

**THE POWER OF HELEN'S NAME:  
HERITAGE AND LEGACY, MYTH AND REALITY**

In her presentation to the Niš conference of 2008, Dr Ivana Kuzmanović-Novović showed two examples of gems illustrated with a cross held by two flanking figures – unmistakably Constantine and Helena, iconography in production even today (Fig. 1). If she is right in proposing a dating range that includes the fourth century,<sup>1</sup> it is possible that the emergence of this enduring image could be roughly contemporary with the first records of Helena's supposed recovery of Christ's Cross in Jerusalem. Rufinus wrote about it in his continuation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, circa 402/3, and was followed by Scholasticus Socrates, Sozomen, and others.<sup>2</sup> Pieces of the Holy Cross were being venerated in Jerusalem circa 340,<sup>3</sup> and a fragment was also deposited two or three decades later in a church near Rusguniae in the Atlas Mountains dedicated in honour of the Cross, perhaps not the first. The builder was Nubel, head of the Iubelani, a Moorish people, and father of Firmus, who led a major rebel against Rome.<sup>4</sup>

For a British scholar, part of the deep fascination with the woman who gave birth to Constantine in Niš becomes bound up with her notable association in the British Isles with 'holy wells'. Her name attaches to more so-called holy wells in England than any other non-biblical female saint. Furthermore – and this point has been made in a previous paper here<sup>5</sup> and now in the writer's vol-

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<sup>1</sup> Ivana Kuzmanović-Novović (this volume): 'not earlier than the fourth century'.

<sup>2</sup> Rufinus (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 10.7-8), Socrates (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.17 PG 67, 117ff), Sozomen (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2.1-2) Theodoretus (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.18), Ambrose (*De obitu Theodosii*, 40-49), Paulinus of Nola (*Epistolae*, 31.4-5), and Sulpicius Severus (*Chronicorum*, 2.22-34).

<sup>3</sup> Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem (*Cat.* 4.10, 10.19, 13.4 PG 33, 467ff, 685-687, 777).

<sup>4</sup> *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Vol. 8, ed. G. Wilmanns (Berlin, 1881), No. 9255; Firmus's revolt was described by Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, ed. W. Seyfarth (3 vols, Leipzig, 1878).

<sup>5</sup> '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 Niš, 2004), pp. 13-27, hereafter Jones, 'Aspects of Helen'.



Fig. 1: Two (?Late Antique) gems with an image of Helen and Constantine with the Cross, shown to the Niš conference of 2008 by Ivana Kuzmanović-Novović.

Сл. 1: Две (?касно-античке) геме са ликом Јелене и Константина са крстом, које је на симпозијуму у Нишу 2008. год. показала Ивана Кузмановић-Нововић.

ume on the importance of religious dedications, *Saints in the Landscape*<sup>6</sup> – it is striking that about ninety per cent of British wells and churches dedicated in honour of ‘St Helen’ lie north of a line from the Bristol Channel to the Wash. South of the same line are found about three-quarters of churches named in honour of the Holy Cross. Whatever the reason for this dichotomy, it seems to have something to do with the power of Helena’s name, particularly in the context of the supernaturalising of the natural world. This appears likely because of the conflation of ‘St Helen’ with ‘Elen’, a figure in Welsh mythology connected with water (and via her family with the heavens), and perhaps also with ‘Alauna’, the feminine form of ‘Alaunos’, a river-spirit name given to many watercourses on the Continent and in Britain. Like Helena’s British churches, insular rivers with names like Allen, Ellen, and Alne occur predominately in the north and west.<sup>7</sup>

Jack Lindsay’s book *Helen of Troy* is among the texts which explores a similar association between the Classical Helena and the world of nature.<sup>8</sup> These strongly argue that the heroic character of Homer’s and other epic poetry developed out of a nature goddess figure who was particularly venerated in the context of trees. Is it conceivable that this supernatural Helen of the Ancient Greek world could have influenced the popular reception and perception of Constantine’s mother as titular of holy wells in the early and later Medieval West? Any direct influence seems unlikely, but it is not impossible that some sense of the archaic Helen-figure may have worked its way westward with

<sup>6</sup> Graham Jones, *Saints in the Landscape* (London, Tempus, 2007), hereafter Jones, ‘Saints in the Landscape’.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Jones, ‘Holy wells and the Cult of St Helen’, *Landscape History* 8 (1986), pp. 59-76.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Lindsay, *Helen of Troy* (1976), hereafter Lindsay, ‘Helen’.

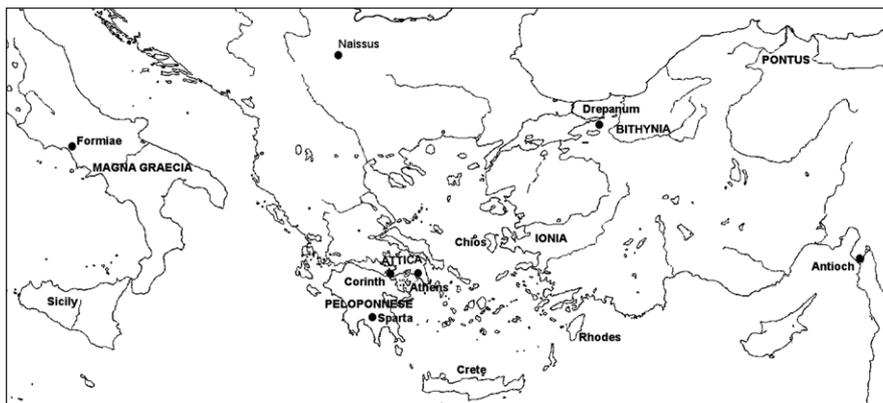


Fig. 2: Map of the Greek-speaking world showing the distribution of names associated with Helena.

Сл. 2: Мапа грчко-говорног света која приказује расподелу имена повезаних са Јеленом.

the broad sweep of Celtic-speaking cultures. Imbedded in insular traditions, it would have been open to revival as devotion to Constantine’s mother arrived from the Roman world.

It seems not unreasonable to broaden out this issue to relate to the popular reception and understanding generally of the Empress Helena in her lifetime. It is timely, and appropriate in the setting of a conference devoted to the careers and representations of both son and mother, to revisit the question, review the problems, and offer some tentative observations. Is it possible, at such a geographical remove, to relate one phenomenon to the other? What connections could there have been and how could these be explained, chronologically and in terms of popular belief and practice?

