

SAINT HELEN.

By EDWARD PEACOCK, F.S.A.

From a very early period Saint Helen has been regarded as a British Princess. Our antiquaries of the older school, Protestant and Catholic alike, seem to have entertained no doubts on the matter. Recent researches have, however, rendered it extremely improbable; though, we believe, there are yet some few men (whose learning is by no means to be lightly spoken of) who still hold that the legends connecting the mother of Constantine the Great with Colchester, are not mere dreams, but have a solid foundation in fact.¹

Mr. Cutts, the latest historian of Colchester, has carefully investigated this legend. He seems not to entertain a doubt that St. Helen was born at Naissus, an important town of upper Moesia.² It was in those days a place of historical importance, for almost within sight of its walls Claudius the Second gained a memorable victory over the Goths in the year 269; but it was destroyed by the Huns under Attila. It seems, nevertheless, soon to have arisen from its ashes and now bears the name of Nissa. It is 130 miles south east of Belgrade. The warm baths in the neighbourhood have given Nissa some celebrity, but the chief claim that it has on our attention is that here Helena gave birth to Constantine the Great. Because her son first saw the light here, it by no means follows that Helen herself was a native of the place also. Another opinion is that Helen was a native of Bythinia. Her parents, it is believed, were in a humble rank of life, dwelling at Drepanum, a place which her son, when the empire became his, named Helenopolis in her honour.

It has been asserted by more than one writer, ignorant of Roman Law and Roman morals, that

¹ Henry, of Huntingdon (Rolls Series) pp. liv. 29. Monast. Anglic iv. 607.

² Historic Towns, *Colchester*, p. 51.

the connection between Constantius Chlorus and Helena was an illicit one. This can be proved to be a mistake. Gibbon (who was certainly influenced by no prejudices in favour of those whom the Church regards as holy) says, "we may defend the legality of her marriage against those who have represented her as the concubine of Constantius."¹ Eutropius, who must have known the truth, says, "ex obscuriori matrimonio ejus filius."² The truth, (when divested of the clouds with which partizan historians have hidden it), is very simple. In the Roman world there were several kinds of marriage, each one of them securing an honourable position for the wife, but they differed in social dignity, and in their effects with regard to property. The misunderstanding this has led to many mistakes with regard to the early Christian History of Spain and other countries.

When Constantius was raised to the rank of Caesar by Diocletian, 292, he was compelled to repudiate Helena, and to make a great political alliance by wedding Theodora, the step-daughter of Maximianus Herculius. A divorce from Helena in due legal form was therefore procured. As Professor Ramsay has pertinently remarked, "the necessity of such a divorce is in itself a sufficient proof that the existing marriage was regarded as regular and legal."³

Constantine was a man of very mixed character. His affection for his mother seems to have been one of his deepest and most enduring sentiments. When he became Emperor, he did all he could to compensate her for his father's neglect and cruelty. She was, till the day of her death, treated with every distinction which the ruler of the civilized world had at his command. The title of Augusta was bestowed upon her, coins were struck in her honour, and more than one place (beside the Bythlinian town we have before mentioned) was named after her.

Whatever may have been the nationality of Helena, it is certain that, in early days, she was not a christian. We do not suppose that Helen was ever a heathen, if that word be used to imply a sincere believer in any one of the

¹ *Decline and Fall of Rome*, Ed. 1862, vol. ii., p. 109.

² X. 2.

³ W. Smith's *Dict. of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*. Sub voce Helena.

innumerable cults which were then slowly perishing throughout the whole area of the Roman world, but it seems certain that Helena first received instruction in the teachings of the Gospel from her son. That after her conversion to Christianity, she was holy and devout, is beyond question; thus much may be gathered from all the historians of her own, and the immediately succeeding times.¹ But Helen's name, like that of by far the greater number of the blessed of all ages, would have been forgotten—recorded, as Sir Thomas Browne has said, “in the register of God, not in the record of man,”² had she not undertaken a search at Jerusalem for the memorials of our Lord's Passion. We cannot enter at present into an account of these investigations and the events by which they were followed. The “Invention of the Holy Cross,” as it has been called, and the building of the churches of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, and the church of the Nativity at Bethlehem have impressed the memory of Helen deeply on the minds of all those to whom the history of the earlier days of the Kingdom of God upon earth is attractive. The nave of the church at Bethlehem yet remains much as Helen saw it. It is the only existing example of the great Constantinean churches which has not suffered hopeless mutilation.³

