendary material and fictional narratives about Helena more interesting than the historical material.

Julia Hillner takes a different approach. While I have argued that the sources are so limited that we cannot write a biography of Helena in the traditional sense, Hillner takes a different perspective on what a biography is, as she explains in the introduction to the book. According to her, there are many ways to write a biography and there are no definitive rules for the genre. As she explains in the Introduction her book should be considered a biography because "it seeks to understand the characteristics of Helena's life and to test the limits of our knowledge about them" (p. 3). Hillner also argues that her book is a biography because it chronologically follows Helena's lifespan, essentially from birth to death. This is fair enough, but the fact remains that there are large interruptions in her life about which we know nothing, as well as periods of her life about which the sources are ambivalent. In order to fill the gaps in her life course, Hillner has come up with a fascinating methodology: to go beyond texts and objects and to include natural and human geography, i.e. the historically verifiable environment in which Helena had moved and/or her portraiture was displayed, as well as the relationships encircling her, in particular female relations. Hillner considers these the pillars of her book (p. 2). Hillner's refreshing approach makes her book not so much a study about Helena, although she remains central, but also a study of relationships of imperial women (and men), and especially their role in dynastic policies, during the Tetrarchic, Constantinian and even post-Constantinian period. Emperors needed their mothers, sisters, and daughters to

3 R. MacMullen: *Constantine*. New York 1969 (Crosscurrents in World History); E. D. Hunt: *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312–460*. Oxford 1984, pp. 28–49.

uphold and extend their positions and that of their families both in the present and for the future. This makes women like Helena important factors in imperial affairs but also leaves them very much dependent on their male relatives. A principal theme of Hillner's study of Helena's life is therefore her dependency on her son Constantine and the fact that Constantine remained the source for her official image and her position within the Constantinian family (pp. 11–12).

Apart from the Introduction (pp. 1–12), the book has eleven chapters chronologically grouped into four sections: "I. Extra (c. 248–c. 289)" ("On the Frontiers", pp. 15–33; "Weather Eye on the Horizon", pp. 34–51); "II. Off Stage (c. 289–c. 317)" ("Sister Act", pp. 55–79; "The Necklace Affair", pp. 80–108); "III. Center Stage (c. 317–c. 329)" ("Keeping Up Appearances", pp. 111–139; "Roman Holiday", pp. 140–177; "Four Deaths and an Anniversary", pp. 178–203; "From Here to Eternity", pp. 204–243); "IV. Curtain and Encores (c. 329–c. 600)" ("Burying an Empress", pp. 247–273; "Silence of the Empress", pp. 274–308; "New Model Empress", pp. 309–346).

The first part concerns Helena's early life and her relationship with Constantius, Constantine's father. Although various places of birth are mentioned in the sources, Hillner rightly believes Drepanum in Bithynia to be the most likely candidate – after his mother's death Constantine renamed it Helenopolis in her honour. Helena was probably born c. 250 and all sources agree that she was of low social origin (a *stabularia*) and therefore was probably not in full control of her body. Hillner makes the not unlikely suggestion that Constantius met her when he accompanied the emperor Aurelian to the East in 272/273. Their association is somewhat obscure: was Helena Constantius' lawfully wedded wife, his concubine or something in between? Much discussion has surrounded the nature of their relationship because it is of importance for the legitimacy of Constantine as emperor. In this discussion Hillner takes a middle position: Helena was waiting for marriage with Constantius, she thought of herself as married (p. 39), or the couple assumed they were married (p. 37). Constantius probably brought her to Naissus where Constantine was born in the mid-270s. Whether other children were born out of the relationship is unknown, but there is ambiguous evidence that Constantia, Anastasia and Constantius were Constantine's siblings instead of his half-siblings from Constantius' later relationship with Theodora (pp. 41–42). Hillner supposes that Helena lived together with Constantius in

Naissus and that she moved with him to Salona when he became *praeses Dalmatiae* in the 280s. She sketches the urban and social environment of both towns which undeniably adds to the setting in which Helena could have lived. However, there is unfortunately no reliable evidence that Helena lived for an extended time in Naissus and Salona. While Hillner presents a rather romantic image of Helena, Constantius and Constantine living together as a young happy family, sources do not allow us to actually know whether she lived together with Constantius in this period. Despite their alleged happiness, Constantius had no qualms leaving Helena in 289 for a political marriage with Theodora, the daughter of the *Augustus* Maximian, to become a member of the imperial Tetrarchy as *Caesar*. For some thirty years Helena disappears from public record only to return in the mid-310s when Constantine incorporated her visibly into his family dynasty.

