

EARTH, FIRE, AND WATER: CONSTANTINE AND HELENA IN THE RITUAL HERITAGE OF EUROPE AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD

Each year over three days in early June, icons of Constantine the Great and his mother Helena are held aloft by fire-walkers as they dance across hot cinders in villages of south-east Bulgaria and northern Greece. Recent research is divided over the antiquity and likely origins of this ritual, but at least two centuries of practice qualifies it as an established part of Europe's cultural landscape.¹ It may be helpful to the debate, and in pursuit of the research theme at the 2012 symposium, to ask what if any common ground exists between these ceremonies and comparable traditions in other European regions and in other ages. Moreover, what processes might have brought these customs and the most famous son of Niš and his mother together?

¹ The most recent and thorough treatment is Valeriâ Fol and Rouja Neikova, *Fire and Music* (Sofia, Prof. Marin Drinov Academic Publishing House, 2000). See also Valeriâ Fol, 'La danse de braise des Nestinari: Entretien avec Valeria Fol', *Nouvelle Ecole* 59/60 (2010-11), pp. 210-16, hereafter Fol, 'Danse'. For the Greek *astenaria* performances, Katerina J. Kakouri, *Dionysiaka: Aspects of the Popular Thracian Religion of Today*, trs. Helen Colaclides (Athens, G. C. Eleftheroudakis, 1965). For the metabolic and psychological effects, Loring M. Danforth, *Fire-walking and Religious Healing. The Anastenaria of Greece and the American Fire-walking Movement* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989), hereafter Danforth, 'Firewalking'. Vassilis Lantzoz, 'Spurious revival and dance events: the case of the Anastenaria worship in Kosti, Bulgaria', *Етнологико-антрополошке свеске* 19, 8 (2012), pp. 139-60, contests the authenticity of present-day fire-walking in Thrace. An anonymous journalistic account from Thrace is posted by Ged Dodd on the web-page 'Saints Konstantin and Helen's Day', <<http://12121.hostinguk.com/stconstantine.htm>>, accessed December 9, 2012, hereafter Anon., 'Saints'. Reports from August 2001 by two students of First Language School, Varna, Polyna Petkova and Victoria Todorova, with their teacher Vanya Diamandieva and advised by Prof. Fol, are at 'Oracle ThinkQuest: Projects by Students for Students: "Fire-dancing, Nestinarstvo"', <<http://library.thinkquest.org/C0130033/about.html>>, accessed December 1, 2012, hereafter 'Petkova/Todorova'. Early accounts are those of P. Slavejkoff, in *Gaida* 3 (1866), No. 12, pp. 194-95, summarised by George Megas, 'Anastenaria ke ethima tis tirinis defteras', *Laografia* 19 (1961), pp. 475-534, and Anastasios Chourmouziades, *Peritōn anastenariōn kai allōn tinōn paradoxōn ethimōn kai prolēpseōn* (Constantinople, Anatolikou Asteros, 1873, repr. *Athēva* 26 [1961], p. 144). See also A. K. Romaios, 'Laikes latries tis Thrakis', *Arhion tou Thrakikou Laografikou ke Glossikou Thisaurou [ATLGT]* (1944-45), and articles by Polydōros Papachristodoulou et al in *ATLGT*, 1934-61.



Fig. 1. Fire-walking villages of Thrace. Solid circles indicate villages taking part in the ritual at the 'Great Ayasma'.

Сл. 1. Села ходања по вагри у Тракији. Затворени кругови означавају села која учествују у ритуалу на 'Велике Ајасме'.

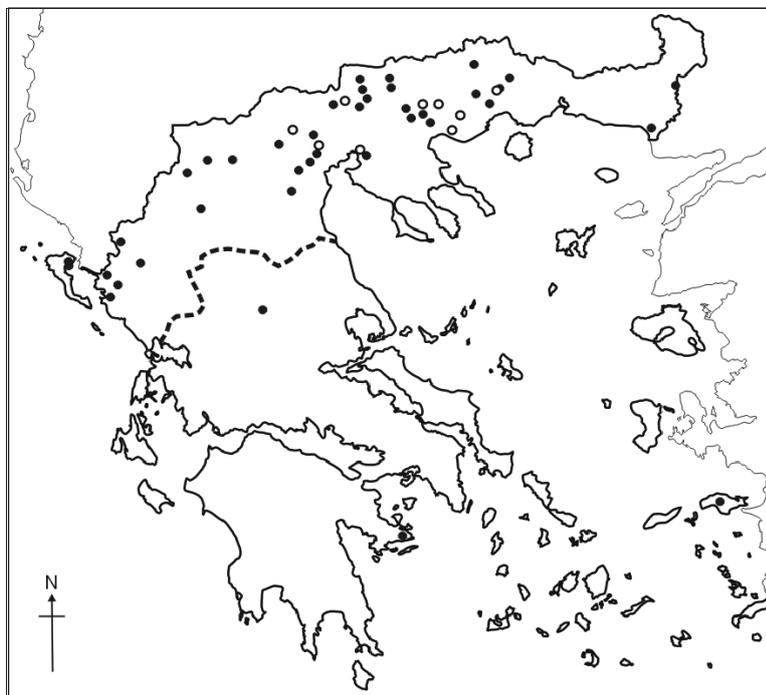
Such questions may be answered most usefully by widening the conceptual and geographical parameters within and beyond the Byzantine realms, extending the inquiry to similar ritual performance and including both the Latin West and, in the East, Mesopotamia and other imperial frontier regions in what is now described as Europe's Neighbourhood. At one end of an evidential continuum is the popular celebration of the fecund landscape, and of water and fire as sources of life and health. At the other is the official culting of the Cross, symbol of Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge made manifest by his mother's supposed discoveries on Golgotha, and the Holy Sepulchre 'miracle' of the New Fire – the latter addressed in a subsequent essay.

Fire-walking in Thrace and northern Greece

Fire-dance ceremonies in which Constantine and Helen are the associated saints are described as the most important of a number of such rituals through the year in Thrace. This seems also to be the case in Macedonia where fire-walking was planted by communities deported from Bulgarian and Turkish Thrace in the so-called 'exchange of populations' after the First World War. About thirty villages between the Strandzha mountain core of northern Thrace

Fig. 2. Modern Greek church dedications of Constantine and Helen (solid circles) and Holy Cross (open circles). Broken line, border between Orthodox jurisdictions of Constantinople ('New Lands') and Athens.

Сл. 2. Савремене грчке црквене посвете Константина и Јелене (затворени кругови) и Светог крста (отворени кругови). Испрекидана линија, граница између православних надлежности Цариграда ('нове земље') и Атине



and the Black Sea are recorded as practising fire-walking. Five core villages, in Bulgaria since 1920, come together for a single celebration, banned in 1947 and revived in 2005 (Fig. 1).²

For the study of Constantine and Helena's place in historical and cultural narratives, official and popular, understanding their involvement in fire-walking is crucial. The interest lies less in the ritual form and content than in the timing, and the perception of Constantine and Helena's roles in accompanying folklore.

The timing of their Thracian fire-dancing on June 3-5 shows that it at least predates Bulgaria's adoption of the Gregorian calendar in March/April 1916. Traditionally it happened on May 21, the saints' joint feast, and the two days following (May 22 is considered St Helen's Day, when in the past a village's icons 'paid visits' to people's homes). In fact the whole of May is known in the Strandzha as 'Kostandovski month'. On May 1 adherents in their respective villages meet in the private chapel (*stolnina* or *konak*, literally 'home') dedicated in honour of the village saints at the home of the hereditary chief *nestinar* who censures their icons – until 1945 kept by a woman who also conducted the rituals and guarded the sacred drum (*tapan*). On May 1-2 they clean the village's holy spring, 'bathe' the icons and drink the waters for health. On the Thursday before the saints' day, *kourban* (a sacrificial gift) is offered, normally a lamb,

² Diko Patronov, Ivan Karayotov and Diana Radoynova, *Tourist Guide: Natural Park 'Strandja'* (Directorate of Natural Park Strandja, 2007).

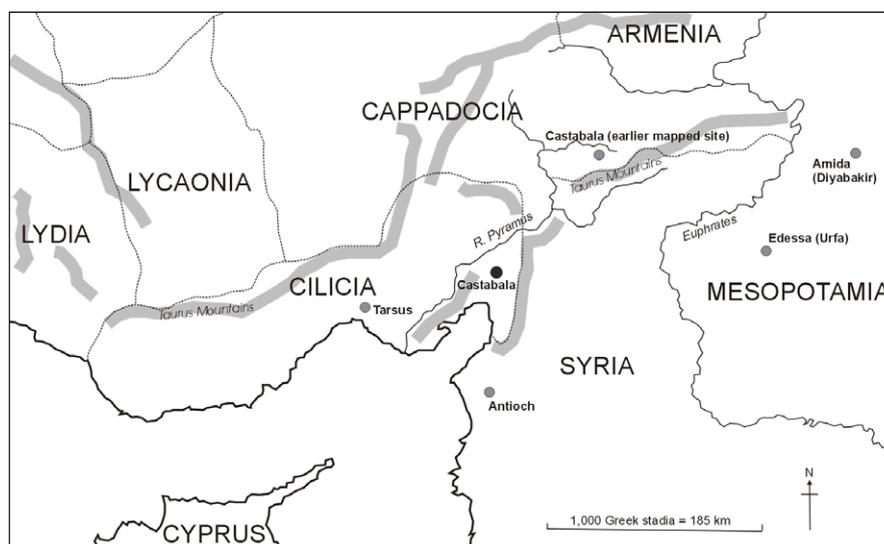


Fig. 3. The fire-walking shrine of Artemis Perasia at Hierapolis-Castabala in its region.

