

ASPECTS OF HELEN:
BYZANTINE AND OTHER INFLUENCES ON THE READING
OF CONSTANTINE'S MOTHER IN THE WEST¹

Constantine's charisma, strength, and his activities as first Christian emperor combine to explain his adoption in later centuries, together with his mother Helena, as the type of Christian rulership and worthy of veneration.² From the fifth century, emperors and empresses, kings and queens, were enjoined and acclaimed to be 'New Constantine', 'New Helena'.³ Severus of Antioch, 512-518, composed a hymn to Constantine.⁴ A silver censer from Lebanon or Syria, probably of the seventh-century, is inscribed 'ΑΓ[ΙΩ] ΚΟΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΩ'.⁵ In Britain, where he was proclaimed emperor, his name was borne not only by the usurper Constantine III (407-411) but also by kings and saints in the surviving 'Celtic'-speaking western polities between the fifth and seventh centuries, and in Scotland as late as the tenth.⁶ The polemicist Gildas, writing per-

¹ 'Helen' is used in this paper for the composite figure in which Helena the mother of Constantine became subsumed. I would like to thank, posthumously, Marian Wenzel for stimulating my interest in this topic; the organisers of the conference for inviting me to take part; and my colleagues at the universities of Oxford and Leicester for making it possible for me to prepare this article for publication.

² A. Linder, 'The myth of Constantine the Great in the West: Sources and hagiographic commemoration', *Studi Medievali*, 3rd series, 16 (1975), Fasc. 1 (Spoleto, Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo).

³ Michael Whitby, 'Images for emperors in late antiquity', in Paul Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines: the rhythm of imperial renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th centuries: papers from the twenty-sixth spring symposium of Byzantine studies, St Andrews, March 1992*, Society for the Promotion of Byzantine Studies 2 (Aldershot, Variorum, 1994), hereafter Magdalino, 'New Constantines', pp. 83-94. See also Jo Ann McNamara, 'Imitatio Helenae: Sainthood as an attribute of queenship', in Sandro Sticca (ed.), *Saints: Studies in Hagiography*, Medieval and Renaissance Studies 141 (Binghamtown, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York, 1996), pp. 51-80.

⁴ E. W. Brooks (ed. and trs.), James of Edessa, 'The Hymns of Severus of Antioch and Others', *Patrologia Orientalis* 7 (Paris, R. Graffin et F. Nau, 1903 ff.), pp. 663-5.

⁵ Marlia Mundell Mango, 'Imperial art in the seventh century', in Magdalino, 'New Constantines', pp. 109-38.

⁶ J. F. Drinkwater, 'The Usurpers Constantine III (407-411) and Jovinus (411-413)', *Britannia* 29 (1998), pp. 269-298.

haps c. 540, berated a king Constantine of Dumnonia (present-day Devon and Cornwall) and the conversion of that king or another is mentioned in the Welsh annals.⁷ Saints named Constantine were commemorated in Dumnonia, in north Wales and on the Welsh-English border, and in Scotland.⁸ Sixteenth-century reports spoke of a lamp burning in memory of Constantine's father Constantius in a chapel, later said to be the church of St Helen's-on-the-Walls, in York, the city where Constantius died.⁹ Though no 'New Constantine' acclamations are recorded from Britain, Pope Gregory the Great wrote to Bertha, wife of King Aethelbeorht of Kent, urging her to imitate Helena in bringing Christianity to the island's Germanic ruling families whose evangelisation the Britons had neglected.¹⁰ A century-and-a-half later, the Mercian king Offa, seeking parity with Charlemagne, struck coins for his queen Cynefryth imitative of those Constantine struck for Helena.¹¹ Two of the most famous Old English saga poems are 'Elene', by Cynewulf, perhaps also of the eighth century, and 'The Dream of the Rood' [or Cross].

Even so, only seven churches of 'St Constantine' (regardless of the patron saint's identification) are found in Britain.¹² In contrast, those commemorating 'St Helen' are relatively more frequent in Britain than anywhere else in Europe, with the exception of parts of contemporary northern Greece.¹³ The geographical distributions of Helen dedications in Britain and Greece exhibit both similarity and contrast. In Britain, three-quarters of Helen dedications occur in England *north* of a line from the Severn estuary to that of the Humber. Half of all British dedications in honour of the Holy Cross, with whose discovery or 'Invention' Helena was credited, occur *south* of that line.¹⁴ In Greece, her dedications occur

⁷ Michael Winterbottom (trs. and ed.), *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works / Gildas*, History from the Sources 7 (London, Phillimore, 1978), chapters 28-9. John Morris (trs. and ed.), *British History; and The Welsh annals / [compiled by] Nennius*, History from the Sources 7 (London, Phillimore, 1980), hereafter 'Nennius', chapters 45, 86, s.a. 589.

⁸ Nicholas Orme, *The Saints of Cornwall* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), hereafter Orme, 'Cornwall', pp. 94-6. G. H. Doble, *St Constantine, King and Monk, and St Merryn*, 'Cornish Saints' series 26 (Truro, Netherton and Worth, 1930), pp. 15-24.