The second part of the book concentrates on the Tetrarchic imperial women and their role in dynastic policies. It discusses their visibility in the form of statues, paintings and coinage, and the connection between Tetrarchic and Constantinian representations of imperial women such as in the famous Trier ceiling frescoes. Based on their appearance (clothing style, jewellery, hairstyle), the women in the frescoes are likely to be representations of imperial women. Particularly interesting is Hillner's discussion of the tomb close to the imperial villa of Maximinus Daza at Šarkamen in eastern Serbia. The tomb contained Maximinus' deceased female relatives, among them most likely his mother. Galerius also erected a mausoleum for his mother Romula at Felix Romuliana. Obviously, Maximinus and Galerius were aware of the significance of the representative presence of their female relatives, and in particular their mothers, for dynastic purposes both in life and in death. The symbolic centrality of imperial women by his Tetrarchic predecessors seems to have served as example for Constantine's policy regarding his own female family members, and especially his mother Helena. Galerius' publicity surrounding his wife Valeria, who first carried the title *nobilissima femina* and was hailed as *Augusta* in 308, foreshadowed Constantine's elevation of, for instance, his mother and his wife Fausta who were first raised to the status of *nobilissima femina* in 317 and then both received the title of *Augusta* in 324.

The third part covers the years when Helena comes out of the shadows and this is the period of her life about which we know most. She was already old by then – around 70. Among other things, Hillner discusses at length

Helena's imperial representation on coins and statues, first as *nobilissima femina* and then *Augusta*. Her clothes, jewellery and hairstyle gave her a distinctive and representative appearance. Around 315, she started to rise in status in the Constantinian family; she was the most important imperial woman after Fausta. And after the latter's death in 326 – Fausta was ousted by Constantine for reasons that can no longer be traced – she was the most important woman at court as the emperor's mother. She was officially designated as *genetrix* of the Constantinian family. Constantine's promotion of Helena was inspired by Galerius' advancement of his mother Romula (p. 138). At the end of her life, she can rightly be characterised as *regina orbis ac mater imperii*⁴ – “queen of world and mother of the empire”. Her rise to power is ascribed by Hillner to the close relationship between Constantine and Helena, a bond that was forged during their time together in Naissus (pp. 137–138). It is therefore somewhat surprising that Hillner does not discuss the possibility that Helena joined Constantine's court in Trier shortly after 306; the frescoes as well as an early medieval Helena tradition in Trier could be interpreted as an indication that she once resided here.

From c. 315 onwards Helena is likely to have lived in Rome where she represented imperial authority – Hillner calls her Constantine's imperial delegate in Rome (p. 142) – just like many imperial women living in Rome before and after her were representatives of the emperor and embodied imperial authority. Again, Hillner highlights the geographical, urban and social environment in which Helena moved, offering depth and a better understanding of Helena's life in Rome. The Sessorian Palace in the south-east corner of the city was her residence – epigraphical evidence and building activities (the *Thermae Helenae*) are testimonies of her presence there. Hillner suggests that Helena had her own court and that as imperial representative on Constantine's behalf she maintained connections with senators and their wives, administrators and perhaps even the bishop of Rome (Sylvester at the time), social groups that were of great political importance to Constantine.⁵ She is said to have supervised Constantine-initiated building activities in the city including church building (e.g. St Peter's, St John of Lateran, the basilica *ad duas lauros*). Although in later times church foundations in Rome were associated with

4 Rufin. hist. 10.8.

5 See now also M. R. Salzman: *The Falls of Rome. Crises, Resilience and Resurgence in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge/New York 2021, pp. 36–90.