Сл. 3. Храм ходања по ватри Артемис Перасиа у Хиераполису-Кастабали у свом региону

eaten communally after further cleaning of the spring.³ On the first or second Sunday before May 21 they return to a *panagyr* ('festival'), accompanied by drum and bagpipes, walking and dancing with the icons, now washed, dressed in red 'shirts' and adorned with jewels and flowers. On the way, the procession visits holy springs and trees and goes round village houses and churches, and the journey home is always by another traditional way. Close to the springs, such as that of St Helena near Bulgari/Balgari village, are places for open-air dancing and dinners, plus small raised wooden platforms open to the north. The icons are attached to the three open-planked sides of these *odartché* ('little wooden beds') so they may 'watch' the rituals, accompanied by offerings of bread, candles, gifts, and cloths, particularly red scarves.

At the communal Great Spring, *Golyama Ayasma*, at Yazmenski in the Vlahov Dol gorge of the river Veleka,⁴ an *odartché* and a dining table awaited each of the five villages taking part. The place was used for consecration ceremonies, drinking holy water, offerings of bulls, sheep and rams, wrestling competitions, and then dinner. Fire-dancing ceased there in 1931.⁵ *Golyama Ayasma* 'has always been treated as the most sacred place in the region... Bulgarians and Greeks believe they originated at an ancient settlement there... They were

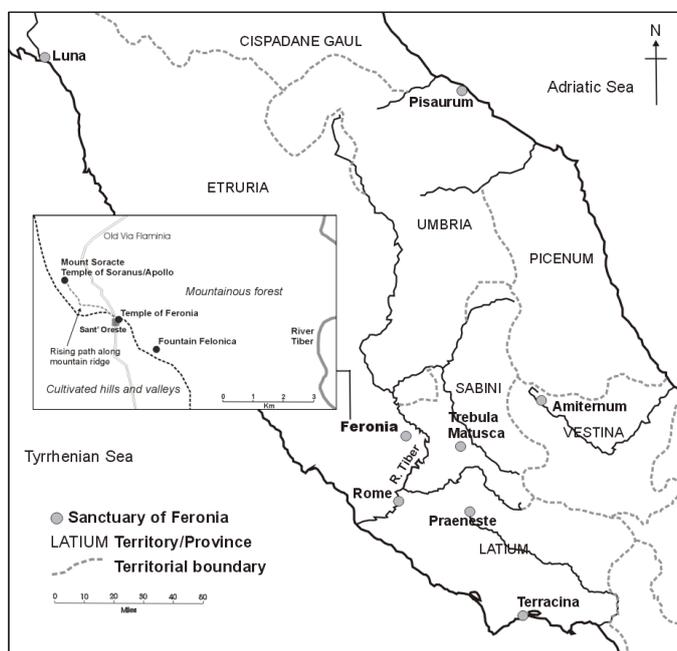
³ Petkova/Todorova.

⁴ *Ayasma*, or *aiazma* dervies from Greek *agiazma*, 'holy, healing spring'. *Golyama Ayasma* was also known as *Vlahovo*, *Odarchetata*, *Pripor*, and *Tripori*.

⁵ For this account see Lilia Stareva, 'The flaming feast day of Ss Constantine and Helena', *Cherga* 42 (July 5, 2011), pp. 56-58, hereafter Stareva, 'Flaming', p. 58, Fol, 'Danse', Petkova/Todorova, and Anon., 'Saints'.

Fig. 4. The cult of Feronia in Central Italy. The fire-walking shrine shown with bold labelling.

Сл. 4. Култ Феронија у централној Италији. Светилиште ходања по ватри приказан са појачаном ознаком



brothers. Their icons were also “brothers”; as the legend says, “they were made of the wood of a same tree and drawn in a same place; three for the villagers of Bulgari, three for the villagers of Kosti” (cf. Fig. 5).⁶

At the end of the day in the village centre, after the killing and roasting of an ox, live embers are spread into a big circle and villagers dance around it. The climax arrives at midnight, when barefoot *nestinars* come to the circle dressed in long white shirts and holding icons of Constantine and Helena, and begin dancing on the embers accompanied by drum and bagpipe. Priests do not take part in these rituals – indeed, bishops took direct action against them in Greece, only to be defeated in the courts over ownership of icons.⁷

So why the pair’s involvement? One explanation is reported from a *nestinar*, an ‘old woman in a red-and-white dress [who] holds aloft a battered Orthodox icon depicting [Constantine and Helen]. “God the grandfather came to earth. He would speak to no one, because no one was without sin. So he brought forth fire and called on all men to walk in the flames. Only one man wasn’t burned: Saint Constantine.”’ (Another version says God built the fire in the centre of the village of Pripor, i.e. the *Golyama Ayasma*, and announced that the youth who could jump over it would be his mediator on earth – Constantine not only jumped over it but danced in the fire.) ““God and Saint Constantine spoke for years, but Constantine grew weary and sad. He had no wife, no family. So God brought forth the fire again and called on all unmarried women to walk in the flames. A sinless man needs a sinless woman. Only

⁶ Anon., ‘Saints’.

⁷ Dimitris Xygalatas, ‘Ethnography, historiography, and the making of history in the tradition of the Anastenaria’, *History and Anthropology* 22:1 (2011), pp. 57-74, hereafter Xygalatas, ‘Anastenaria’.

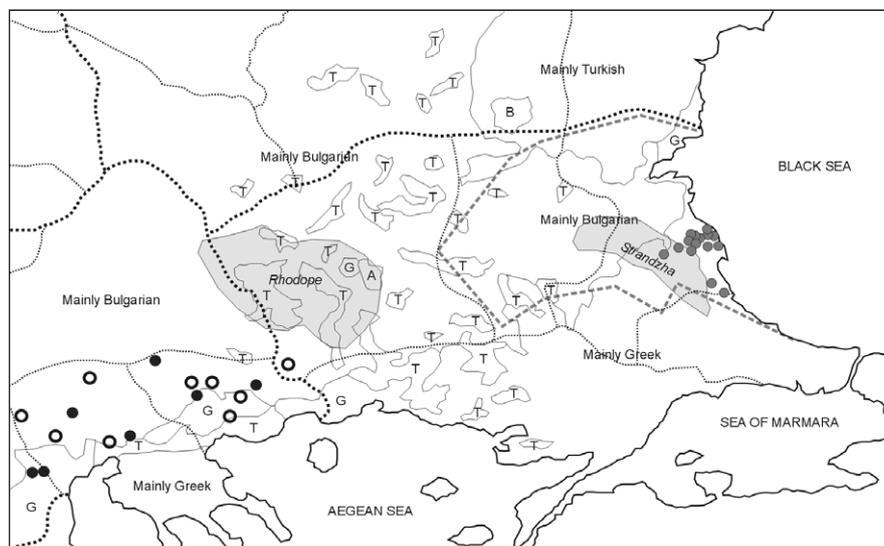


Fig. 5. Ritual and ethnicity in the south-east Balkans. Tinted circles, villages associated with firewalking (Fig. 1). Thick broken line, area of pre-Lent *Kouker* customs featuring 'wild man' and 'wife' (Stoan Rajčevski and Valeriâ Fol, *Кукерът без маска* (Sofia, St Climent Ochridski University, 1993), pp. 41-46). Solid circles, churches in honour of Ss Constantine and Helen. Open circles, churches of the Holy Cross (Fig. 2). Grey tint, Rhodope and Strandzha mountains. Mid-nineteenth-century distribution of Bulgarian, Greeks, and Turkish populations based on contemporary cartography, e.g. Carl Sax, *Ethnographische Karte der Europäischen Türkei und Ihrer Dependenz zu Anfang des Jahres 1877* (Vienna, Hölzel's Geographical Institute for the Imperial and Royal Geographical Society of Vienna, 1878), V. Kynchov, *Makedonija, Etnografija i Statistika* (Sofia, 1900), electronic version, Prof. M. Drinov, Sofia, 1996, <<http://www.promacedonia.org/vk/index.html>>, accessed February 16, 2013.