⁹ William Camden, *Britannia*, trs. Edmund Gibson (London, A. Swalle and A & J Churchil, 1695), s.v. York; Francis Drake, *Eboracum: or, The history and antiquities of the city of York...* (London, W. Bower, 1736, reprinted Wakefield, EP Publishing, 1978), p. 44.

¹⁰ *Gregorii I Pape Registrvm epistolarvm*, ed. P. Ewald and L. Hartmann, Monumenta Germaniæ Historica Epistolæ 1-2 (2nd edn, Berlin, Weidmann, 1957), XI.35.

¹¹ Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds and Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles, on-line at <<http://www-cm.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/Coins/emc.html>>, accessed February 9, 2004.

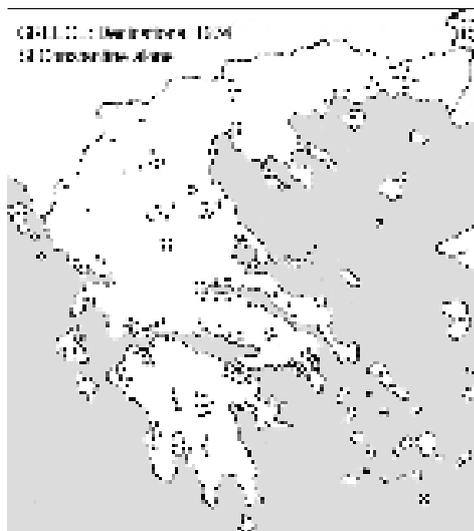
¹² Three in Cornwall and two in Devon (Orme, 'Cornwall', pp. 95-6), For the two in Wales see Graham Jones, *The Saints of Wales* (Aberystwyth, Celtic Studies Publications, forthcoming).

¹³ Graham Jones, 'Holy wells and the cult of St Helen', *Landscape History* 8 (1986), hereafter Jones, 'Wells', pp. 59-76. See also Graham Jones, 'Diverse Expressions, Shared Meanings: Surveying Saints in the Context of 'European Culture'', in Graham Jones (ed.), *Saints of Europe: Studies Towards a Survey of Cults and Culture* (Donnington, Shaun Tyas, 2003), hereafter Jones, 'Saints', pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ Jones, 'Wells', pp. 59 ff. On Helena and the Cross, see Jan Willem Drijvers (University of Groningen), author of *Helena Augusta, The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 27 (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1992).

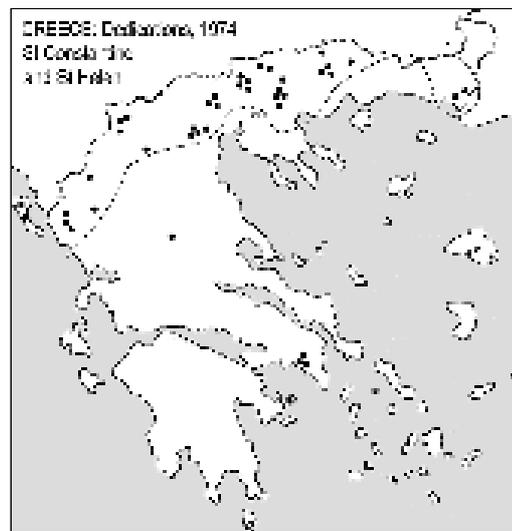
almost entirely in the north, in Thrace and Greek Macedonia – and so do those of Holy Cross. In the south she is venerated jointly with Constantine, and there Constantine is also commemorated alone.¹⁵ So the Greek coincidence between the zones of Helena and Holy Cross churches is the opposite of what is found in Britain. Nevertheless it seems to offer the same message: Helena owes her importance first to her discovery of the Holy Cross, and secondly to her association with Constantine.

Any geographical distribution is likely to represent a palimpsest of cultural imprints, and the distribution of Helen dedications in Britain is influenced in fact by four aspects of the saint over and above her status as Constantine's mother and her reputation as Cross-finder. She is an Anglo-Saxon royal saint by adoption; saint of holy springs; personification of medicinal flora; and protector of flocks. These 'native' aspects of Helena prompt attention to two secular characters, since her name resonates with those of Elen, a folk figure in Welsh and other 'Celtic'-speaking lands who in myth is married to the usurper emperor Magnus Maximus, and Alauna, probable female counterpart of a western European deity whose pre-English name is also borne by many British rivers. In the Byzantine world, arguably the critical cradle of Western Christian culture, three further manifestations may have influenced how perceptions of Helena, mother of Constantine, developed: Helen, tree deity in Greek myth (and precur-



Objekti posvećeni Sv. Konstantinu, Grčka, 1974. (ucrtao autor)

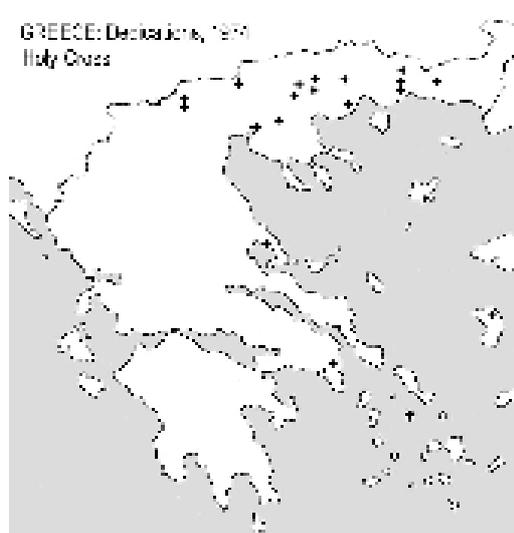
Dedications in honour of St Constantine alone, Greece, 1974 (by the author).