Helena, Hillner points out that there is no agency from Helena in this regard and that all church foundations were by Constantine. Whether part of her Sessorian Palace was transformed into a chapel – later known as *basilica Heleniana* and S. Croce in Gerusalemme – during her lifetime is uncertain.

After the celebration of his *Vicennalia* in Rome and the elimination of his son Crispus and his wife Fausta, Constantine left the eternal city in the late summer of 326. Hillner suggests that he took his mother with him – she was by then almost 80 years of age. Her journey through the eastern provinces of the empire was a diplomatic and political mission, as Hillner rightly argues, and not a pilgrimage as some scholars still sometimes claim. However, Hillner's reconstruction of Helena's itinerary and the chronology of her journey are debatable. Our main source of information is Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* 3.42–47; apart from presenting Helena as a pious and benevolent Christian, Eusebius concentrates on Helena's stay in Palestine. Eusebius presents no information about her route, when her journey started or when it ended; nor do other sources. In fact, we do not know when she started her journey, how long it lasted, and whether she travelled by land or by sea. As mentioned, Hillner suggests she left Rome in the late summer of 326 together with Constantine and that they travelled overland to Constantinople – Hillner thinks it reasonable to assume that they had a somewhat longer layover in Constantine's hometown Naissus. From Constantinople, Helena continued her journey to Antioch where she arrived early in 328 and from there travelled on to Palestine where she arrived in the spring of that year. This itinerary is plausible but actually we do not know anything with any certainty. She may have travelled by sea to the east – not an unusual route – and might have left Rome only in 327, and visited Antioch on her way back as most scholars assume. In Antioch she had a run-in with bishop Eustathius who allegedly had insulted her. Eustathius was soon afterwards deposed by Constantine, presumably not only because he had insulted Helena but also because of the religious upheavals he created.⁶ Eusebius associates Helena with the building of the Eleona church on the Mount of Olives and the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, but Hillner argues rightly that she supervised the church building in Palestine but was not responsible for founding these

6 See now H. A. Drake: Constantine and Eusebius in Antioch. In: *Studies in Late Antiquity* 7, 2023, pp. 106–136, at pp. 125–126. Drake discusses also the chronology of Helena's itinerary (pp. 110–111).

churches, just like in Rome. Again the geographical, urban and social environment is elaborately described which adds to a better understanding of Helena's stay in Palestine.

The fourth and last part of the book discusses Helena's death sometime in the second half of 328 or early 329 on her return back home, as well as her funeral in Rome – with full imperial honours according to Hillner (p. 250) – where she was laid to rest in a porphyry sarcophagus in a mausoleum attached to the Ss. Marcellino e Pietro at the Via Labicana. She was the first imperial figure to be interred in a mausoleum connected to a church; soon this would become standard. Helena's memory lived on and Hillner presents her granddaughter Constantina as imperial female representative who continued Helena's position in Rome and played a role in imperial affairs. Constantina focused more actively on Christian patronage rather than on fertility and motherhood, as Helena and also Fausta had done, although she knew her role in dynastic affairs – her brother Constantius II married her off to his *Caesar* Gallus. Constantina too was buried in Rome in the mausoleum now known as S. Costanza, also attached to a church – the S. Agnese, a female martyr with whom Constantina associated herself. Appropriately, her porphyry sarcophagus stands next to Helena's in the Vatican Museums. Hillner describes how Helena gradually faded into the background until she made a comeback at the end of the fourth century, when the discovery of Christ's Cross in Jerusalem was attributed to her, first attested in literary tradition in Ambrose's funeral oration for Theodosius in 395. Analogous to the emergence of Constantine as role model for Christian emperors, Helena became a benchmark for the self-representation of imperial women from the Theodosian dynasty such as Eudocia and Pulcheria, and later on in the West for the Frankish queen Radegund. Helena's portrayal as exemplary empress is very much connected to her Christianity and the story that she found the Cross; she was considered a very pious woman who was furthermore well-known for her charitable work and her patronage of churches and monasteries. But by then we are dealing with a Helena not based on historically reliable information but with the Helena of Christian legends.