Сл. 5. Ритуално и етницитет на југоистоку Балкана. Затамњени кругови, села повезана са ходањем по ватри (сл. 1). Густа испрекидана линија, површина пре Коукер обичаја који приказују „дивљег човека“ и „супругу“ (Стојан Рајчевски и Валерија Фол, *Кукерът без маска* (Софија, Универзитет Свети Климент Охридски, 1993), стр 41-46). Затворени кругови, цркве у част Св Константина и Св Јелене. Отворени кругови, цркве Светог крста (сл. 2). Сива нијанса, Родопи и Странџа планине. Средином деветнаестог века распоред бугарске, Грчке и турске популације на основу савремене картографије, пример Карл Сак, *Етнографска мапа Турске и њених зависних држава на почетку 1877*. (Беч, Холзелов Географски институт за Царско и Краљевско географско друштво у Бечу, 1878.), В. Кинчов, *Македонија, етнографија и статистика* (Софија, 1900.), електронска верзија, др М. Дринов, Софија, 1996., [ХТТП://www.promacedonia.org/vk/index.html](http://www.promacedonia.org/vk/index.html), приступљено 16. фебруара 2013

Saint Helena endured the fire.” (The ‘Pripor’ version has Constantine wishing for a sister.) In these narratives, Constantine is the *Svetok* – meaning ‘Saint’ but perhaps rather the ‘Holy One’ – and also ‘Great Father’, while Helena is hypostasised as the *Svetok*’s wife/sister as well as his mother.⁸

⁸ Petkova/Todorova.



Fig. 6. Basket and Torches: Denarius of Hieropolis-Castabala, reign of Marcus Opellius Antonius (217/18), Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum, France 2, 2242.

Сл. 6. Корпа и бакље: Денариус из Хиерополиса-Кастабале, владавина Маркуса Опелијуса Антонијуса (217/18), Суллоге Нумморум Граецорум, Француска 2, 2242

Elsewhere one reads that Constantine was the ruler of Yurta (yet another name for *Golyama Ayasma*) before his choice by God, that as God's representative made sinful men dance on the hot embers, and that the first woman *nestinar* expiated the sin of in-breeding which was leaving its marks on the young.⁹ Another local explanation concerns the bodies of Constantine and Helena. 'The Greek king and his wife' were found by the people of Kosti after dying in the land of *Golyama Ayasma*, 'where God chose his vicar on Earth, and where the deer came to clean the holy spring with its antlers, and after that to be offered. The first bull offering was performed there as well.'¹⁰ The deer's involvement is intriguing: 'deer' in Slavic languages is *jelen* (Bulgarian *елен*). From Baltic to Black Sea Helena is St Jela, which is hypocoristic for any Helen as a common first name

It is sensible to note the *nestinars'* 'veneration of springs and trees',¹¹ and not to dismiss out of hand Fol's interpretation of the circle of fire as the terrestrial image of the Sun god and the spreading of embers as signifying the descent of the god to the human home.¹² However, more mundane reasons for Constantine and Helena's involvement are possible: for example, that the icons act merely as local banners when they ceremonially 'visit' neighbouring villages and are set up alongside the local titular saints' icons at the open-air spring-shrines. Slivarovo's patron, for example, is St Marina (Margaret), whose veneration is centred on her holy cave, called 'monastery'. In times past she was 'visited' by adherents and their icons from numerous other villages, many identified elsewhere as fire-walk communities.

⁹ Stareva, 'Flaming', p. 57.

¹⁰ Anon., 'Saints'.

¹¹ Anon., 'Saints'.

¹² Fol, 'Danse', p. 212.

Another explanation hangs on the calendar. As 'St Helen's Day-in-the-Spring', the feast of Helena's Invention ('finding') of the Holy Cross, May 3, marked the start of seasonal stock movements from northern English townlands to high summer pastures and subsequent sowing of the fields, so Constantine and Helena's Day had a pastoral function in the Rhodope Mountains of southern Bulgaria (Fig. 5). Here sheep-breeding is a principal livelihood, and, as in eastern Europe generally, the year is divided by the feasts of two warrior saints, George on April 23 and Demetrius on October 26. In Italy two feasts of Michael, May 8 and September 29, have this function.¹³ Flocks begin their journey to the mountain pastures on St Gregory's Day, March 12, in parts of Hungary; St George's Day elsewhere in Hungary, Greece and the foothills and hilly areas of Bulgaria; St Sophia's Day, May 15, in Poland; and Ss Constantine and Helena's Day, May 21 (*Kostadinovden*), in other parts of Bulgaria. Moreover, *Kostadinovden* in Bulgaria was often observed as the special labour holiday marking the start of the milking period, mainly in the Rhodopes and in the Pirin area. By then the flocks have come back from the areas where they spent the winter and the dairies open their doors for the milking season in the mountains.

Did fire-walking take place on May 21 because Constantine and Helena's Day happened to provide a major feast at a point where the agrarian cycle required a calendar-marker? Constantine died at noon on the day of Pentecost, 337, in that year May 22. For some reason the 22nd became associated with his burial, with his 'natal' feast celebrated on the 21st. Joint commemoration with Helena, whose own death is marked on August 18, seems to have come later and may have had something to do with the shift to May 21. The association of Helena with both May 3 (via the Cross) and May 21 (via Constantine) was powerful enough to influence the feast days of three medieval 'namesakes': Elenaria of Rheims on May 2, Helen of Athyra at Troyes on May 4, and Helen of Auxerre at Venice on May 19 and on the day of her deposition, May 21 or 22.¹⁴ While none of this adequately explains why Strandzha's inhabitants attached Constantine's name to the month as a whole, it remains possible that understandings of Helena were key to the fire-walking.

¹³ Alan John Bayard Wace and Maurice Scott Thompson, *The Nomads of the Balkans: An Account of Life and Customs among the Vlachs of Northern Pindus* (London, Methuen & Co., 1914, repr. New York, 1971), pp. 48, 77; Lucia Nixon and Simon Price, 'The Diachronic Analysis of Pastoralism through comparative variables', *Annual of the British School at Athens* 96 (2001), pp. 395-424, at p. 417, fn. 90, also cite J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage. A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), pp. 343-44; S. Georgoudi, 'Quelques problèmes de la transhumance dans la Grèce ancienne', *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 87 (1974), pp. 155-85, at p. 169, fn. 54; J. A. Marino, *Pastoral Economics in the Kingdom of Naples* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 40, 44.

¹⁴ Graham Jones, 'Constantinople, 1204, renewal of interest in Imperial and other Byzantine cults in the West, and the growth of new traditions', in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium. Third Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June 2004. The Collection of Scientific Works III* (Niš, University of Niš, 2005), pp. 29-47.

Church dedications

All but two of the 32 churches in Greece bearing the names of both Constantine and Helena, in contrast to the many honouring Constantine alone, are concentrated in the 'New Lands', those northern dioceses remaining under Ottoman rule between Greek independence in 1828 and Turkish collapse in 1919, and still today answering to the Patriarch of Constantinople (Fig. 2). Twenty-three are within what was the Ottoman province of Macedonia, and two each just within Thrace to the east and Ottoman Albania to the west.

These lands also received the bulk of the Greeks displaced from Bulgaria during the 'exchange of populations' and resettled in areas vacated by deported Turks (Fig. 5). Aerial photography shows villages with gridded streets and other signs of modernity – a few like Achinos occupying land reclaimed from drained lakes. It is likely therefore that many of these churches are modern; even that joint veneration of Constantine and Helena was brought here by displaced Greeks perhaps no more than a century ago, and/or considered appropriate in the circumstances of the time. Historical accounts of individual villages, including Turkish statistical data,¹⁵ record the wholesale expulsion of Bulgarian Muslim and Turkish village communities and their replacement by Greeks. The concentration of all nine Greek churches of the Holy Cross in the same zone tends to support this, especially if the Cross is viewed as an instrumental feature of Helena's cult. (In the wooded Strandzha landscapes the Cross-as-tree may have held particular significance.)

Fire-walking takes place at a cluster of villages in Greek Macedonia: Agia Eleni and Kerkini, south of Serres,¹⁶ Langadas, north-east of Thessalonika (with two icons of Constantine and Helen brought from Kosti),¹⁷ Mavrolefki near Drama (two icons from Kosti), and Meliki near Verria (one icon),¹⁸ Danforth mentioned all but Kerkini, and also a village he called Limnohori (two icons from Kosti, one of Constantine and Helena and one of St Pantaleimon, a healing saint).¹⁹

The exact locations of the displaced Greeks' home villages are hard to pinpoint. Ethnic mapping of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century shows the complex, Balkan-wide jigsaw of areas variously Greek, Bulgarian, Albanian, Turkish, Vlach and so on, both Christian and Muslim.²⁰ Bulgarian dedications are also difficult to pin down, but Balgari/Bulgari church is certainly in honour of Constantine and Helena. Though its age is difficult to determine, it does not seem a modern construction.

¹⁵ V. Kynchov, *Makedonija, Etnografija i Statistika* (Sofia, 1900), electronic version, Prof. M. Drinov, Sofia, 1996, <<http://www.promacedonia.org/vk/index.html>>, accessed February 16, 2013

¹⁶ Danforth, 'Firewalking', pp. 64-68; Zygaltas, 'Anastenaria', pp. 67ff.