Objekti posvećeni Svetima Konstantinu i Jeleni, Grčka, 1974. (ucrtao autor)

Dedications in honour of St Constantine and St Helen, Greece, 1974 (by the author).

¹⁵ Jones (see Footnote 13), using data from *Ηερολογιον τις Εχχλυσίας Ελλάδος* (Athens, Apostolic Diaconate, 1974), pp. 226-514.



*Objekti posvećeni Časnom krstu,
Grčka, 1974. (ucrtao autor)*

*Dedications in honour of the Holy
Cross, Greece, 1974 (by the author).*

sor of Helen of Troy); Helen, sister of the Dioscuri and bringer of St Elmo's fire; and Helena as joint patron with Constantine of the fire-walkers of Thrace. This article attempts to introduce each aspect and suggest ideas for further research.



*Hoda~ po `eravici u Langadi,
severna Gr~ka, 1953. [Iz: Katerina
J. Kakouri, Dionysiaka: Aspects
of the Popular Thracian Religion
of To-day, prev. Helen Colaclides
(Athens, G. C. Eleftheroudakis,
1965), Sl. 13.]*

*Firewalker at Langada, northern
Greece, 1953. [From Katerina J.
Kakouri, Dionysiaka: Aspects of the
Popular Thracian Religion of To-
day, trs. Helen Colaclides (Athens,
G. C. Eleftheroudakis, 1965),
Fig. 13.]*

Helen, Anglo-Saxon royal saint by adoption

Attention has been drawn to the concentration of dedications honouring Helen north of a line across the island of Britain: essentially within Northumbria and the 'Celtic' west, including Wales. That is not to say that those dedications south of this line have no significance. Far from it. In fact their locations point up an interesting spatial association: though few in number, they appear so frequently at places which were royal centres of the kings of Mercia, one of the major Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, that Helen may fairly be described as a Mercian royal saint by adoption. Offa (757-796) had coins struck for his consort, Cynefryth, imitative of those Constantine had made for Helena and in line with the exhortation of kings and queens to be 'New Constantine, New Helen'. They were minted in Kent, the kingdom nearest the Continent over which Offa had extended his *imperium*. In fact, Helen's appearance in Mercia is doubly significant because the Mercian ruling families produced more saints than any others in Anglo-Saxon England.



Novčić koji je Konstantin iskovao Jeleni u čast

Coin minted for Helena by Constantine.

One of a notable cluster of five Helen churches on the Leicestershire/Northamptonshire border is Gumley, location of meetings of Offa's council. Nearby is a chalybeate well (that is, one with high concentrations of iron, beneficial to health) and the church is located against what may be a remnant of an estate or hunting park bank. Associations with Offa coincide with other Helen churches at Benson, Oxfordshire, a royal estate centre and *caput* of a group of administrative units; Worcester, a county capital and diocesan see of the sub-kingdom of the Hwicce; and Bedford, another county town and Offa's alleged burial place. Helen churches found elsewhere on the periphery of the Mercian kingdom include those at Alvington, Gloucestershire (a hunting lodge of Kings Harold and Henry II), Bath, Malmesbury, and Abingdon, all sites of important seventh-century monasteries, and in the subject kingdoms of Essex

(at Colchester, which claimed to be Helena's birthplace and that she built its Roman walls); Sussex (at Ore and Hangleton); and Kent (at Cliffe-at-Hoo and Canterbury).

Helena may well have been popular in Mercia long before Offa adopted her as a model for his queen and seemingly placed churches under her patronage around its boundaries. Perhaps her veneration had been encouraged a century earlier during the brief overlordship of Northumbria, the northern Anglo-Saxon kingdom which encompassed York, see of Britain's junior archbishop, and where Constantine's acclamation as emperor was never forgotten. Certainly it is necessary only to notice the places with Helen churches where older, British influence had been (and perhaps still was) strong: Benson, the king's vill relative to the Romano-British town of Dorchester; Worcester, Colchester and Canterbury, three Romano-British cantonal capitals; and Bath, famous in late antiquity for its healing springs.

Helen, saint of holy springs

The first scholar to catalogue holy wells in Britain, that is, springs popularly associated with healing and/or divination, was Robert Charles Hope. He recorded more wells of St Helen than were attributed to any other non-biblical saint.¹⁶ Most of Hope's 450 wells bear non-recurring, secular names. Of those with saints' names, 28 are attributed to Mary or the ambiguous (Our) Lady. The second largest group is the ten attributed to Helen. However, Hope seriously understated Helen's popularity. At least 43 wells and four pools are supposedly under her patronage, plus 27 wells known by other names but associated with



Zavetna povesma na Izvoru Sv. Jelene
blizu Tadkastera u Jork{iru, 1906. [Iz:

M[argaret] L. Faull, i S. A. Moorhouse (izd.), An Archaeological Survey to A.D. 1500 (Wakefield, West Yorkshire Archaeological Service, 1981), Plate VIA.]