It is hard to say anything certain about whether Helena was or became Christian during her lifetime since her Christianity is so inseparably connected with later Christian traditions about her. She was probably not born a Christian. The sources say nothing about her conversion; nor is there information

about a baptism at the end of her life, as was the case with her son Constantine who received baptism on his deathbed. However, throughout her book Hillner suggests that Helena was a Christian even before her rise in imperial status in the mid-310s. As a youth she may have known Christians in Bithynia and Pontus, the region where her supposed birthplace Drepanum was situated, and she may have even witnessed Christian persecutions. In Salona Helena may have experienced “Christianity in a confident, organized, and urban form”, in the view of Hillner (p. 47). However, this is conjecture since there is no reliable historical information about her possible contacts with Christians at this stage of her life, and we do not even know whether she ever lived in Salona. Hillner thinks that Helena was a Christian when she returned to court life in the mid-310s (“When she returned, she was a Christian empress”, p. 49), thereby implying that her conversion took place before that. During her travels through Palestine in 328 Helena apparently experienced her Christian faith in spatial and tactile ways; remarkably Hillner speaks here of her recent conversion (p. 241). But that Helena came late to Christianity makes sense. She was, as Hillner herself argues, dependent on Constantine. Since Constantine’s transition to Christianity was likely to have been a slow process – a Pauline conversion in 312 is highly improbable – Helena’s coming to the Christian faith may have happened rather late in her life. Eusebius may therefore well be right that she became Christian under the influence of her son.⁷ There are suggestions from unreliable sources that she favoured Arianism because of her conflict with the Antiochene bishop Eustathius and her supposed connections with Lucian, the teacher of Arius (pp. 224–229). It is also not very likely that she was a leader of the Christian faith during her lifetime (p. 25).

In many respects this is a great book and a fascinating read. It does a much better job than previous studies of outlining Helena’s life against the background and in the context of political and dynastic entanglements during the Tetrarchy and the reign of Constantine. It will rapidly become the standard monograph on Helena. The book’s greatest value, however, lies in how Hillner explains the role of Tetrarchic and Constantinian women in dynastic politics. Helena fulfilled an important function in this as *nobilissima femina*, *Augusta*, *genetrix* and mother of empire. But she was not the only one; many other female imperial family members played important roles in the dynastic

7 Vita Const. 3.47.2.

politics of their husbands, sons and brothers as well. They all pass the review in this book. Hillner's use of natural and human geography as well as her extensive discussion of the imagery of female imperial representation greatly add to a better understanding of the role these women were expected to play within their imperial families.

However, Hillner sometimes gets too carried away in sketching Helena's life, for example in her description of her early years and her relationship with Constantius, about which the sources provide hardly any information. Using natural and human geography as a source of information here then leads to fiction rather than historical fact. But this methodology can also be revealing, as is the case with the description of Helena's years in Rome.

The book contains a useful index (pp. 383–394), a timeline of the Constantinian, Valentinian and Theodosian dynasties (pp. XV–XIX), a list of *dramatis personae* (pp. XXI–XXIV) and a family tree (pp. XXVI–XXVII, especially useful because of the complex dynastic and inter-dynastic relationships). Unfortunately, a list of illustrations is not included, and the publisher could have done a better job with the maps (pp. XXIX–XXXIII) and illustrations which are rather small (and all printed in black and white).

Jan Willem Drijvers, University of Groningen
Department of History
Associate Professor/Reader in Ancient History
j.w.drijvers@rug.nl

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Jan Willem Drijvers: Rezension zu: Julia Hillner: Helena Augusta. Mother of the Empire. New York: Oxford University Press 2023 (Women in Antiquity). In: Plekos 25, 2023, S. 303–311 (URL: <https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2023/r-hillner.pdf>).

Lizenz: Creative Commons BY-NC-ND