¹⁷ Danforth, 'Firewalking', p. 68, Zygaltas, 'Anastenaria', pp. 69-70; Christodoulou (1978), Makrakis (1982), and Mihail-Ded (1972-73, 1978).

¹⁸ Danforth, 'Firewalking', p. 68.

¹⁹ Danforth, 'Firewalking', pp. 68-69.

²⁰ e.g. Carl Sax, *Ethnographische Karte der Europäischen Türkei und Ihrer Dependenz zu Anfang des Jahres 1877* (Vienna, Hölzel's Geographical Institute for the Imperial and Royal Geographical Society of Vienna, 1878).

Balkan churches of St Helena alone are rare. In the Kosovan village Vracevo, ‘belonging to Ss Vraci’ (‘healers’), the church is dedicated in honour of the doctor-saints Cosmas and Damian and marks their day, June 14, but also that of St Helena (now June 3), without Constantine.²¹ However, most of the handful of Greek churches and toponyms of Aghia Eleni are found on islands – Skiathos, Corfu, Kefalonia – and the others are on or near the coast.

Fire-walking in other times and places

It seems sensible to treat fire-walking separately from fire-leaping, as practised for example in some regions on St John’s Eve, June 24 – Midsummer, the summer solstice – though people of San Pedro Manrique in Castile and León, Spain, fire-walk as part of their St John’s Eve celebrations. In western Asia fire-leaping takes place at the spring equinox, Nowruz, traditional start of the year and first day of Spring, spring sowing and first grazing; celebrated on March 21 or the previous/following day, depending on where observed. On the night before the last Wednesday, Iranians and others make public space bonfires, and jump over them, singing a traditional song *Zardi-ye man az (ane) to, sorkhi-ye to az (ane) man*: ‘My yellowness [pain, sickness, fear – symbolising the old year] is yours, your redness [strength, health – symbolising the new year] is mine.’

Some tribes in Pakistan use fire-walking as a form of judicial trial. Fire-walking is also practiced by some Shia on the ninth and tenth days of Muharram, first month in the Muslim calendar, to mourn the death of Hussain, Muhammad’s son-in-law. In Lucknow, home to the largest Shia community on the Sub-Continent, Hindus join in *Aag Ka Maatam* in large numbers. Indian fakirs practice fire-walking, and so do Indian communities more generally, mainly Hindu, in South Asia and their diaspora in South Africa, Malaysia and Singapore, celebrating *Thimithi*.

Originating in Tamil Nadu, Thimithi happens during the Tamil month Aip(p)asi, overlapping October and November. It celebrates Draupati Amman, main character of the Mahabharata epic and considered an incarnation of Mariamman (‘Mother-man’), chief female divinity of South India, deity of rain, protector against smallpox, and counterpart of Shitala Devi. Further afield, !Kung Bushmen of the African Kalahari desert may have practiced fire-walking since their tribal beginnings – and use fire in healing ceremonies. Fire-walking is observed throughout Polynesia, in the Fiji Islands, and in Bali.

Firewalks in the ancient world

Central Italy: Feronia

At the beginning of the Common Era, fire-walking was recorded at two Mediterranean cult-sites by the geographer Strabo. One was at a double-cult

²¹ I am indebted to Dr Biljana Sikimic, Serbian Academy, SANU, for discussing the results of her fieldwork.

only 25 miles north of Rome and absorbed into its civic religion (Fig. 4). A temple of the Sabine deity Soranus stood on gleaming, snow-capped Mount Soracte, today's Monte Soratte. On its southern spur, between the mountain and the Tiber, was the city and shrine of Feronia, another Sabine deity, at whose feast, the Feroniæ, on November 13 during Rome's Plebeian Games, slaves received their cap of liberty.²² 'Those possessed by the divinity pass over a large bed of burning coal and ashes at her temple, unhurt,' wrote Strabo *circa* 25CE. 'A great concourse of people assembles to assist at the festival and see the spectacle.'²³ Virgil, who had died in 19CE aged 89, understood the ceremony as venerating Apollo, whose cult had absorbed that of Soranus – making it likely that Soranus like Apollo symbolised the Sun – and implied that it took place on the mountain:

'Chief of the gods, Apollo, who dost guard
Soracte's hallowed steep... for thee is fed
the heap of burning pine; for thee we pass
through the mid-blaze in sacred zeal secure,
and deep in glowing embers plant our feet.'²⁴

On the eve of Hannibal's destruction of the Roman army at Lake Trasimene (217BCE), Rome's general Flaminius was remembered urging on 'Aequanus, a son of Mount Soracte', probably meaning a priest of the temple, 'a splendid figure: in his native land it was his task to carry the offerings thrice in triumph over harmless fires, at the time when the Archer [i.e. Apollo]... takes pleasure in the blazing piles. "Aequanus, fill your heart with wrath... then may you ever tread unhurt over Apollo's fire, and conquer the flame, and carry the customary offering to the altar, while Phoebus [Apollo's Latin epithet] smiles."²⁵

The temple stood to the side of the old Flaminian Way and was celebrated for its riches, the shrine itself adorned with gold and silver through the first-fruits and other offerings of the people of Capena, offerings plundered by Hannibal.²⁶ The now ruined Feronia lies near the town of Sant'Oreste, overlooking the Felonica fountain. Its name is reminiscent of *ferus*, 'wild' but also of *ferro*, 'iron', perhaps smelted in the well-wooded neighbourhood, the Selva Grande – probably the forest regarded in such awe by Romans that a consul was once forbidden to lead his army through it.²⁷ There are intriguing hints of Artemis in Feronia's sacred landscape. Artemis was a deity of groves and hunting, Apollo was her twin offspring of Zeus (the Greek Jupiter), and St Orestes, otherwise St Edistus, supposedly martyred near the mountain, shares his vernacularised

²² William Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic* (London, 1908), pp. 252-54, hereafter Fowler, 'Festivals'.

²³ *The Geography of Strabo. Literally translated, with notes* (3 vols, London, George Bell & Sons, 1903), H. L. Jones (ed.), *The Geography of Strabo* (London, William Heinemann, 1924), hereafter Strabo, 5.2.9.

²⁴ *Publius Vergilius Maro [Virgil], Aeneid, trs. Theodore C. Williams* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1910), hereafter Virgil, 'Aeneid', 11.784.

²⁵ *Silius Italicus. Punica*, with English trs. by J. D. Duff (2 vols, London, William Heinemann, 1927, repr. 1961), 5.173- pp. 244-46.

²⁶ Livy, 'History', 3.26.11.

²⁷ Livy, 'History', 9.36ff.

name with the Orestes who in Greek story-telling stole Artemis' statue from her shrine in the Crimea and brought it to Athens. In contrast, near Terracina (ancient Anxur), 75km south-east of Rome, Feronia played the role of Juno, both sister and wife of Jupiter, and female patron deity of Rome. Feronia shared her grove at the foot of Monte Leano with the tutelary local deity Anxurus who was regarded as a youthful Jupiter.²⁸ Her grove lay on the edge of a wooded region still producing charcoal. Anxurus' temple on Monte Sant' Angelo overlooked the harbour at the southern end of the Volscian hills,

'where Jove [Jupiter] of Anxur guards, and forests green
make fair Feronia glad.'²⁹

The Greeks called Feronia a goddess of flowers, translating her name as *Anthophoros*, 'Flower Bearer', *Philostephanos*, 'Lover of Garlands', and *Persephonê*.³⁰ On denarii minted in 20BCE for a triumph of Augustus, Feronia wears flowers in her hair.³¹ Persephone, daughter of Zeus and harvest-deity Demeter, personified vegetation which shoots forth in spring and withdraws into the earth after harvest – thus combining the pre-Greek queen of the underworld and the Greek Corn Maiden.³² Suggestively, then, Feronia's month, November, is the half-year 'twin' of May, and May 3 in Rome was the culmination of Floraria, the six-day festival of the Sabine deity Flora. Votive offerings to Feronia included harvest firstfruits³³ (particularly animal figurines³⁴); and the epithet Feronia Mater has been linked to the Corn Mother and Sanskrit *bharsani mata*.³⁵

Feronia's festival was also a fair, 'the most celebrated in Italy', attracting 'merchants, artisans and husbandmen', and affording legal asylum in the sanctuary.³⁶ It operated in the time of king Tullus Hostilius (673-642BCE), but

²⁸ Georg Thilo and Herman Hagen (eds), *Maurus Servius Honoratus*. In Vergilii carmina comentarii (Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1881), hereafter Servius, 'Commentary', 7.799. P. Longo, 'Feronia, un culto sabino nel territorio volsco', in AA. W., *La Valle Pontina nell'antichità, Atti del Convegno, 'Studi e ricerche sul Lazio antico', Cori, 13-14 Aprile, 1985* (Rome, 1990). Livia Boccali, 'Esempio di organizzazione delle fonti antiche per la ricostruzione del quadro della vita religiosa di una città e del suo territorio in età preromana e romana: Terracina', *Cahiers du centre Gustave Glotz* 8:8 (1997), pp. 181-222, hereafter Boccali, 'Terracina'.