Votive rags at St Helen's Well, near Tadcaster, Yorkshire, 1906. [From M[argaret] L. Faull, and S. A. Moorhouse (eds), An Archaeological Survey to A.D. 1500 (Wakefield, West Yorkshire Archaeological Service, 1981), Plate VIA.]

¹⁶ Robert Charles Hope, *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England, including rivers, lakes, fountains, and springs* (London, 1893). For 'holy' wells generally see James Rattue, *The Living Stream: Holy Wells in Historical Context* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 1995).

Helen churches.¹⁷ A particular problem is the incomplete state of knowledge about the extent of secularisation or suppression of medicinal, oracular, and holy wells generally following the sixteenth-century Reformation. One popular account estimates that there were 4,000 in pre-Reformation England.¹⁸ Very many sites, particularly in the south of England, await rediscovery.

Altogether, 233 locations in the British Isles are or have been associated with Helen: 137 churches, plus the wells and pools, and miscellaneous sites, mainly legendary. Analysis of these locations against a control group of parishes randomly selected showed that 33 parishes with one or more Helen sites have associated wells (in the control group thirteen), 35 are located on rivers (nineteen), and 33 on or near Roman roads (eight). Even allowing for under-recording in the control group because of limitations on field research and the use of maps at a scale of one inch to the mile, the results seem significant. The ratio of 74 wells and pools associated with Helen to 233 Helen sites in total itself appears very high compared with other cults, except perhaps that of St Anne and one or two others.

Helen, personification of medicinal flora

Herbs such as St John's Wort, widely known as an antidote to depression, were fundamental for pre-modern health. In Wales the alpine herb *meum athamanticum* (spignel), which flowers in June and July and benefits urinary conditions among others, is known as *Elen's Spignel*. A photograph of St Helen's Well at a Roman crossing of the river Wharfe near Tadcaster, Yorkshire, taken in 1906, shows the bushes around the well festooned by votive rags.¹⁹ It was said that an Edwardian botanist and his companion found there vervain and other rare medicinal plants.²⁰ *Verbena officinalis*, also known as Herb of the Cross, is deemed effective for depression, liver conditions, gums and teeth. At Salew on the parish boundary of Newton Bromswold, Huntingdonshire, the field in which 'S. Tellyn's [St Ellyn's] chapel' and an accompanying well are shown on a seventeenth-century map is identified as 'Alycon Payne Close'.²¹ This seems almost certainly to represent a corruption of 'Elecampane', the popular English name for *inula helenium*, a well-known plant with yellow petals like rays of the sun (*helios*) which past generations have used to treat stomach and respiratory complaints.

In 1868 a clergyman, John Christopher Atkinson, recorded popular customs from which May 3, the feast of the Invention of the Cross, was known as

¹⁷ Jones, 'Holy wells'.

¹⁸ Janet Bord and Colin Bord, *Sacred waters: holy wells and water lore in Britain and Ireland* (London, Granada, 1985).

¹⁹ M[argaret] L. Faull, and S. A. Moorhouse (eds), *An Archaeological Survey to A.D. 1500* (Wakefield, West Yorkshire Archaeological Service, 1981), Plate VIA.

²⁰ Guy Ragland Phillips, *Brigantia* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

²¹ *Victoria History of the County of Huntingdon 3* (London, Dawsons of Pall Mall for the Institute of Historical Research, 1974), s. v. 'Newton Bromswold'.

‘Rowan Tree Day’ or ‘Rowan Tree Witch Day’, rather than May 1.²² Sprigs of rowan (‘mountain ash’), a magical tree throughout Europe, were placed above doors and carried in pockets ‘to ward off witches and their spells’. Farmers’ whipstocks of rowan were credited with the power of ‘making them safe against... horses made restive by a witch’. In many parts of Britain crosses of rowan protected children’s cradles and cattle stalls. Atkinson noted that May 3 was known also as ‘St Eline’s Day-in-the-Spring’ – as distinct from Helena’s own feast day in the West on August 18.

Helen, protector of flocks

St Helen’s-in-the-Spring, or Ellenmas, stands alongside May Day (May 1) itself, and Ascensiontide when the famous well-dressings of Derbyshire take place. May was the time, according to popular tradition, that the ‘powers’ of water were at their greatest. Stories were told of ‘prophetic’ wells and springs, the measure of whose flow or dryness at the beginning of May portended good or evil. Nevertheless, the practical significance of Ellenmas for rural communities in Britain lay in its linkage to the agrarian year. Alex Winchester has shown that in many townships on the Pennine hills it was the latest date for the beginning of the season during which the arable fields were closed to grazing.²³ For these farmers on the northern fells, Ellenmas perhaps superseded Beltane, the occasion in Celtic-speaking lands on which fires were lit to purify and protect the cattle as they were sent to the summer grazings.²⁴ Beltane is specifically recorded as an alternative name for St Helen’s Day in Scotland.²⁵ Ellenmas was also an accounting date, like Christmas and Michaelmas, and both semantically and functionally stands alongside Candlemas (St Brigit and the weaning of lambs and calves), Lammas (St Peter and the opening of water meadows to cattle), and Martinmas (St Martin and the slaughter of animals for winter sustenance).