Much rests on the currency of the name Helen in the Greek and Roman worlds of the fourth century. How common was the name and how was it understood? We can approach this question with greater confidence now that we have the benefit of the first five volumes of the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*.<sup>9</sup> From this we can see that ‘Ελένα (pronounced with an initial aspirate, ‘Heléna’, and, with its final ‘a’, corresponding to the Latin form, Helena) was rare throughout the Antique period: only seven examples given, and none from Attica, Macedonia, Thrace, or the northern regions of the Black Sea (Fig. 2). Thirteen cases recorded from Athens by John Traill probably reflect that city’s greater cultural mix.<sup>10</sup> ‘Ελένη (modern Eleni and pronounced ‘Heléni’, Latin Helene), on the other hand, occurs 58 times, but with geographical bias. It is

<sup>9</sup> *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987-), 1, *Aegean Islands, Cyprus, Cyrenaica*, P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews (eds); 2, *Attica*, M. J. Osborne and S. G. Byrne (eds) (1994); 3a, *Peloponnese, Western Greece, Sicily, and Magna Graecia*, P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews (eds) (1997); 3b, *Central Greece: From the Megarid to Thessaly*, P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews (eds) (2000); 4, *Macedonia, Thrace, Northern Regions of the Black Sea*, P. M. Fraser and E. Matthews (eds) (2005).

<sup>10</sup> John S. Traill, *Persons of Ancient Athens* (Toronto, Athenians, 1997), p. 6.

found twice as frequently as elsewhere in records from the region which encompasses the Peloponnese, Western Greece, Sicily and Magna Graecia (southern Italy), and in coastal Asia Minor from Pontus on the Black Sea to Ionia on the central Aegean. Central in the latter tract is Bithynia, including the Asian shore of the Sea of Marmara and opposite Byzantium – the region in which Helena herself is believed to have been born, at Drepanum, later Helenopolis. The name crossed social classes: from Campania in Magna Graecia comes the record of Plotia Helena, a freed slave in the first century CE. The empress, of course, was described by Rufinus as ‘stabularia’.<sup>11</sup> Four Helenas were commemorated at Pompeii in the century leading to its destruction. The masculine name ‘Ἑλενος (Helenos, twin of Cassandra and a suitor of Helena) was even more popular, with 82 cases overall, and found in all regions, including 30 from Attica (all Athenian), and 19 from the region of the Peloponnese, Western Greece, Sicily and Magna Graecia. Helena’s name was being given to girls through to the second century of the Common Era and there are also cases in the third.

So much for the name’s distribution. Was reference to the divine or mystic Helen intended, or were children being named ‘shining’ or ‘bright one’? – for ‘ελένη also carries the meaning ‘torch’.<sup>12</sup> The same word also referred to the wicker-basket used to carry sacred vessels at a feast of Artemis Brauronia: a cult attractive to young girls which recalled the goddess’ intervention in the Trojan war. The feast itself was known as the ‘ελένηφόρια’.<sup>13</sup>

A brief summary of Helena’s career allows us to relate her name to the central issue. Helena was born circa 248. Circa 270 she met Constantius at Niš: it is possible but not certain that they were married. Two or three years later a son was born at Niš and named Constantine. In 289 Helena was put aside in favour of Theodora, but in 305 her son Constantine was acclaimed Augustus at York after his father’s death. In 324, on November 8, she and her daughter-in-law Fausta were made Augusta; they were also made *nobilissima femina* together. In 326/7 Helena undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, built churches there, ‘discovered’ the True Cross, and took relics of the Crucifixion back to her son. At some in the next three years she died on her way to Rome, aged about 80.

In a previous paper at the Niš conference, the writer remarked on the report that Constantine, after the defeat of Licinius in 324, set up a public portrait, in front of the imperial palace in Constantinople, of himself and his sons standing on top of a serpent representing Satan. This was eleven years after the Edict of Milan, by which toleration of Christianity was proclaimed, and in the year previous to his presidency of the Council of Nicaea. However, it was also three years after Constantine’s decree that Christians unite with non-Christians in observing ‘the venerable day of the Sun’. In fact the iconography of the portrait would have clearly reminded its audience of the slaying of the Python by

<sup>11</sup> Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (rev. edn, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940, repr. 1960), hereafter Liddell and Scott, citing the (?fifth-century CE) lexicographer Hesychius.

<sup>13</sup> Liddell and Scott.

the Sun god, Apollo. Constantine was effectively telling his subjects: 'See me as Apollo'. Is it conceivable that Constantine allowed or even facilitated popular ideas about his mother to be influenced by conceptions or understandings of the Classical Helen?

Two posthumous associations provide a context which makes this feasible. The first is tenuous: the linking of Helena's name in northern Britain with holy wells, and the southern preference for churches of the Holy Cross. If older imbedded ideas about a supernatural figure (Elen, Alauna) were rooted in the same humus which gave rise to the archaic Helen, their reawakening with the arrival of devotion to Constantine's mother would have received some additional stimulus if understandings about Helena had previously been influenced by official manipulation of her public image in her lifetime.

Lowell Edmunds has recently pointed out that two springs of Helen are known from ancient Greece, but a couple of swallows are far from making a summer.<sup>14</sup> Stephanus of Byzantium (fl. sixth century CE) reported a spring called Helen on Chios 'in which Helen bathed'.<sup>15</sup> In the second century CE, Pausanias the geographer wrote that at Corinth, 'Right opposite Cenchreae is Helen's Bath (loutron). A large stream of salt water, at a temperature approaching warm, flows from a rock into the sea'.<sup>16</sup> These two springs have recently been related to the decoration of a lekythos, or oil jar, on which Eros pours water from a hydria on a naked Helen who crouches beside a tree. The scene includes Pothos and Eukleia and these two figures along with Eros point, in Edmunds' view, to an interpretation that the woman who takes 'Helen's bath' will be known as desirable and thus well-prepared for the passage to marriage.

'Holy wells' in England and Wales are frequently accompanied by trees, not necessarily significant in itself, but a necessary feature of 'rag-well' sites where votive items are hung on a tree or bush as the Antique Helen's masks and ribbons were hung on trees in Ancient Greece. Elsewhere the well was accompanied by medicinal herbs, like the helenion at 'St Tellin's' Well and Chapel at Newton Bromswold, mentioned in a previous paper.<sup>17</sup> The whole argument about 'holy wells' in Britain has been hung up on the issue of christianisation and its dating. Much better to acknowledge the presence of wells in Late Antique and early medieval landscapes, together with the sites of early churches, and to work from there.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Lowell Edmunds, 'Helen's divine origins', *Electronic Antiquity: Communicating the Classics* (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, on-line publication at <<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/EIAnt/>>), 10.2 (May, 2007), hereafter Edmunds, 'Divine origins', p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Stephanus of Byzantium, *Helenê* 265.5.