²⁹ Virgil, 'Aeneid', 7.803-05.

³⁰ *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, trs. Earnest Cary (7 vols, London, William Heinemann, 1960), hereafter Dionysius, 'Antiquities', 1, p. 453 (2.49.5); 2, pp. 139-41 (3.32.1).

³¹ Seth William Stevenson, rev. C. Roach Smith, Frederic W. Madden, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins* (London, George Bell, 1889), p. 384.

³² Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Popular Religion* (1940), pp. 51-55.

³³ Livy, 'History', 26.11.9.

³⁴ Excavations in the 1950s cited by Christa Frateantonio, 'Feronia', *Brill's New Pauly* (Brill Online, 2013), <<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/feronia-e410930>>, accessed January 22, 2013.

³⁵ Lang, 'Mythology', p. 149, citing Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Wald- und Feldkulte* (2 vols, Berlin, Bornträger, 1875-77), 2, *Antike Wald- und Feldkulte*, p. 238.

³⁶ Dionysius, 'Antiquities', 2, p. 141 (3.32.1-2).

on the threshold of the Common Era was referred to in the past tense.³⁷ Some assume it jointly celebrated Feronia and Soranus.³⁸ Rome's cult of Feronia was located in the Field of Mars, the place of the Plebian Games, and it has been suggested she was patron of a market or fair there predating the games.³⁹

Other philological links have been proposed between Feronia, the Greek Phorōneus, and Bhuranyu, a name of Agni, the Vedic fire-god;⁴⁰ while Soranus' absorption into Apollo Soranus has been explained etymologically through identification with the fiery Sun deity Sol [Sor>Sol].⁴¹ A tradition that when Feronia's grove at Terracina seemed consumed by fire and people gathered to rescue her statue, it suddenly grew green again,⁴² has a suggestive echo of the modern story that icons rescued in the thirteenth century from the burning Anastenaria church of Kosti had cried out for help and were unharmed.⁴³ Forests, open-air workshops of charcoal-burners, are vulnerable to summer conflagrations – yet these are paradoxically regenerative. Forest-dwelling fire-walkers might know this. Those at Feronia, who passed over 'a burnt pile of wood, yet are not scorched' (some said they smeared their soles 'with a drug', *medicamentum*, beforehand⁴⁴), belonged to local families called Hirpi (Sabine, 'wolves'). ('Wolves belong to the wild, to the mountain; what wolves are to the tame, the Hirpi are to ordinary men.'⁴⁵) By Pliny's time they enjoyed 'a perpetual exemption, by Senate decree, from military and all other services'.⁴⁶

As well as Feronia and Terracina, other sanctuaries of Feronia are mentioned near Trebula Mutu[e]sca among the Sabines (modern Monteleone Sabino), 45km north-east of Rome; Palestrina (Greek Praeneste) in Lazio, about 35km east of Rome; and Amiternum in the Abruzzo (modern San Vittorino), 9km from L'Aquila with a modern Valle Ferone south of Ponte Peschio. Two of the sanctuaries are far from the rest at either end of the northern frontier of

³⁷ Dionysius, *ibid*; John Bostock and H. T. Riley (eds), *The Natural History. Pliny the Elder* (London, Taylor and Francis, 1855), hereafter Pliny, 'Natural History', 1:30:5; *Livy. History of Rome*, trs Canon Roberts (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1912), 1.30.5. Harry Thurston Peck, *Harpers' Dictionary of Classical Antiquities* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1898).

³⁸ Andrew Lang, *Modern Mythology* (London, Longmans, Green, 1897), hereafter Lang, 'Mythology', pp. 148ff.

³⁹ W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic* (London, Macmillan, 1899), p. 253.

⁴⁰ F. Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology* (2 vols, London, Longmans, Green, 1897), hereafter Müller, 'Mythology', 2, p. 800.

⁴¹ Ludwig Preller, *Römische Mythologie* (2nd edn, Berlin, Weidmannsche, 1865), p. 239.

⁴² Servius, 'Commentary', 7.800

⁴³ Anna Chatzinikolaou, 'The icons of the anastenaria', *Thrace Archives* 19 (1954), pp. 327-32, showed the oldest Kosti icons were from 1833, with the red-robed Helena 'as if she was dancing'.

⁴⁴ Servius, 'Commentary', 11.787, citing Varro, 'always an enemy of religious belief'.

⁴⁵ Valerie Flint and Willem de Blécourt, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* (London, Athlone Press, 1999), 2, p. 169: cf. Piccaluga, 1976; Buxton, 1987, pp. 63ff. Mannhardt compared the Hirpi firewalking with other rituals involving wolves.

⁴⁶ Pliny, 'Natural History', 7.2.

pre-Augustan Italy with Cispadane Gaul: near Luna (modern Luni) at the estuary of the Macra on the boundary between Etruria and Liguria; and at Pisaurum (modern Pesaro on the Adriatic coast).

Pisaurum lies 12km north of Fanum Fortunae, a shrine of the deity Fortuna and the terminus of the Via Flaminia, so that it is interesting that Praeneste⁴⁷ (whose mythical king Erulus was regarded as Feronia's son) was the cult centre of Fortuna Primigenia, with whom, in turn, Feronia shared the Plebeian Games at Rome.⁴⁸ Fortuna, personifying fate and luck, was venerated on June 11 and two weeks later on June 24, Midsummer. As Primigenia she directed the fortunes of the first-born at the moment of birth and her sanctuary at Praeneste on the Via Latina was perhaps the largest in Italy. The slope of the mountain north of modern Palestrina, crowned by its citadel, Castel San Pietro (St Peter and Paul, June 29), is known as La Foresta, so perhaps here too Feronia was a patron of charcoal-burning. The view from the citadel includes Rome and Soratte. The mountainous coastal spur at Terracina affords wide views, too. Feronia notably occupied high and border places.

A symmetry links Feronia's cult in late autumn and that of Flora in late spring, both wearing flowers in their hair. Flora's, like Feronia's, was a plebeian, but also a boisterous cult, seemingly originating among the Sabines, who named their month Flusalis after her (corresponding to April). Ovid gave her a Greek counterpart: '*As she talks, her lips breathe spring roses: I was Chloris, who am now called Flora*'.⁴⁹ However, Chloris ranked only as a nymph and her name means 'pale-green, pallid'. She was abducted by Zephyrus, god of the west wind, as Flora was married to his counterpart Favonius ('favourable'), who held dominion over plants and flowers. Though Flora was otherwise a relatively minor figure, her association with the spring gave her festival and games, the Floralia, April 27/28, extended to May 3 (the Floræ) under the Empire, particular significance in Rome, where it was instituted in 240 BCE. A further festival in her honour was held on May 23, and another on August 13 in harvest-time.⁵⁰

The two May dates will not escape notice. In the Roman church until 1962, May 3 marked the feast of the Helena's Invention of the Cross, distinct from that of the *Exaltation* of the Cross, September 14, the day following the anniversary of the consecration in 335 of Constantine's Holy Sepulchre basilica in Jerusalem. On the 14th, it is said, a third portion of the Cross was brought out for the people's adoration – the other portions had gone to Santa Croce in Rome and Constantinople.

In Byzantine practice, the September feast celebrates both the Invention, and the recovery by the emperor Heraclius in 628 of Jerusalem's portion of the cross, which Persian Sassanids had carried away in 614. However, the Invention

⁴⁷ J. G. Fr., R. S. C., and T. As., 'Praeneste', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (), 22, pp. 243-44, with bibliography.

⁴⁸ Fowler, 'Festivals'.

⁴⁹ Ovid, *Fasti*, Bk 5, lines 193ff (May 2).

⁵⁰ Ovis, *Fasti*, Bk 4; T. P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2004), pp. 1-11; H. H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 110-11.



Fig. 7. Artemis Perasia with Torch: Denarius of Hieropolis-Castabala (circa 150-211), Roman Provincial Coins, I, 464.

Сл. 7. Артемида Перасиа са бакљом: Денар од Хиерополиса-Цастабале (око 150-211), римски покрајинске кованице, I, 464

itself is specifically remembered on March 6. The Armenians, on the other hand, while also celebrating the September feast, mark the Invention on the Sunday nearest to October 26. In Gallican usage, known from about the seventh century, the Feast of the Cross, Crouchmas (for 'Cross Mass') or Roodmas, was celebrated on May 3. When Gallican practice was merged with that of Rome, a process complete by about 800, the May date was kept as celebrating the Invention, while the September feast was assigned to commemorating the rescue and Exaltation, as it had done previously in Rome. Bede, writing in northern Britain before *circa* 730, noted both the Invention on May 3 and the Exaltation on September 14.⁵¹

Since festal calendars evolved alongside the form of the eucharist, the origins of Gallican usage could illuminate the origins of the May 3 celebration. Alas, this is an area subject to long, unresolved debate. Scholars variously suggest it was developed from the rites of Ephesus (perhaps with Irish involvement), Antioch (in Milan by Bishop Auxentius), the East generally (in Gaul by Cassian in the fifth century), or the West (emerging as the rites of Rome and Milan did).⁵²

⁵¹ J. Giles (ed.), *The Complete Works of Venerable Bede*, 4, *Historical Tracts* (London, Whittaker and Co., 1843), p. 63.