So far the evidence for the term Ellenmas is confined to northern England. However, it is worth enquiring whether St Helen’s Day in the Spring may have defined agrarian calendars elsewhere. For example, a cluster of Helen churches defines the upland pastures surrounding the arable fields and water-meadows of the Welland valley on the Leicestershire-Northamptonshire border - including one of the half-dozen highest points in central England. In the Helen parishes of Thornley and Saddington rise head-streams of three major rivers: the Warwickshire Avon, the Welland and the Nene. This ‘heart of England’ was significant sheep country in the Middle Ages and seasonal stock movements

²² John Christopher Atkinson, *Forty Years in a Moorland Parish: reminiscences and researches in Danby in Cleveland* (2nd edn, London, Macmillan, 1891).

²³ Angus J. L. Winchester, *The Harvest of the Hills. Rural Life in Northern England and the Scottish Borders, 1400-1700* (Edinburgh, University Press, 2000), hereafter Winchester, ‘Harvest’.

²⁴ Winchester, ‘Harvest’, pp. 55 and 74 (footnote 10).

²⁵ Winchester, ‘Harvest’, pp. 55, and 74 (footnote 11). Winchester cites the *Dictionary of Older Scottish Tongue*, s.v. ‘Beltane’, for a source from Coupar Angus in 1539: ‘Sanct Helyn daye callit Belten or the inventione of the hali cros’.

are very possible. Furthermore, this calendrical functionality may begin to explain the geographical divide between Helen and Holy Cross dedications. Some cultural significance in Helen's association with Maytide may have been peculiar to the north country and overrode the straight-forward association with the Cross which pertained elsewhere.

Elen, wife in British myth of Magnus Maximus

The wife of Maximus, the emperor acclaimed by the army in Britain in 383 who ruled Britain, Gaul and Spain (and latterly Italy) until 388, is named Helen in Welsh heroic literature and genealogies, for which the earliest surviving MSS. is of the twelfth century, but preserving much earlier material.²⁶ She is *Elen Lluyddawc*, 'Elen of the Hosts', and heroine of the romantic tale *Breudwyt Macsen*, 'The Dream of Maxen', in the so-called *Mabinogion* cycle.²⁷ Roman roads in Wales were known as *sarnau Elen*, 'Helen's Roads'. A further conflation linked *Elen Lluyddawc* with an earlier Elen, a divine and mythical figure, sister of a moon deity, Arianrhod ('Silver Wheel'). Neither the naming of Maximus's wife in a Welsh pedigree as *Ceindrech*, a late form of a Brittonic name meaning 'Fair of Face', nor the absence of a contemporary source for her name(s), need rule out her identification as Helen. Many girls born in the middle years of the fourth century must have been named Helena, particular among local ruling elites anxious to imitate the imperial dynasty. For the same reason, and to support his claim of legitimacy, Maximus might well have arranged for his wife to take an additional name of imperial significance. Adoption of such names happened frequently in Late Antiquity among competing imperial families – and perhaps more widely. A cross-shaft inscription of perhaps the ninth century near Llangollen in eastern Wales, the Eliseg Pillar, asserts that a daughter of Maximus was named Severa. The masculine form had been an imperial name since the days of the first emperor Severus and was borne by Constantine's first colleague in the West. Severa, the inscription states, was wife to Vortigern, the king said to have invited the first Saxons to Britain. ('Vortigern' is a title, meaning 'Great King', similar to those given to minor members of the fourth-century imperial colleges such as 'King of Kings' and 'Prince of the Romans'.)

The biographer of Martin of Tours, Sulpicius Severus, writing c. 420, described the unnamed wife of Maximus playing both Mary and Martha to the saintly bishop during a visit by him to the court at Trier.²⁸ Unless she was pre-

²⁶ Antonina Harbus, *Helena of Britain in Medieval Legend* (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2002). On Maximus, see John F. Matthews, 'Macsen, Maximus, and Constantine', *Welsh History Review* 11 No. 4 (1983), pp. 431-449.

²⁷ Rachel Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein. The Welsh Triads* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1978), pp. 341-3, 534; Chadwick, H. M. et al, *Studies in Early British History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 107-9; Peter C. Bartrum (ed.), *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1966).

²⁸ Sulpicius Severus. *Dialogi*, ed. C. Halm, *CSEL* 1 (Vienna, 1866), II 6; Monceaux, (1928), pp. 53, 215-6. Henry Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila: the occult and the charismatic in the early church* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976).

tending for her husband's political advantage, this is not unlikely behaviour for a Christian matron of Late Antiquity. It would be surprising if the consort of Maximus did not endow a church or two during her husband's five-year reign, which began with baptism and in which questions of religion were problematical.²⁹ Nonetheless, few Christian women of Late Antiquity were acclaimed as saints, unless for martyrdom. Helena owes her sainthood to the discovery of the Cross rather than the endowment of Trier Cathedral, or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Tradition holds that the wife of Maximus returned to Britain after her husband's execution in 388.³⁰ There, it is said, she became a venerated member of the British church which by the end of the imminent fifth century (again if tradition is to be believed) was counting women among its leaders and saints - Non, mother of St David, Gwladys, wife of sainted king Gwynllyw, and Tudful, daughter of King Brychan, to name three.