<sup>16</sup> Pausanias, 'Description of Greece', 2.2.3.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, 'Aspects of Helen'.

<sup>18</sup> As, for example, with cases of dedications in honour of St Michael at potential baptism sites, looking back at healing springs of the archangel in the Greek world and their Classical antecedent. See Jones, 'Saints in the Landscape', pp. 74-79; 'The cult of Michael the Archangel in Britain. A survey, with some thoughts on the significance of Michael's May feast and angelic roles in healing and baptism', in Pierre Bouet, Giorgio Otranto, and André Vauchez (eds), *Culto e santuari di san Michele nell'Europa medievale / Culte et sanctuaires*



Fig. 3: Coins from Gortyna on Crete which show what Lindsay described as the marriage of the tree goddess with a bird.

Сл. 3: Новчићи из Гортине на Криту који приказују оно што је Линдзеј описао као венчање три богиње са птицом.

Difficult though it is to demonstrate, a potential link between a Helen figure tied to nature and Constantine's mother Helena does exist, via trees and the wooden Holy Cross. In fact an explicit association of the Cross with the Tree of Life is a feature of the Anglo-Saxon poem *Elene*, discussed elsewhere in this volume by Deacon Ivica Čairović. Lindsay pointed to images of female cult figures and tree-related ritual from Ancient Greece. Did tree worship last longer in England than on the Continent, perhaps because of the Anglo-Saxons and their ritual pillars (*stapōls*), arboreal place-names like Holyoaks, Ashill ('hill of the ash tree'), and so on? Archaeologists like John Blair are now recognising churchyards which were preceded, probably in the Anglo-Saxon period, by graves grouped around trees.<sup>19</sup> Were some of these preserving the memory of tree-veneration? At Bibracte in Gaul, by way of contrast, St Martin cut down the holy oak there and perhaps his more muscular style of Christianisation and conversion prevailed.

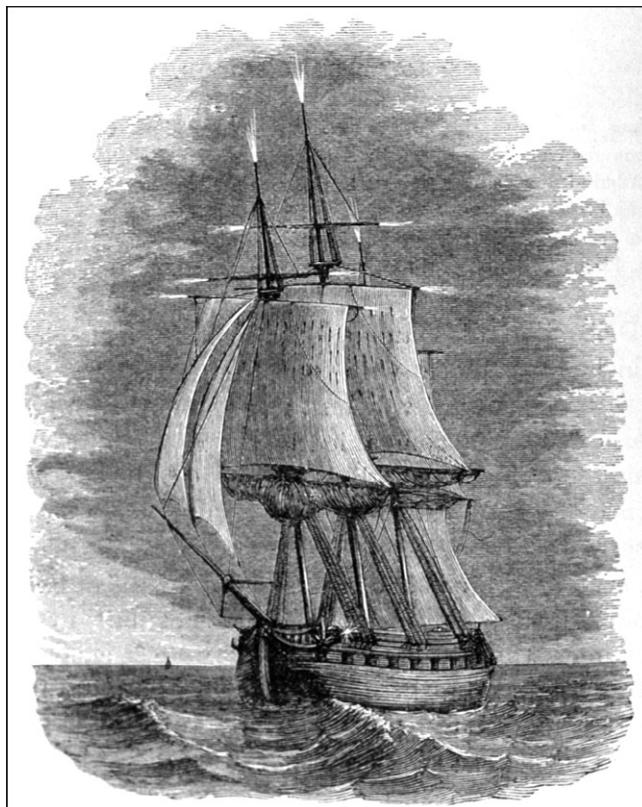
Lindsay compared the mythic figure he called 'Helen of the Tree' with coin designs from Gortyna on Crete which show what he described as the marriage of the tree goddess with a bird (Fig. 3) – a synchopated echo of the rape of Leda (herself Helen's mother in one version of the latter's legend) by Zeus in the shape of a swan. However, it is probable that the coins in fact show another of Zeus' victims, Europa, whose cult was centred at Gortyna. The city, also known as Gortys and located in the centre of the island near the river Lithaios, was the

*de saint Michel dans l'Europe médiévale. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di studi (Bari – Monte Sant'Angelo, 5-8 aprile 2006)*, Bibliotheca Michaelica 1 (Bari, Edipuglia, 2007), pp. 147-82; and 'Constantine's legacy: Tracing Byzantium in the history and culture of the British Isles: The case of the Archangel Michael', in Miša Rakocija (ed.), *Niš and Byzantium. Sixth Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June 2007. The Collection of Scientific Works VI* (Niš, University of Niš, 2008), pp. 327-46.

<sup>19</sup> John Blair, *The Anglo-Saxon Church* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005).

Fig. 4: St Elmo's Fire:  
Nineteenth-century  
engraving, source  
unknown.

Сл. 4: Вагра Светог  
Елиса: гравура из  
XIX века, непознат  
извор.



equal of Knossos in terms of wealth and importance. Indeed it was the first of the Cretan cities to issue coins, in whose design the myth of the abduction of Europa was revived. In honour of Europa, the city celebrated a festival called the Ellotia, the origins of which were apparently associated with the moon. The issues of Gortyna are diptych-like. On the obverse Europa (Lindsay's 'Helen of the Tree') is shown sitting in a tree, probably the willow. An eagle sometimes sits in the branches of the tree. The bull engraved on the reverse symbolises Zeus. According to the legend, Zeus transformed himself into an eagle. Whether or not Lindsay's identification can be sustained, it does show the ease with which iconographic associations might be made. The danger is in reaching over-hasty conclusions.

Nonetheless, Otto Skutsch, like Lindsay, noted that on the island of Rhodes Helen was commemorated (Skutsch wrote 'worshipped') as Ἐλεγχ Δευδρίτις, Helen Dendrites, so some link between Helen and trees did exist.<sup>20</sup> Martin West, again like Lindsay, drew attention to a spring festival at Sparta called the Heleneia, whose ritual was focused on a plane tree.<sup>21</sup> It celebrated Helen's supposed return from exile in Egypt. Theocritus, the second-century

<sup>20</sup> Otto Skutsch, 'Helen, her name and nature', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987), pp. 188-93, hereafter Skutsch, 'Helen', p. 189.