⁵² Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul: A.D. 481-751* (Leiden, Brill, 1995), pp. 65-66.

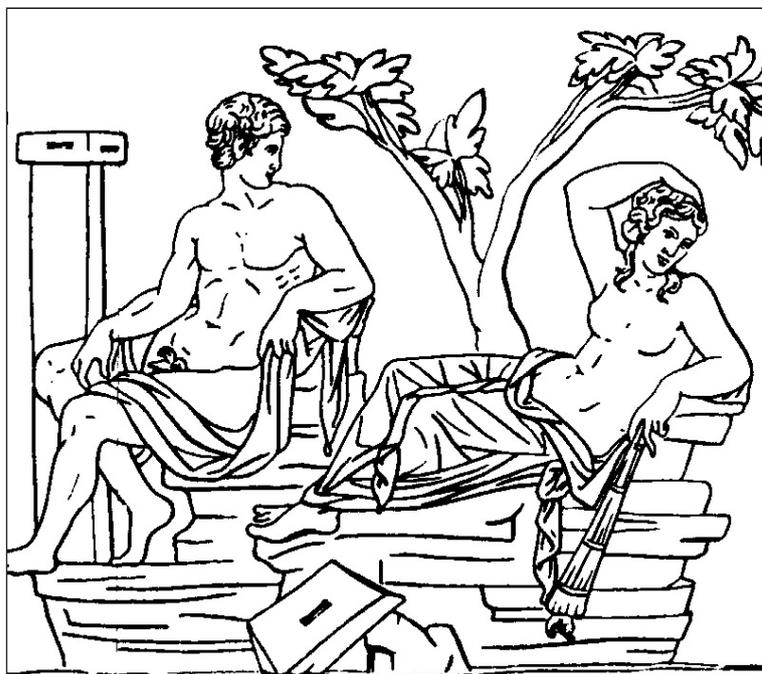


Fig. 8. Helen holding torch downwards, accompanied by Achilles on White Island. Drawn from British Museum, Portland Vase (see Footnote 60).

Сл. 8. Јелена држи бакљу наниже, у пратњи Ахила на Белом острву. Извучено из Британског музеја, ваза Портланд (видети фусноту 60)

Asia Minor: Castabala

Springtime also features in the fire-walking which Strabo encountered at Hierapolis-Castabala,⁵³ a city of Cataonia in Roman Cilicia, 13km north-west of modern Osmaniye and 30km from the Gulf of Issus facing across towards Cyprus. This involved female priests of a temple of Artemis (Fig. 3), to whom the Athenians dedicated their month Munychion – shifting between March/April and April/May. ‘Some tell us over and over the story of Orestes and Tauropolus, saying Artemis is here called “Perasian” because she was brought “from the other side” [i.e. overseas, Greek *perathen*]’ – referring to Orestes’ theft of Artemis’ statue from Taurica (Crimea).⁵⁴ First Orestes went to Comana in the southern Black Sea province of Pontus, and then to the other Comana in Cilicia, founding temples of Artemis in both places before doing so at Hierapolis (‘Sacred City’)-Castabala.

Strabo wrote that at the climax of her ecstatic state, the fire-walking adept would run towards the valleys of the Pyramus and to the wooded hills with her torch in hand. It is with the festival of Artemis Perasia that scholars have associated a series of Castabalan coins from the early third century CE showing the prize basket awarded to victors of athletic or cultural contests at the religious games popular with Greek cities (Fig. 6). Flanking the basket (sometimes referred to as a crown) are lit torches – symbolism revived with the modern

⁵³ Getzel M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in Europe, The Islands, and Asia Minor* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995), pp. 366-68.

⁵⁴ Strabo, 12.2.7.

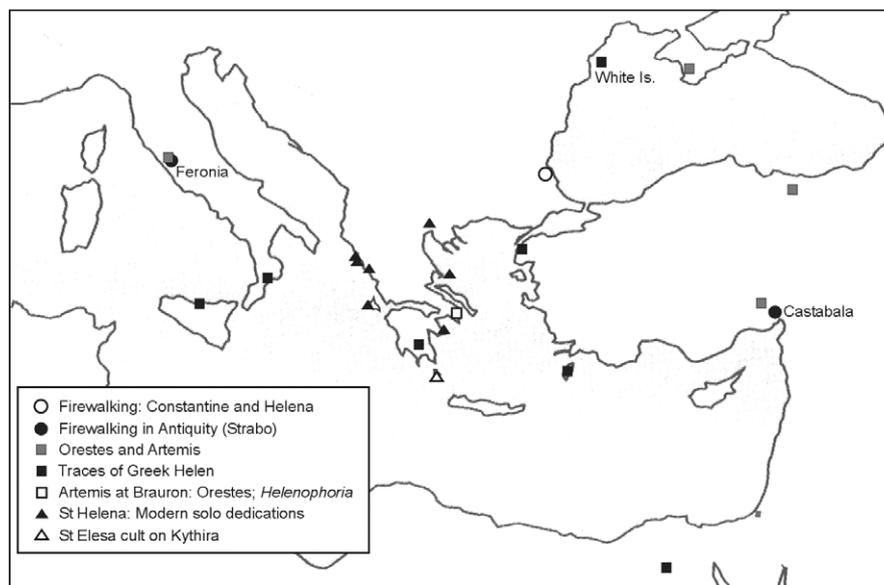


Fig. 9. Map drawing together the themes of this paper

Сл. 9. Мапа која приказује теме овог рада заједно

Olympic Games.⁵⁵ The basket also appears on a coin of Caracalla (211-217) and a third design from Castabala, *circa* 150-211, with Tyche (Fortuna) on the obverse, has on the reverse Artemis Perasia wearing the mural-crown of city-patron accompanied by a burning torch (Fig. 7).

This is pertinent to the present inquiry because in Greek, Helena's name, *Helenē* (*Ἑλένη*), also meant both 'torch' and 'basket' – specifically the wicker-basket in which sacred utensils were carried at the festival of Artemis at Brauron in Attica. Jack Lindsay compared *helenē* with *elanē*, bundle or torch of reeds.⁵⁶ He also observed that Pollux, the second-century CE lexicographer, 'telling us of the basket *helenē*, adds that the festival in which it was carried, a rite of puberty for girls, was called *Helenēphoria*' and took place in Munychion.⁵⁷ (Intriguingly, the much later chapels here and at a smaller shrine 12m south-east both honour St George – venerated on April 23.)

Artemis' temple at Brauron is on the Aegean coast just south of modern Artemida 25km of Athens from which there was a procession every four years from her temple on the Acropolis. Here there is a further association with Helena's Greek namesake, and a link with Castabala's 'Taurian' Artemis. In the bay off Brauron the Greek fleet assembled to bring back Helen from Troy.

⁵⁵ André and Robert Louis Dupont-Sommer, *La déesse de Hiéropolis Castabala, Sicilie* (Paris, A. Maisonneuve, 1964).

⁵⁶ Jack Lindsay, *Helen of Troy, Woman and Goddess* (Totowa, New Jersey, Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), hereafter Lindsay, 'Helen', p. 208.

⁵⁷ Lindsay, 'Helen', p. 210, citing Julius Pollux, *Onomasticon* (Leipzig, Libraria Kuehniana, 1824), 10.191 (p. 261).

Agamemnon's killing of a deer sacred to Artemis caused an ill wind, forcing him to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia. (An Athenian account of Iphigeneia makes her a daughter of Helen by Theseus.⁵⁸) In Euripides' version of this story, Artemis provides a stag as surrogate sacrifice and the girl becomes a priest in her cult among the Tauri people of the Crimea. When Iphigeneia returns with the help of her brother Orestes and an effigy of 'Taurian' Artemis, she continues till her death as a priest of Artemis at Brauron.

As for Helen, by the second century CE it was said that she had survived to live in wedlock with the Greek hero Achilles on White Island, the Greek Leukê, at the mouth of the Danube.⁵⁹ This episode has been traced on the so-called Portland Vase in the British Museum, with Helen identified by the torch she holds (Fig. 8).⁶⁰ Her presence there was asserted by the Greeks of Crotona (modern Crotona in Calabria) and Himera (on the northern coast of Sicily), said Pausanias. A wounded Crotonian general Leonymus had a vision of her when he was sent for healing to White Island by an oracle. Helen had ordered him to visit the poet Stesichorus (*circa* 640-555 BCE) at Himera and tell him his unflattering account of her had brought on his blindness, and sight would return when he wrote in her praise.⁶¹

Philostratus, writing towards the middle of the third century CE, goes further. He wrote that statues of Helen and Achilles characterised White Island, which had been created by the gods to give the pair an immortal home and sailors a safe anchorage – though they must stay aboard their ships at night. Helen and Achilles were said to drink together and that sailors approaching the island heard them singing – of their mutual desire, the Trojan war, and the gift of poetry.⁶²

This is Helen of Winter and the Underworld – as shown on the Portland Vase, her torch held downwards, or, as represented by Homer, reconciled with Menelaus in the Isle of the Blessed and her temple outside Sparta, or transformed into a star. Helen of Spring is the prize of Paris, and Helen of the Trees, 'Helen Dendritis' in the tradition on Rhodes that Helen was seized and hanged on a tree,⁶³ and Helen of the Plane Tree at Sparta ('I am Helen's, worship

⁵⁸ Claude Calame, 'Identities of gods and heroes: Athenian garden sanctuaries and gendered rites of passage', in Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine, *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 258.