Constantine's mother is not commemorated directly in any major British church calendar on her feast day, August 18. A commemoration on August 25 of a 'Helena, Queen and Widow' in the calendar of Tavistock Abbey in Devon was recorded c. 1540 by the antiquarian William Worcester, who was noting matters of interest - some 'Celtic', some Continental.³¹ Tavistock owned the Devon churches of Abbotsham and Milton Abbas, whose patrons were Helen and Constantine respectively. Given the awkward date and the existence of British saints Constantine, it is by no means certain that this Helen is the mother of Constantine the Great rather than the wife of Maximus, who supposedly had a son called Constantine who reigned after him in Britain.³² The 'Dream of Maxen' associates his wife with Caernarvon in north Wales. There a church is dedicated in honour of a St Peblig (Publicius), supposedly another son of Maximus, and the inscription on a Roman tombstone of someone named Constantine was interpreted c. 800 and again in 1283 (for the conquering English king Edward I) as belonging to Constantine the Great.³³

Alauna, counterpart of a western European river deity

Perhaps behind *Elen Llwyddawc* stands a precursor shared with those women of the Grail and Arthurian stories variously named Elaine, Elen, and Helain, who is other than Helena, mother of Constantine. There is good reason to examine the naming of rivers called Ellen and the like, and of places such as Ellenborough, Cumbria. This received its name by reference to a Roman

²⁹ Henry Chadwick, *Priscillian of Avila: the occult and the charismatic in the early church* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976).

³⁰ Barnwell, (1878); Styles (1979) and pers. comm.

³¹ J. H. Harvey (ed.), *William Worcester: Itineraries* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 112.

³² A. W. Wade-Evans, *The Emergence of England and Wales* (Wetteren, De Meester, 1956), hereafter Wade-Evans, 'Emergence', pp. 120-2, citing pedigrees in the Oxford, Jesus College, MSS., and a Welsh Life of St Ursula, contained in 'The Book of Syr Hugh Pennant' (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS. 182) c. 1514.

³³ Wade-Evans, 'Emergence', p. 121; 'Nennius', chapter 25.

fort built to guard the lowest crossing of the Ellen as it spills into the Irish Sea. In turn the fort derived its Latin name from that of the river - Alauna, a common river and place-name in Celtic-speaking parts of the Roman world. Rivers were thought to have tutelary spirits, and Rivet and Smith not unreasonably proposed that the continental god Alaunus may have had a female counterpart, Alauna.³⁴ Nicolaisen believed the name to be pre-Celtic.³⁵ An accompanying figure shows the distribution of Alauna names in Britain.³⁶ Over the centuries a variety of forms of the name have evolved: Allan, Alne, Ellen, Lyne. Watson thought the first element of Alauna names represented the meaning 'rocky'.³⁷ Pokorny preferred 'bright, brilliant', Nicolaisen 'flowing'. A pioneer etymologist, Isaac Taylor, derived the element from a Gaelic *all*, 'white', to mean 'clear, transparent'.

Helen, tree deity, and Helen of Troy in Greek myth

It is hard to disassociate Helena from the Cross. An Old English charm, recorded from the (eleventh) century, encourages those who have lost possessions, such as cattle, to lie on the ground with arms outstretched, and ask her to help them.³⁸ The Old English saga, 'The Dream of the Rood', together with the survival votive ritual at holy wells that involves tying rags on branches and the secularised annual communal 'dressing' of such springs, inevitably prompts attention to tree worship in pre-Christian Europe.

Whether aspects of the Greek Helen venerated as a deity of vegetation and precursor of Helen of Troy were culturally transmitted to the West is difficult to determine.³⁹ The medicinal benefits of *helenion* may hold a clue, as also the derivation of a number of Ellen- placenames in Britain from Old English *ellern*, the elder tree whose medicinal properties were highly prized. In both cases lexical confusion has to be confronted and explained.

Helen, sister of the Dioscuri, bringer of St Elmo's fire

In a carving over the doorway of Sant' Elena, Venice, a Venetian admiral offers to Helena the Mediterranean and its riches. This island church at the entrance to the Adriatic and a ninth-century church of Helena on the landward side of the lagoon, hark back to the earliest days of Venetian sea-power. Helen may have protected Mediterranean sailors long before the arm of Helena arrived to be displayed below the altar in her chapel. It seems likely that for a crucial period during the transition between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, Helen of the Cross took the place of the mythic Greek Helen in these sailors' beliefs

³⁴ A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London, B. T. Batsford, 1979), pp. 243-7.

³⁵ Nicolaisen, (1976), pp. 173-87.

³⁶ Based on those mapped by Rivet and Smith (footnote 35).

³⁷ Watson, (1926), pp. 467-9.

³⁸ G. Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948).