<sup>21</sup> M. L. West, 'Immortal Helen', inaugural lecture at Bedford College, London, 1975.

BCE creator of Greek bucolic poetry, told how maidens poured out oil at the root of the tree; wrote her name in its bark, ‘for him that passeth by to mark, “I am Helen’s; worship me”’; and sang her wedding nuptials, wearing blooms of hyacinth in their hair.<sup>22</sup>

*‘O Lady Night, the face of the rising day is passing bright;  
It is like the white spring of the year [i.e. white with flowers] when winter is no  
longer here;  
But so shines golden Helen among our gay company  
And the crops that upstand in a fat ploughland make it fair to see.’*

The problem, as Lowell Edmunds has recognised, is whether the tree in such cases was a prop for the actions rather than an actor itself.<sup>23</sup> If masks of Helen were hung on a tree, does that make Helen a ‘tree-goddess’? At what point does coincidence end and symbolism begin?

The second posthumous linkage between Helena and her mythic predecessor lies in the attribution, personification even, of the electrical discharge which became known in the western Mediterranean as St Elmo’s Fire, or corposant, ‘holy body’. This is the coronal discharge seen on ships’ spars during thunderstorms, which is caused by a slow discharge of electricity when the strength of the electric field is high (Fig. 4). Here we are firmer ground chronologically. From Greek literature of the centuries before the Common Era, and in the first century after Christ’s birth, the discharge is attributed not to St Elmo but to Helen, and to her brothers the Twins, the Dioskouri, Castor and Pollux (Greek, Polydeuces). Helen’s single light foretold lightning strikes; the Twins’ double light preceded the end of the storm. Circa 40 to 50CE, St Paul sailed in a ship called The Castor and Pollux (Acts 28:2), and in the same period Pliny (23-79CE) reported the phenomenon and their attributions to the twins and their sister. In the second book of his Natural History, Pliny described how the lights, which he called stars, settled not only upon the masts and other parts of ships, but also upon men’s heads:

‘Stars make their appearance both at land and sea. I have seen a light in that form on the spears of soldiers keeping watch by night upon the ramparts. They are seen also on the sail-yards, and other parts of ships, making an audible sound, and frequently changing their places.

‘Two of these lights forbode good weather and a prosperous voyage, and extinguish one that appears single and with a threatening aspect – this the sailors call Helen, but the two they call Castor and Pollux, and invoke them as gods [present writer’s emphasis].

‘These lights do sometimes, about evening, rest on men’s heads and are a great and good omen. But these are among the awful mysteries in nature.’

<sup>22</sup> *The Greek Bucolic Poets*, trs. J. M. Edmonds, Loeb Classical Library 28 (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1912), Theocritus, Idylls, No. 18, The Epithalamy of Helen.

<sup>23</sup> Edmunds, ‘Divine origins’, pp. 11-15.

The poetic line ‘O Sons of Zeus and Leda, most beautiful saviours’ is attributed to Terpandros of Lesbos, fl. c. 675 BCE, writing in the already old-fashioned Aeolic Greek spoken there and on the opposite mainlands of Aeolia (Asia Minor) and Thessaly (Greece) and renowned as the developer of the choral lyric.<sup>24</sup> However, the first known poet explicitly to link the Twins with St Elmo’s Fire was Alkaios (Latin, Alcaeus), c. 611 to c. 580 BCE, older contemporary and alleged lover of Sappho and like her and Terpandros a native of Lesbos. He describes the fire as leaping to the topmost point of the benched ships, then sitting far-seen on the forestays and bringing light in the darkness to the black ship.

*‘Come hither, ye mighty sons of Zeus  
And Leda; Olympus leave behind,  
Your flashing home. With gladsome mind,  
Castor and Pollux, appear to us.*

*‘Ye who traverse the whole expanse  
Of the earth and over the spacious seas  
On your swift-footed steeds, ye save with ease  
All men whom to meet chill Death did chance.*

*‘On the tops of the well-benched ships ye leap,  
Gleaming afar in the murky night.  
As ye land on its cables ye bring a light  
To the swift black ship which sails o’er the deep.’<sup>25</sup>*

Two millenia later, the attribution to Castor and Pollux was still remembered – as, for example, in Erasmus of Rotterdam’s colloquy ‘The Shipwreck’ (1523): ‘the worst sign in the world to sailors, if [the ball of light] be single; but a very good one, if double. The ancients believed these to be Castor and Pollux.’<sup>26</sup> At sea, however, a new attribution had emerged. Belief in the saving grace of the multiple fires surfaces in the log of Christopher Columbus’ second voyage, written up by the explorer’s son Fernando in October 1493:

‘During the night of Saturday, the thunder and rain being very violent, St Elmo appeared on the top-gallant mast with seven lighted tapers; that is to say, we saw those fires which the sailors believe to proceed from the body of the saint [(corpo santo)]. Immediately all on board began to sing litanies and thanksgivings, for the sailors hold it for certain, that as soon as St Elmo appears, the danger of the tempest is over.’<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Lindsay, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> ‘To Castor and Pollux’, translated by Walter Petersen, *The Lyric Songs of the Greeks: The extant fragments of Sappho, Alcaeus, Anacreon, and the minor Greek monodists* (Boston, Badger, 1918). See also *Greek Lyric I: Sappho and Alcaeus*, D. A. Campbell (ed.) (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>26</sup> Erasmus, ‘The Shipwreck’. *Colloquies of Erasmus*, trs. N. Bailey (London, Reeves and Turner, 1878).

<sup>27</sup> Log of the second voyage of Columbus, *Historia del Almirante*, in J. M. Cohen

The Spanish historian Antonio de Herrera (1559-1625) noted that Magellan's sailors had the same beliefs. He worked from state papers and other authentic sources, perhaps including ships' logs and eyewitness accounts, and described how in storms off the Guinea coast in 1519 the lights appeared which the sailors called 'Santelmo': sometimes one *candela*, sometimes two.<sup>28</sup>

'Elmo' is the vernacular hypocoristic form of the name of St Erasmus, supposedly bishop of Antioch (Syrian Antioch, on the Orontes), though his name does not appear in any official lists, and a victim of the Diocletian persecution. His subsequent death took place around 303CE and his remains were at Formiæ on the Italian coast between Rome and Naples by 590. Here a shortening of 'Erasmus' to 'Erm' has been followed by a change of 'r' to 'l'.