⁵⁹ Pausanias's *Description of Greece*, trs. J. G. Frazer (6 vols, London, Macmillan, 1898), 1: 3.19.11-14, pp. 165-66.

⁶⁰ John Hind, 'The Portland vase: new clues to old solutions', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995), pp. 155-53.

⁶¹ Pausanias, 3.9.11-14. A similar tale was told by the Augustan mythographer Konon: M. K. Brown, *The Narratives of Konon. Text, Translation and Commentary of the Diegeseis* (Munich, K. G. Saur, 2002), 18.

⁶² Philostratus, 'On Heroes', 'On Leukê', 54.2-55.6.

⁶³ Pausanias 3.19.10.

me').⁶⁴ Here Helen is 'Persephone returned to earth, or Aphrodite. These dualisms are... a phenomenon that holds out hope for ultimate correspondence and reconciliation'.⁶⁵

The Marriage of the Rains of May: seasonal rituality

Springtime customs tied to May – especially the start of the month – are found across swathes of Europe and western Asia. For example, the festival of *Serê Gulanê*, literally 'First of May' though held on the 14th (May 1 in the Julian calendar), and also known as 'The Marriage of the Rains of May', is celebrated in parts of the south-east Turkish province of Diyarbakir (Fig. 3), marking the 'wedding' of the last rains of May and Spring.⁶⁶ Communal picnics and barbecues are held at the towns Silvan, Kulp, and Lice, and villages in a 25km hinterland of Silvan such as Gürpınar (*Bêzwan*), Çatakköprü (*Mala Badê*), Yeniçahlar (*Quba Zıla*) and Eskiocak (*Kaniya Navîn* or *Sextê*).

People also visit their relatives' graves, or sheikhs'tombs. At Gürpınar some of the biggest celebrations are as people come to pray, picnic, sing and dance at the tomb of Mihemed Emin,⁶⁷ great-grandson of the founder of the Sufi Qadiri order, Abdul Qader Gilani Al Amoli (1077–1166 CE), scholar, preacher, and native of the Iranian province of Mazandaran.⁶⁸ The *wali* (Sufi saints) are deemed God's chosen spiritual guides and command considerable local reverence.

May Day (May 1) is marked widely in the British Isles; in England by communal dancing around 'Maypoles', traditionally bare tree trunks brought for the purpose from woods to village greens. May 3 was a Celtic cross-quarter day festival, Beltane, known particularly for fires and cattle-related ritual. In later medieval times, Beltane became 'St Helen's Day-in-the-Spring' (see above), whose customs included the tying to horses and carts of rowan twigs, thought to protect against misfortune and malevolence. The numerous curative wells of St Helen would also be visited on May 3. These festive features aligning Helen(a) with those of May Day echo her association in modern Thrace, and her Classical namesake's in ancient Greece, with the fecund landscape and sources of water and fire.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Theocritus [Sicilian, third century BCE], *Idylls* 18, 'The Epithalamy of Helen', 38.

⁶⁵ L. S. Dembo, *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966), p. 35, commenting on H(ilda) D(oolittle)'s 1952-54 poem 'Helen in Egypt'.

⁶⁶ Information about the custom is difficult to find in English translation. One summary source in English is Richard Lim (ed.), *Another Look at South and Southeast Turkey: A Traveller's Handbook* (Diyarbakir, Union of Southeast Anatolia Region Municipalities, 2009), hereafter 'Another Look', p. 301.

⁶⁷ 'Another Look', p. 301.

⁶⁸ The sheikh's name is locally transliterated as Ebdilqadirê Geylani, and he is also referred to as Jilani, etc.

⁶⁹ Graham Jones, 'Aspects of Helen: Byzantine and other influences on the reading of Constantine's mother in the West', in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium. Second Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June 2003. The Collection of Scientific Works II* (Niš, University of

Might echos survive also in the once Hellenised parts of the Mesopotamian ‘Fertile Crescent’ on the upper reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates? A starting place in Late Antique practice might be the annual Spring festival in the theatre of Edessa (Map 4). (Previous papers have explored aspects of Helen in the region, including that city.⁷⁰) It has been guessed that its banning in 502,⁷¹ promulgated by the emperor Anastasius, met the ascetic opinion of local ecclesiastics like St Jacob, bishop of Batnan da-Srugh (modern Serugh/Sarug), not far south-west of Edessa. Jacob, a poet-theologian, *circa* 451-521, denounced the performances as ‘dancing, sport and music, the miming of lying tales, teaching which destroys the mind, poems which are not true, troublesome and confused sounds, melodies to attract children, ordered and captivating songs, skilful chants, lying canticles composed according to the folly invented *by the Greeks*’ (author’s italics).⁷²

Paralleling Jacob’s reproaches are the canonical prohibitions on which Valeria Fol relies for deriving fire-walking (and wider Thracian masquerade ritual, Fig. 9) from seasonal rituals of the first millenium.⁷³ In 419, ‘most wicked leapings throughout the fields and open places’ on feasts ‘contrary to divine precept’ were condemned.⁷⁴ Prohibitions in 692⁷⁵ forbade ‘the fires which are lighted on the new moons by some before their shops⁷⁶ and houses, upon which (according to a certain ancient custom) they foolishly and crazily leap’. Offending clerics were to be deposed, laymen excommunicated. ‘For it is

Niš, 2004), pp. 13-27, hereafter Jones, ‘Aspects’; ‘The power of Helen’s name: Heritage and legacy, myth and reality’, in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium. Seventh Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June 2008. The Collection of Scientific Works VII* (Niš, University of Niš, 2009), pp. 1-19, hereafter Jones, ‘Power’.

⁷⁰ Graham Jones, ‘Helen of Mesopotamia: The view from Edessa’, in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium. Ninth Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June 2010. The Collection of Scientific Works IX* (Niš, University of Niš, 2011), pp. 427-46; and ‘Constantine and his mother build a city: Helen of Edessa and Martyropolis’, in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium. Tenth Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June 2011. The Collection of Scientific Works X* (Niš, University of Niš, 2012), pp. 481-507.

⁷¹ Hugh Kennedy, ‘From Polis to Madina: Urban change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria’, *Past & Present* 106 (February 1985), pp. 3-27, hereafter Kennedy, ‘Madina’, p. 7.

⁷² J. B. Segal, *Edessa, the Blessed City* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 163-65, cited by Kennedy, ‘Madina’, p. 7.

⁷³ Fol, ‘*Kouker*’, p. 84.

⁷⁴ Fourth synodical Council of Carthage, Canon 60, *Dionysius Exiguus*, Codex Can. J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* 67 (Paris, J.-P. Migne, 1863), col. 182.

⁷⁵ Council of Constantinople (sixth ecumenical council, held at Trullo), Canons 65 and 62 respectively. H. R. Percival (ed.), ‘The Canons of the Council in Trullo, Often Called the Quinisext Council, A.D. 692’, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (gen. eds), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark,), hereafter Percival, ‘Canons’, p. 757. Theodore Balsamon, Commentary on Photius: *Photii Patriarchæ Constantinopolitani, Syntagma Canonum*, in Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologiæ Cursus Completus, Series Græca* 104 (Paris, Garnier Fratres, 1896), cols. 441-976, at cols. 934-35.

⁷⁶ An ancient epitome of Canon 65 substitutes ‘workshops’.

written:⁷⁷ “Manasses built an altar to the whole host of heaven, in the two courts of the Lord, and made his sons pass through the fire; he used lots and augurs and divinations by birds and made ventriloquists [or pythons⁷⁸] and multiplied diviners, that he might do evil before the Lord and provoke him to anger.”⁷⁹

Referral to seventh-century ordinances against leaping over flames is more cautious than the widespread insistence that dancing on embers derives from Dionysian practice. Recent research links the supposition to nationalistic ethnography serving Greece’s need to develop its identity during the campaign for independence.⁸⁰ Another view is that fire-walking arrived with migrant tribes from Asia, where fire-worship was prevalent, particularly for Zoroastrians.