³⁹ Jack Lindsay, (1974), pp.

about the electrical efflorescence which manifests itself at mastheads (and today at wingtips also) during Mediterranean storms. Jack Lindsay and others have described the way in which the Greek Helen, daughter of Zeus and Leda the Swan and inspiration for Homer's Helen of Troy, became associated in beliefs about the fire with her brothers Castor and Pollux, the 'Heavenly Twins' (the Gemini or Dioscuri).⁴⁰ Generally the phenomenon is named St Elmo's Fire, but sometimes it is still called St Helen's Fire. David Farmer has dismissed this latter naming as 'less correct', but without explanation.⁴¹ James Rendel Harris argued the opposite case, drawing on evidence from Classical writers, iconography, and early Christian calendars.

In his study of instances of the occasions when the Dioscuri appear to have taken Christian guise, Rendel Harris noticed that in Byzantine calendars 'chiefly of a south Italian type', the twin martyr saints Florus and Laurus were commemorated on August 18, the day assigned in the Roman church to the mother of Constantine.⁴² He proposed that their description in the Greek Orthodox Synaxarion as stonemasons, and their function as 'the horses' saints' (as Platon calls them in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), alongside their feast on August 18, indicated that they were one of a number of saintly twins, commemorated around the 18th of successive months, whose devotion had replaced worship of the Dioscuri. Hippolyte Delehaye contested this deduction, pointing out that the feasts of Florus and Laurus and of Helena had come together 'accidentally' in a compilation of eastern and western elements known only from the sixteenth century.⁴³ This objection wants the support of an explanation of the August feast day. Was this the historic date of Helena's death? Moreover, it ignores the role of southern Italy, Magna Graeca, as a conduit for eastern traditions travelling west.

In the church of St Maria in Aracoeli, Helena has her chief place of veneration in Rome – the others are her alleged mausoleum outside the city and the shrine in Santa Croce containing part of her alleged skeletal remains. Relics of Helena share a porphyry urn with those of saints Abundius and Abundatius, supposed victims (priest and deacon) of the Diocletian persecution, commemorated on September 16. Though it is tempting to sense here too the shadow of the Dioscuri, bringers in Greek myth of abundance, stronger ground is supplied in the work of Marian Wenzel on the iconographies of Helena and the Dioscuri in former Yugoslavia. Wenzel argued convincingly that medieval grave-cover and reliquary iconographies of Helena and the Cross can in some instances be traced stylistically to Classical representations of the Greek Helen and her brothers.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Jack Lindsay, (1974), pp. 115, 163, 211, 241.

⁴¹ David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, fifth edn (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), hereafter 'Saints', pp. 173-4.

⁴² J[ames] Rendel Harris, *The Dioscuri in the Christian Legends* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1903), hereafter Rendel Harris, 'Dioscuri'..

⁴³ Hippolyte Delehaye, *Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*, ed. Richard J. Shoock, trs. V. M. Crawford (London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), p. 184.

⁴⁴ Marian Wenzel, (1964 *et al*) and pers. comms. H. C. Toynbee, *The Roman Art Treasures from the Temple of Mithras*, London and Middlesex Archaeological Society Special

Further, she demonstrated that in this process the cross replaced representations of the apparatus for the annual kindling of New Fire, known to the present in Balkan rites associated with purification, passage and rebirth. Frequently such rites take place at water crossings.

The fire-making apparatus cited by Wenzel has two uprights and a cross-piece. It closes resembles a windlass, therefore. The windlass became the symbol of Erasmus, bishop of Formiae in the Byzantine-influenced Campania and a supposed victim of the Diocletian persecutions. This has been explained by his protection of sailors (the windlass being an essential piece of ship's gear), particularly in sudden storms, arising from an episode in his legend in which he preached undeterred by a lightning bolt.⁴⁵ Donald Attwood is among those who have accepted that Erasmus's name became corrupted over the centuries to Elmo (without exploring by what philological process this might have happened), and that the masthead fire was originally his, not Helen's.⁴⁶ The windlass came to represent Erasmus' means of martyrdom, his bowls twisted from his gut. However, what has not been noticed is the similarity between the shape of the windlass with its attached anchor chain and uprights, the outline of the ship's mast with yardarm and ropes, and that of the fire-making machine. Given also that Christ's Cross has been represented as the mast and yardarm of the Church-as-ship, *navis* (hence, the central part of the church building, the nave), a sequence from Greek Helen to Helen of the Cross to Elmo/Erasmus begins to appear within reason.

Devotion to the Greek Helen together with her brothers is known from coinage, and from literary references to Sparta (in Euripides' drama *Helena*) and outlying centres such as Agrigentum (Pindar). Rendel Harris wrote that Mediterranean sailors esteemed them and distinguished between their divine aspects. 'Euripides [*Orestes*, line 1636] says of Helen:

*Κάστορι τε Πολυδέκκει τ' ἐν α'ίθερος πτυχαῖς
σύνθακος ἔσται, ναυτίλοις σωτήριος.*

'This common honour was divided under the two heads of fear and trust, and Helen's share was, for the most part, and in spite of Euripides, the former... According to Pliny, the single discharge [of St Elmo's Fire] was named after Helen, and was *dura ac minax*, while a divided flame was named after Castor and Pollux and was held to be propitious... For the dangers which attend the Helena fire... compare Solinus 18.1

Paper 7 (1986), discussed a Dioscurus relief and a roundel depicting Rider Gods (Dioscuri) and Great Goddess (pp. 34-9) found in the London Mithraeum. Both parallel motifs are illustrated and discussed in Wenzel (1964 *et al.*) and Toynbee noted another Dioscurus relief at Corbridge near Hadrian's Wall. Wenzel also referred to 232 Danubian Rider-god monuments listed by D. Tudor, *Corpus Monumentorum Religionis Equitum Danuviorum* i (1969), ii (1976), many including a central goddess figure, and noted references to the interaction of the Rider-gods cult with that of Mithras.