One late antique and two later recensions of his *Passio* (of the tenth and later eleventh centuries respectively) speak only of his torture, guidance by an angel to Formiæ, and subsequent reception into heaven. 'Erasmus thus has a form of the standard Campanian legend of a bishop (variant: holy virgin) coming from abroad, usually with angelic assistance, and often dying soon afterwards (variant: already dead en route).'<sup>29</sup> Texts which make him bishop of Formiæ and which combine this with the testimony of the Martyrology of pseudo-Jerome to make him actually martyred there are later and alien to this tradition, according to John Dillon. He adds that only later still, after Erasmus had become a patron of sailors, came the tale that his torture involved the winding out of his entrails with a windlass.

Since the eleventh century Erasmus has reposed at Gaeta, the port which was once the chief town of the early medieval duchy that included Formiæ. In the early and central Middle Ages his cult spread across southern Lazio and coastal Campania around Naples – areas of *Magna Graecia*, it should be noted – and it was from the ports there that he became a seaman's saint, often under the name form 'Elmo'. John Dillon has explained this as 'a typically Campanian pronunciation of his hypocorism "Ermo"'. There are chapels and other churches dedicated to him around much of the western Mediterranean, and by the end of the Middle Ages he was treated as one of the thaumaturgic saints known as the Fourteen Holy Helpers.

Otto Skutsch had a different explanation for the development of the name 'Elm': not in relation to St Elmo but by the 'n' of 'Helen' giving way to 'm' in the speech of Spanish seafarers.<sup>30</sup> (An appropriate example of the concomitant dropping of the aspirate 'H' and also the second vowel is the transition by which the name of the city 'Castrum Helenae' in the modern French department of Roussillon became 'Elne'.) With the voiced change came a change in identity, for the name 'Elm' came close to 'Elmo'.

(ed. and trs.), *The Four Voyages of Columbus* (London, Penguin Classics, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Antonio de Herrera, *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos en las islas y tierra firme del mar oceano* (4 vols, Madrid, 1601-15), 1, p. 132. A modern printing is edited by Angel Gonzalez Palencia (Madrid, 1947).

<sup>29</sup> For the information on Erasmus, I am indebted to John Dillon's 'Saints of the Day' notes for the Medieval-Religion Internet discussion list.

<sup>30</sup> Skutsch, 'Helen', p. 191.

Both the philological change Helen > Elm and the development of Elmo's martyrial legend and imagery may well have happened, therefore, rather late in the Middle Ages. Descriptions of the 'corposant' phenomenon as St Elmo's Fire are known only from the fifteenth century. Moreover, attribution of the lights to Erasmus was not universal in the Mediterranean. Similar philological change is traceable in the attribution to St Hermes (from Erasmus > Erm), and while Elmo was invoked particularly by Spanish and French sailors (sometimes, significantly, as Helmo), Italian sailors prayed for help from Peter or Nicholas, and elsewhere St Clair ('clear', 'bright') was called on.<sup>31</sup> English sailors called the fires 'comazants', a corruption of Corpo Santo; the French furole.<sup>32</sup>

The elephant in the room is the absence of a name for the treasuring single light. It seems likely that the phenomenon as a whole – first the single light, then the double or multiple – came to be given a single name, that of 'Elmo'. One piece of evidence has the potential for showing that Helen(a) had not gone away. That Elmo stood for Helen(a) is a reasonable inference from another French attribution of the fires, as Feu d'Helene or Feu S. Herme. Though no Ste accompanies Helene, the linguist Randle Cotgrave translated this in his great French-English dictionary of 1611 as 'St Helens or S.Hermes Fire; a Meteor that often appears at sea'.<sup>33</sup>

The contention that by the time she was addressed in the abbreviated form of her name, Elm, Helen was understood rather as Constantine's mother, is very strongly supported by the subsequent substitution of 'St' Elmo, though such a switch might be thought an unnecessary step in the process. Many cases of gender-change are known in hagiography, including apparent adaptations of the names of pre-Christian divinities: Demeter > (St) Demetrios, Apollo > (St) Apollonia, for example. In this case, sailors coming fresh from outside the Mediterranean need have had no prior knowledge leading them to question the identity of 'Elm' with the male 'Elmo'.

Elmo's legend told how lightning had struck during his torture, killing his tormentors while he himself survived, continuing to preach the gospel to them. At the same time, the German name of the corposant, Sankt-Elms-Feuer, has an alternative, Eliasfeuer, 'Elias' or Elijah's Fire', which indicates that the lights were associated with thunder and lightning. Appeals to Elijah against the effects of storms are well known, deriving from his calling down heavenly fire to consume the priests of Baal, and explaining the presence of chapels of St Elias or Ilia on eastern Mediterranean mountaintops. Elijah's connection with Mount Lebanon is mirrored in the legend of Erasmus, who is said to have fled there and to have been sustained by ravens, again like Elijah. (The episode is one of those shown on Gaeta cathedral's late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century pas-

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Dilworth, 'Parallel light shows in Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner', *The Explicator* 65:4 (Summer, 2007), pp. 212-5, and 'Symbolic spatial form in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the problem of god', *The Review of English Studies* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), footnote 18; *The Nautical Magazine* (1832), pp. 696ff.

<sup>32</sup> Oxford English Dictionary; Claudius Hollyband, *The Treasury of the French Tongue* (London, 1580), who also mentions invocation of St Hermes.

<sup>33</sup> Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, Adam Islip, 1611), s.v. Feu d'Helene, and Feu S.Hermes.

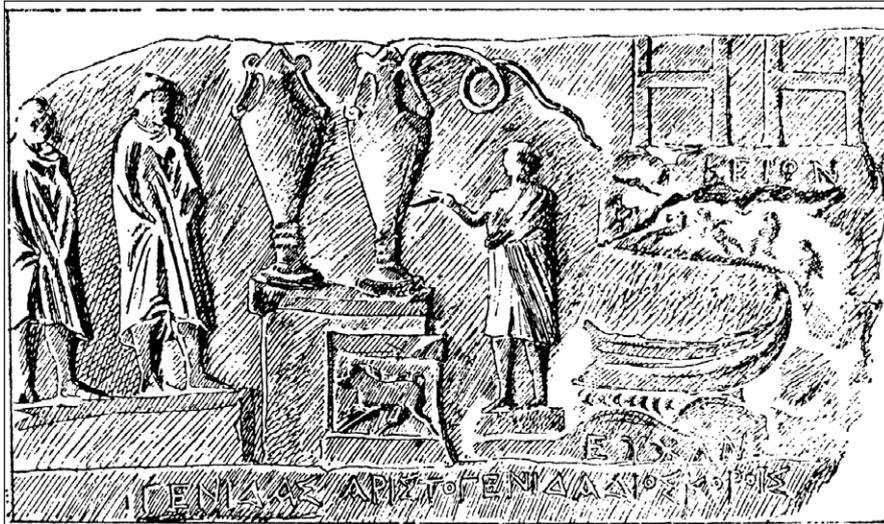


Fig. 5: Votive relief, 'Argenidas to the Dioscuri, a vow', after a safe return from a sea voyage: the Heavenly Twins as humans, amphoras, and dokana (Lindsay, 'Helen of Troy', illustration on p. 244).