Conclusions

Anastenarian celebration of Constantine and Helena claims at best a tenuous link with fire-walking celebration of Feronia or Artemis. Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether their incorporation into an age-old and far-flung ritual might owe something to a process of assimilation and transformation similar to the metamorphosis of the Greek Helen, *Ἐλένη*, ‘torch’, into post-Antique or medieval understandings of St Elmo’s Fire.⁸¹

In the folklore associated with Thracian fire-walking, the mother-and-son joint feast proved well-suited to the agrarian season, adaptable to cultural myths and narrative as folklore shows. For example, the first milking (*predoy*) is customarily made on *Kostadinovden* – a test milking, its outcome determining the amount of milk and cheese that farmers will expect to receive during the season.⁸² *Predoy* is accompanied by a communal celebration, with apotropaic and magical practices for health and fertility involving ritual breads and fresh cheese. Traditions include first milking of the sheep through a silver ring, spraying milk from nursing mothers, and racing of breastfeeding mothers between the feast table and the water spring.⁸³ In that way that Antique and medieval mindsets worked, reality and metaphor interweave into a single narrative.

Though mother and son, Constantine and Helen form a devotional pair, a popular way of thinking about deities in the ancient world. While there is no evidence that they were venerated in the regions around the two, widely separated places where fire-walking is evidenced in the Antique world, there are suggestive echos of ambiguity. In association with the Italian cult we find Feronia and Apollo Soranus, Feronia Mater and Jupiter, and the twins Artemis

⁷⁷ 2 Kings 21:5-6.

⁷⁸ ‘Pythons’, in square brackets, appears only in the Latin version (Percival, ‘Canons’, fn. 380).

⁷⁹ Percival, ‘Canons’, p. 757, notes that ‘Lupin remarks that the fires kindled on certain Saints’ days are almost certainly remains of this heathen practice. These fires are often accompanied with leaping, drinking, and the wrestling of young men.’

⁸⁰ Xygalatas, ‘Anastenaria’.

⁸¹ Jones, ‘Aspects’, pp. 25-26, ‘Power’, pp. 8-13.

⁸² CANEPaL, ‘Theme 7’, pp. 15, 20-21, 28.

⁸³ CANEPaL, ‘Theme 7’, pp. 15, 20-21, 28.

and Apollo, offspring of Jupiter. Feronia shares aspects of Artemis at Soratte, but at Praeneste, as Feronia Mater, she partners Jupiter, represented in his youth. Here is encountered much the same familial ambiguity found in the Thracian Constantine and Helen. Indeed, as Livia Boccali points out, with Feronia's presence alongside Fortuna at Praeneste, Feronia is '*una deo femminile si presenti nel duplice aspetto di mater e di virgo, e sia collegate ad uno Iuppiter puer, che una volta è dato come suo compagno, ma che certamente doveva assumere anche l'aspetto di "figlio"*'.⁸⁴

Feronia was culted in November, but also as a double of Flora, celebrated six months later, culminating on May 3. By the seventh century, May 3 marked the feast of the Helena's Invention of the Cross, possibly originating in Asia Minor or Syria. Its substitution in northern Britain – essentially lands where British speech long survived – for the bonfire and cattle feast of Beltane lays emphasis on the importance of that cross-quarter day, particularly for pastoralists. Certainly the character of the Strandzha and the localisation of the cult-sites of Constantine and Helena fits that of the places where Feronia was culted. Two themes of her locales, as Paul Aebischer concluded, are '*les sources et les bois*'.⁸⁵ Her name may have to do with ironworking, but equally it could come from *ferus*, 'wild', 'not civilised'.⁸⁶

While Artemis-like Feronia patronises fire-walking and a popular market, Artemis at Castabala is associated with fire-walking and public games. The latter are represented iconographically by a basket and torches – both linked lexicographically with the Greek namesake of Helena. At Artemis' chief Greek mainland temple, she was celebrated by young women bearing baskets which gave the festival its name, 'Helenêphoria'. Feronia's doublet Flora was associated with maidenhood and springtime; Artemis with the Spring month Munychion and the passage to womanhood.

In Thracian folklore, Constantine's role overlaps with that of God, and Helen's is hypostasised into those of sister and wife. Historically, Constantine amplified the cult of the Sun god Sol, making Sunday a day of rest in 321⁸⁷ and aligning his triumphal arch in Rome with Sol's gigantic statue by the Coliseum.⁸⁸ In Constantinople he depicted himself as Sol's *alter ego* Apollo. Though he discontinued the image of Sol on imperial coinage after 325/26, inscriptions referring to Sol Invictus appear until 387⁸⁹ and there were enough devotees in the fifth century that Augustine found it necessary to preach against

⁸⁴ Boccali, 'Terracina', p. 184.

⁸⁵ Paul Aebischer, 'Le culte de Feronia et le gentilice Feronius', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 13:1-2 (1934), pp. 5-23, at p.22.

⁸⁶ Daphne Varenaya, 'Locus Feroniae', *Hellenismo*, Anthesterion 2788, <http://www.academia.edu/1478803/Hellenismo_-_Anthesterion_2788>, accessed January 22, 2013.

⁸⁷ Martin Wallraff, *Christus verus Sol. Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike*, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 32 (Munster, Aschendorff, 2002).

⁸⁸ E. Marlowe, 'Framing the sun. The Arch of Constantine and the Roman cityscape', *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006), pp. 223-42.

⁸⁹ Gaston Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden, Brill, 1972), hereafter Halsberghe, 'Sol', p. 70, n. 3: CIL VI, 1778.

them.⁹⁰ This in itself does not provide a link between Sol, Constantine, and fire-walking. Nevertheless, it testifies to a cultural humus, resistant to official Christianity, which in time might allow, if the traditions survived long enough (and bearing in mind Constantine's long-standing posthumous status as ideal ruler and the proximity of his eponymously-named city), easy appropriation of Constantine to a fire-walking calendar.

Developed the tradition of folk ritual performances (dromena), transferred to northern Greece, which as well as firewalking includes, for example, that of gynaikokratia ('women's rule') around the 'old mother' character (Babo) and childbearing issues on January 8,⁹¹ St Domnica's Day. In such a humus, sailors' tales of Helen and her Dioscuri fire-making brothers as causal agents of electrical discharges on ships at sea were transformed into the popular description of these discharges as St Helen's, and then St Elmo's Fire. The coastal distribution of St Helen churches in Greece is notable, considering the seaways which linked places where the Greek Helen was remembered – from White Island off the Danube delta to Rhodes to Memphis to Sicily. A strange echo of the Rhodian Helen hanged on a tree occurs on Kythira, the island at the southern tip of mainland Greece, due west of Rhodes and north of Crete, overlooking the entrance to the Aegean Sea. Here there is a cult of a 'St Eles', whose conversion to Christianity so angered her father Eladios ('The Greek') that he pursued her to her island nunnery 'in 375' and hanged her from a carob tree (Fig. 9).

Together with the lexical overlap with *helenē* as 'torch', cultural cross-overs between the Antique and Christian worlds may have been long-standing enough to influence Helena's inclusion with Constantine in the fire-walking of Thrace – if not vice versa: Constantine's inclusion in a custom influenced by evolving understandings of Helena alongside memories of her Greek namesake.

Грејем Џонс

ЗЕМЉА, ВАТРА И ВОДА: КОНСТАНТИН И ЈЕЛЕНА У РИТУАЛНОМ НАСЛЕЂУ
ЕВРОПЕ И ЊЕНИХ СУСЕДА

Сваке године од три дана у мају, иконе Константина и Јелене се високо држе од стране ватрених шетача, док играју преко врелог пепела у селима јужне Бугарске и северне Грчке. Недавна истраживања у овим ритуалима Нестинара („ватреним плесовима“) и њихов придружени коукер или калогерос' маскарада дивљег човека, повезују их са пред-константиновским сезонским обичајима преко канонима цркве у два века након Никејског сабора. Овај рад настоји да пронађе заједнички језик између обичајима у вези Константина и Јелене у античкој и модерној Тракији и сличних традиција у другим европским регионима, са циљем разматрања процеса

⁹⁰ Halsberghe, 'Sol', p. 170, n. 4: Augustine, *Sermones*, 12; also in *Ennaratio in Psalmum* 25; *Ennaratio* II, 3."

⁹¹ Kalliopi Panopoulou, 'Tradition and modernity in a dance ritual performance (dromeno): the example of gynaikokratia in a community in the prefecture of Serres, northern Greece', *Етнолошке свеске* 12.1 (2008), pp. 111-23.

којима најпознатији син Ниша и његова мајка су дошла да буду повезани са њима. Он исто шири уобичајене географске параметре етнографије у византијском контексту, проширујући своју потрагу на Месопотамију и друге царске границе у ономе што се данас описује као суседство Европе. На граници Турске и Сирије, на пример, „Брак на мајских киша „, фестивал Сера Гулане (дословно „почетак маја“), носи одређене особине које се исто налазе се у обичајима везаним за Константина и његову мајку. На једном крају континуума је прослава плодног пејзажа и воде као извора живота. На другом је егзалтација Светим крстом, симболом Константинове победе на Милвијском мосту који се пројављује наводним мајчиним открићима на Голготи.