⁴⁵ David Farmer, 'Saints', p. 164.

⁴⁶ Donald Attwater with Catherine Rachel John, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (3rd edn, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1995), p. 120.

Helena *sidus navigantibus perniciosissimum:*
and... Horace
*Fratres Helenae, lucida sidera.*⁴⁷

Several Helen sites in the British Isles are found on headlands or other coastal sites which could have acted as beacons or sailors' landmarks: Aldcambus, Overton, Ore, Lundy, Cape Cornwall, Kilnsea and others in Britain; St Helen's and Hook in County Wexford, Ireland. St Helen's, Isle of Wight, was also a favoured place for sailing ships from Portsmouth harbour to take on supplies of water from its spring.

*Helena, patron with Constantine
of the fire-walkers of Thrace*

There is one famous event in which Constantine and Helena are commemorated with fire, and healing, namely the annual firewalking at St Eleni near Serres in northern Greece and Langada near Thessalonika on May 21.⁴⁸ This is performed by *anastenarides*, descendants of Greeks displaced from Thrace after the war between Greece and Turkey. After animal sacrifices on May 20 and a night of preparation, including the transfer of icons of Constantine and Helena to a domestic sanctuary called a *konaki*, 'lodging', the icons are brought to Agiasma, 'holy place', in a small wood or grove. The fire is lit in the afternoon by an hereditary guardian. Whether the claim can be sustained that the ecstatic dancing on the embers, while holding an icon or handkerchief, is a survival of Dionysiac worship, or whether a convincing link could be established between the veneration of Helena and that of the Greek Helen, is beyond the scope of this paper. It undoubtedly encourages a systematic investigation of the Byzantine, Balkan, and other influences which appear to have subsumed Constantine's mother into a mythic figure. Having discounted coincidences and charted semantic and other confusions, it may be possible to hypothesise more confidently about this figure whose aspects appear various but coherent and link the cultural worlds of eastern and western Europe.

⁴⁷ Rendel Harris, 'Dioscuri', pp. 4-5.

⁴⁸ Katerina J. Kakouri, *Dionysiaka: Aspects of the Popular Thracian Religion of Today*, trs. Helen Colaclides (Athens, G. C. Eleftheroudakis, 1965), pp. 10, 14-17. Also see the Serres prefecture web-site, <<http://www.e-view.gr/serres-keimena.php?textid=15&lang=en>>, accessed on February 9, 2004.

Graham Xons

JELENA: VIZANTIJSKI I DRUGI UTICAJI NA INTERPRETACIJU
KONSTANTINOVE MAJKE NA ZAPADU

Poštovawe Svete Jelene je uvek bilo sna`no u Engleskoj, a naro~ito na wenom severu. Ovo se ~esto pripisivalo ~iwenici da je rimska vojska sa sedi{tem u Jorku izglasala wenog sina Konstantina za imperatora. [tavi{e, ka`u da u crkvi Svete Jelene-na-zidinama, izgradjene na ostacima rimske ku}e u Jorku, stalno gori kandilo u spomen njenom suprugu Konstanciju. Anglosaksonske kraljevske porodice po{tovale su Konstantina i Jelenu kao uzore hri{anske monarhije, te su u nekim centrima velikih kraljevskih imanja u Mersiji podignute crkve posve}ene Jeleni. ^ini se, mejutim, da je po{tovanje sãme Jelene bilo mnogo slo`enije, budu}i da je ona dobijala na popularnosti iz brojnih pobuda.

Medju ovim razlozima nalazi se i povezivanje Praznika otkri}a ~asnog krsta, 3. maja, sa 'Danom Svete Jelene Prole}ne', kada se stada isteruju na letnje pa{wake. Postoje zna~ajne razlike u rasporedu crkava Sv. Jelene i ~asnog krsta. Jedna od pomenutih pobuda je i rasprostranjeno prihvatanje Jelene kao za{titnice svetih izvora ~udotvorne vode. [to se ti~e Konstantina, njegovo ime su prihvatili britanski kraljevi, a u zapadnim delovima Britanije registrovani su lokalni sveci sa tim imenom.

U ovom radu napravljeno je poredjenje izmedju po{tovawa Konstantina i Jelene u Britaniji sa slavljenjem ovog sveca i svetice u drugim delovima zapadne i isto~ne Evrope, kako bi se ustanovilo u kom obimu je uticaj Vizantije mogao da stimuli}e prihvatawe i interpretaciju wihovih individualnih i zajedni~kih kultova na Zapadu.