Сл. 5: Заветни рељеф, 'Аргенида до Диоскурија, завет', након безбедног повратка са морске пловидбе: Небески Близанци као људска бића, амфоре и докана (Lindsay, 'Helen of Troy', illustration on p. 244).

chal candlestick.<sup>34</sup> The mother of Constantine is similarly invoked to mitigate thunderstorms and fire in German-speaking lands – a straight line of adaptation from Helen to Helena – leaving us to wonder whether and when a philological shift might have occurred in the East between 'Elena' and 'Ilia': quite possibly at about the same time that in the West 'Helena' was giving way to 'Elm'.

At first sight, therefore, it would seem that the Greek Helen must have continued in the mind of mariners, travellers, and writers (consciously or otherwise) as the figure to whom the 'corposant' was attributed through the end of Late Antiquity into the early medieval centuries. Against this needs to be set the use by the sixth century CE of a homophone, the Greek word for 'torch', 'ελένη', to refer to the 'corposant'. It is found in the writings of the historian Joannes Laurentius Lydus.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, we should be cautious in assuming that what sailors spoke and heard was 'torch' rather than 'Helen', particularly given the theme of light which lies behind Helen's name. The shift of their intercessory prayers to 'St' Elmo in any case argues for an intervening period when Helen was replaced by 'St' Helena. At the very least we can be confident that Helena was lauded in imperial propaganda as *Nobilissima Femina* and *Augusta* at a time when sailors, across the Mediterranean sea which drew the sinews of the empire together, recognised the supernatural interventions of a divine spirit (or mysteri-

<sup>34</sup> The candlestick's iconography has been brought to the attention of the Medieval-Religion Internet discussion list by John Dillon, to whom my thanks are due.

<sup>35</sup> Joannes Laurentius Lydus, *de Ostentis*, ed. C. Wachsmuth (Leipzig, 1897), cited by Liddell and Scott.

ous flame) whose name she bore. Moreover, that divinity, sister of the Dioscuri, could easily have become conflated in popular understandings with the Helen, wife of Menelaus, whose face in Marlowe's phrase 'launched a thousand ships and burnt the topless towers of Illium'.<sup>36</sup> That Helen of the electrical fire threatened destruction would have given seafarers good reason to pray to her as potential saviour. It would have been a short and easy step to substitute Christian Helena, mother of Constantine, for 'pagan' Helen, sister of the Dioscuri.

Thus far, the transition of identity from Helen(a) to Elmo is suggested as a function of speech and popular naming. However, in a previous paper the present writer pointed out a additional visual clue. This lies in the intriguing similarity in shape between the Twins' symbol of the Dokana, a structure of two upright beams joined by two transverse beams (δοκος, 'beam'), and that of the windlass, martyrial attribute of St Erasmus, even though it appears in devotional iconography only late in the Middle Ages.<sup>37</sup> The Passio of Erasmus is found only in the second and subsequent printed editions in English of the Golden Legend of James of Voragine (first published circa 1275; first English edition published in 1483), and the winding of his guts occurs as the last in a long list of torments that fail to kill the saint.<sup>38</sup>

The Dokana, appearing on a series of reliefs showing the Dioscuri's symbols and cult paraphernalia (Fig. 5),<sup>39</sup> has been interpreted as representing the wooden frame of a house built of crude bricks. They were evidently house gods at Sparta, where the Twins' cult was especially popular. They were symbolised by amphorae on certain reliefs there and from Sparta's colony Tarentum, and on Spartan coins. A snake approaches them or is coiling around them or the beams of the Dokana. That the Dioscuri were house gods is proved by their cult, in the view of Martin Nilsson: ritual meals (theoxenia) were set out and a couch prepared for them in the house. 'This is what Euphorion did; Phormion was punished because he would not open the chamber of his house to them.<sup>40</sup> Theron of Agrigentum and Iason of Pherae prepared meals in honour of the Dioscuri, and Bacchylides in a poem invites them to a meal from which wine and songs will not be missing. The Athenians spread the table in the prytaneum for them with a frugal, old-fashioned meal of cheese, cakes, olives, and leeks. Some vase paintings and reliefs show the Dioscuri coming to the meal. [In one scene] they are riding, in accordance with the common conception. In Sparta they appear as snakes. The close affinity of Zeus Ktesios and the sons of Zeus is apparent.'<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*, Harvard Classics 19, pt. 2 (New York, P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), Scene 13, Lines 88-89.

<sup>37</sup> Jones, 'Aspects of Helen'.

<sup>38</sup> *The Golden Legend, or Lives of the Saints, Compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, Englished by William Caxton* (1st edn, London, 1483; new edn, ed. F. S. Ellis, London, Temple Classics, 1900), 7, Appendix.

<sup>39</sup> The relief in Fig. 5 is discussed by E. di Filippo Balestrazzi, 'Il rilievo di Argenidas e il culto dei Dioscuri ad Este', in *Nuovi Studi Maffeiiani* (Congress, Verona, 1983), 1985, pp. 33-51.

<sup>40</sup> Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Popular Religion* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> Nilsson, see previous footnote.



Fig. 6: Helen personified by peace-bearing Securitas: Gold double-solidus, Ticinium, 325 CE. Source: Kenneth Holum, *Theodosian Emperors: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989), No. 3.

Сл. 6: Јелена персонификована Секуритасом који доноси мир: дупли златни солидус, Тициније, 325 CE. Извор: Kenneth Holum, *Theodosian Emperors: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989), No. 3..

An alternative explanation for the Dokana by Marian Wenzel was that it symbolised the fire-making arrangement of a rotating stick supported by two uprights.<sup>42</sup> She saw this as a clear precursor of the iconography of Helen and Constantine with the Cross.

Further potential for associating Constantine's mother with the mysterious fire lies in another symbolic interface. As well as resembling the windlass, the Dokana shares its shape with the yard or cross-piece of a sailing boat's mainmast together with the endmost shrouds which attach the yard to the hull. The mast and yard are often compared to the shaft and cross-piece of the Cross, of course, a link to Helena, its asserted rediscoverer, and the boat as a whole (Latin, *navis*) symbolises the Church, giving its name to the nave, the central part of the church building. Moreover, while in pre-Christian lore the appearance of the twin lights of Castor and Pollux, house gods in ancient Greece, signalled safety for an endangered ship's company, its 'family', in Christian metaphor the ship represents both the Ark of salvation and the Ark of the Covenant.

The threat posed by Helen's single light might remind educated individuals in the Classical world, and others who had happened to find out, that while she and her brothers were children of Leda the Swan in one tale, in another they were children of Nemesis, the divine spirit of retribution towards those who succumb to hubris. Perhaps there was wider appreciation of this connection than we can tell at this remove. The cult of the Emperor as a god was well established by the time of Constantine's acclamation. That is why Constantine

<sup>42</sup> Marian Wenzel, 'Some reliefs outside the Vjetrenica cave at Zavala', *Starinar* 12, pp. 21-34; 'Some notes on the iconography of St Helen', *Actes du XIIIe Congress International d'etudes Byzantines 1961* (Belgrade), pp. 415-21; 'The Dioskuri in the Balkans', *Slavic Review* 26 (1967), pp. 363-81.



Fig. 7: Helena, N[obilissima] F[emina], accompanied by a single star. Bronze billon centenionalis, AE3, Thessalonica, 318 CE. William Boyne, *Manual of Roman Coins From The Earliest Period To The Extinction Of The Empire* (London, W. H. Johnston, 1865), Pl. XVIII, No. 10.

Сл. 7: Јелена, N[obilissima] F[emina], праћена једном звездом. Бронзани billon centenionalis, AE3, Thessalonica, 318 CE. William Boyne, *Manual of Roman Coins From The Earliest Period To The Extinction Of The Empire* (London, W. H. Johnston, 1865), Pl. XVIII, No. 10..

was able to get away with displaying himself as Apollo. Customarily, coins portrayed the head of the Emperor or member of the royal family on one side and on the other some personalized virtue with which he or they were associated. Most such reverse images were meant to present an aspect of the issuer, in the view of Carlos Noreña.<sup>43</sup> This did not change after Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the state religion. In Helena's case the virtues were the security and peace of the state and the piety of her imperial offspring (Fig. 6). If a connection was made in the beholder's mind between Helena mother of Constantine and Helen of Greek myth, and furthermore between Helen's brothers and Nemesis, this could go some way to explain the use of the Nails of the Passion, supposedly recovered by Helena together with the Cross, in the bridle of Constantine's horse. Antonia Harbus has drawn attention to the bridle as an attribute of Nemesis which stood for the restraint which must be observed by every conscientious ruler as a guard against hubris.<sup>44</sup>

One coin of Helena has on the reverse a single, eight-pointed star encircled in a wreath (Fig. 7). Could a mental connection have been made with the star which represented Helen in depictions of the Dioscuri – as, for example, when the Aiginetans after a sea-battle dedicated at Delphi three stars atop a mast, representing Helen and her brothers?<sup>45</sup> (Compare the single star with eight

<sup>43</sup> Carlos F. Noreña, 'The Communication of the Emperor's Virtues', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 91 (2001), pp. 146-68, at p. 154.

<sup>44</sup> Antonia Harbus, Leeds International Medieval Congress, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Lindsay, 'Helen', p. 211.



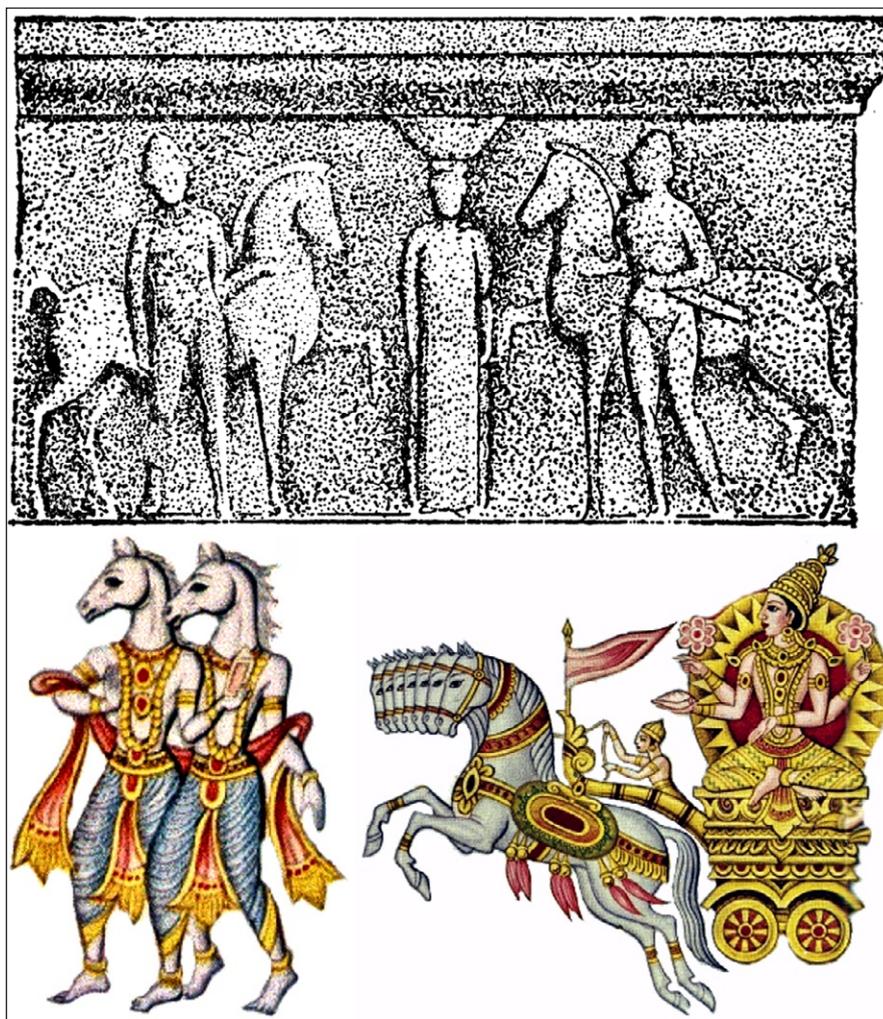
Fig. 8: Nemesis (holding her bridle), and the Dioskuri dressed as travellers. The star may represent Helen as the single, threatening light of the 'corposant'. Source: Antiken-sammlungen, Munich, 3297. Modern drawing from Apulian painted vase of circa 330-310 BCE.

Сл. 8: Немезис (како држи своју узду), и Диоскури, обучени као путници. Звезда можда представља Јелену као неудату, која прети да угрози светлост 'ватре Св. Елиса'. Извор: Antiken-sammlungen, Munich, 3297. Modern drawing from Apulian painted vase of circa 330-310 BCE..

main points shown with Nemesis and the Dioskuri in Fig. 8.) There is the well-known philological link between Helen's name and that of the archaic moon deity Selene, eventually replaced by Artemis. Lindsay dismissed associations of Helen with Selene in Late Antiquity as belonging 'to the spiritualizing trend [notable] in late art and literature' and deriving in large measure from her connection with the Twins. Nevertheless, Helen is one of the personifications of light, and her legendary walk with a torch, 'ελένη, on Troy's ramparts has been noted by both Lindsay and Skutsch and also points to the theme of light in her personal name.

This aspect of Helen's name and representation may have influenced the promotion by the religious entrepreneur Simon Magus of his deified companion named Helena (like the empress, a woman brought from social obscurity to the public stage). The episode was reported in the New Testament Acts of the Apostles, an account which can not be assigned to Late Antiquity.

Indeed, the very 'spiritualizing trend' which Lindsay treated askance in fact provides a sound context for the hypothesis that Helena's reputation may



Figs. 9, 10, 11: Helen pictured with the Dioskuri on a fraternity cult stele from their Spartan shrine site; the *Aśvini* of Hindu mythology; and their wife *Suryā* in her sun chariot (modern representations).

Слике 9, 10, 11: Јелен представљена са Диоскуријем на стели култа братства из њиховог спартанског светилишта: Асвини (близанци, божанства светлости) из хинду митологије; и њихова супруга Сирија у сунчаним кочијама (модеран приказ).

somehow have drawn on the popularity of her Greek mythic namesake. Some exploration of names may assist. *Selene's* may have some relationship with Greek *selas*, 'light', and still today *σεληνη* means 'moon'; *Selene* the Moon was sister of the Sun, *Helios*. This reminds us that *Helen's* best-known herb is *helenion* or *inula Helenium* – whose radial yellow petals resemble the rays of the sun, though *Pliny the Elder* (in the first century CE), remarked that '*Helenium*

[a drug produced from the flower] was born, it's said, from Helen's tears'.<sup>46</sup> (To complicate matters, in Pliny's time Helenium was produced from helenion flowers on the Aegean island Helene. The island's name is derived from the Greek word ἑλεῖν, 'to seize, overpower with eros or death, destroy'.<sup>47</sup>) Helios, whose name shares a common root with his Roman counterpart Sol (Sol Invictus), was in time supplanted by the deity of light, Apollo. Here, of course, we are presented with the divinities most clearly appealed to in Constantine's political acts of self-promotion.

There is something in the dual image and veneration of Constantine and Helena, son and mother, which recalls not only other sons and their mothers (Cyriacus and Julitta, for example, or David and Non, following Jesus and Mary, Isis and Osiris) but brothers and sisters. We need not digress to look closely at incestuous Egyptian and Herodian marriage practice, but a glance in the direction of Helios and Selene may be wholly warranted.

One further aspect of Helen comes to attention here. This is the link drawn long ago between the Classical Helen, whose mythical supernatural form went to Egypt in Winter and returned to Greece for Summer, like the Sun, and the Hindu divinity Suryâ, daughter of the Sun and his wife Saranyu (Figs. 9-11). Wendy Doniger has recently explored the shape-shifting practiced alike by the Classical Helen and Sita, bride of Rama, and suggests that both Helen, the adulteress, and Sita, the chaste wife, have their model in Saranyu who is sexually ambivalent. So there is renewed interest in this probable Indo-European topos.<sup>48</sup> As the Greek Helen has two brothers, Suryâ has two husbands, the Ásvins, saviours who guarantee the traveller's or warrior's safe return, on land or sea<sup>49</sup> – counterparts in this and in other ways of the Dioscuri. It remains to note that Helen as a celestial sky-figure could well have survived into the fourth century alongside her electrical fire. In that case, it would give added point to Constantine's emphasis on Sol Invictus and his own deliberate masquerade as the sun-god Apollo. A man bold enough to present himself as the divine source of light would have been well capable of presenting his mother as the Moon. From there the step is considerably shortened to the firewalkers of Thrace who dance annually with icons of Constantine and Helen, discussed in an earlier paper in this series, and more recently in a presentation by conference colleagues from Bulgaria.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Dormandy, *The Worst of Evils: The Fight against Pain* (Yale, Yale University Press, 2006), p. 10. The island's name comes from

<sup>47</sup> Heather Sebo, 'Gary S. Meltzer, *Euripides and the Poetics of Nostalgia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. 278., Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2007:8:63, online at <<http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2007/2007-08-63.html>>, accessed April 4, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference...Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion (1999, Oxford, repr. Oxford University Paperbacks, 2002).

<sup>49</sup> Skutsch, 'Helen', p. 189.

Грејем Џоунс

МОЋ ЈЕЛЕНИНОГ ИМЕНА:  
НАСЛЕЂЕ И ЗАОСТАВШТИНА, МИТ И СТВАРНОСТ

Константинова мајка Јелена носила је име које је одјекивало историјом, традицијом, митом и магијом. Никада нећемо сасвим сазнати у којој мери је одјек њеног имена увећао њен положај и утицај, или за њеног живота или постхумно – али је важно поставити основе за истраживање ове теме, узевши у обзир да су она и њен супруг изменили ток европске историје. Овај сажет рад предлаже неке прве кораке у процесу поновног схватања, у најмању руку, симболике Јелениног имена, јер је ово могло да утиче на њену репутацију и, вероватно, на њено поступање у јавности. Суштинске контекстуалне поставке укључују прозографију (биографија историјских личности) света Грчке и Рима, као и културолошке алузије на њена историјска, митолошка и натприродна имена.