Colchester is not the only place in England which has been held to have given birth to this holy princess. York has also put in its claims, which have been supported by not a little misemployed learning, and Trèves has entered the lists as a claimant for the honour of her nativity. We do not know that Scotland has ever asserted that St. Helen was a native of her territory, but she was honoured in the middle ages in this kingdom. Several of the old Scottish churches were dedicated to her, and there is a St. Helen's Well at Maybole, and another at Melrose. We have heard of fifteen English springs named after Saint Helen. It may not be uninteresting to give a list of them. Persevering research would most probably discover many others. Those of which we have notes are at—

¹ See Eusebius, *Vita Const.* III., 42, Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecll. Hist.* I. 17. Sozomer, *Ecll. Hist.* ii., 1 and 2.

² *Urn Burial*, chap. v.

³ A little sketch of it may be seen in

Cutts's *Constantine The Great*, p. 353, and we are informed that it is duly illustrated in Court de Vogue's *Les Eglises de la Terre Sainte*.

Barnby-on-the-Marsh, Yorkshire.
 Brindle, Lancashire.
 Brindley, Lancashire.
 Cornhill, Northumberland.
 Derby.
 Eshton, Yorkshire
 Fernhill, Yorkshire.
 Gargrave, Yorkshire.
 Louth, Lincolnshire.
 Newton Kyme, Yorkshire.
 Rushton Spencer, Staffordshire.
 Sefton, Lancashire.
 Staniland, Yorkshire.
 Thorparch, Yorkshire.
 Wrawby, Lincolnshire.

We do not know of any wells named after St. Helen in Wales, and the dedications of the old churches of that principality have not as yet been arranged in a satisfactory manner, but she was well known and highly honoured there in former times. Her name often occurs in the Welsh legends, but early history is so much distorted in them that if we did not know of her from more authentic sources we might well believe Helen to have been a mere creation of the fervid Keltic imagination. There she appears as the wife of Maximus the Usurper. She is represented in this phase as the daughter of King Eudav of Caernarvon. She now became Helen Luyddawc, or Helen of the Mighty Host, and gave her name to the Sarn Helen, or Roman Road in North Wales. The men of Britain would not have made these great roads for any save her alone.¹

There are many churches dedicated to the honour of St. Helen in England, but they are very irregularly distributed. None seems to occur in Cumberland, Westmorland, or Essex. The rest of the English shires for which we have at present authentic information give the following results :—

Devonshire. ²	3
Durham.	2
Kent.	1
Lincolnshire. ³	28
Northumberland.	3
Nottinghamshire.	15
Yorkshire. ⁴	32

¹ Charles Elton, *Origins of English History*, 334, quoting Lady C. Guest's *Mabinogion*, 449, 456. ³ *Archæological Journal*, vol. xxxviii, p. 375.

² J. Brooking Rowe, *Topography of* *Archæological Rev.* ii, 276. ⁴ See table of Church Dedications in *Dev on*, 68.

It would, therefore, appear that in the three adjoining counties of York, Nottingham, and Lincoln the devotion to St. Helen was much greater than in any other parts of the island of which we have accurate knowledge.

Although there seem to be no church dedications to St. Helen in Essex, there was a chapel in her honour at Colchester, an admirable account of which has been written by Mr. J. H. Round. It was secularized in the reign of Henry VIII., but has now once more been devoted to ecclesiastical uses. The seal of the Mayor of Colchester represents St. Helen holding the cross on which our Blessed Lord suffered, in her left hand, and a casket in her right.¹ Church dedications to St. Helen seem to be commoner in England than elsewhere, but they are not unknown in continental lands. There are two churches at Mount Athos dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helen.²

Many representations of St. Helen occur in old service-books, and, we believe, that there are figures of her in stained glass yet remaining, but of these we have at present no accurate accounts. The Norman sculptured cross at Kelloe, Durham, has upon it a representation of St. Helen which is probably by far the oldest in existence in this country. In the upper part the Saint is shewn asleep, an angel revealing to her where the cross is to be found; below we have other scenes from the legendary history of the cross.³

At Beverley one of the pre-reformation Guilds seems to have been under St. Helen's patronage. On her feast a boy clad like a queen to represent St. Helen walked in a procession, accompanied by an old man bearing the cross and another carrying a spade, symbolizing the workmen who found it. These performers headed a long procession of the brethren and sisters of the Guild, who went with much music to worship in the Church of the Friars Minors.⁴

The tomb of St. Helen is near Rome, beyond the Porta Maggiore. A porphyry sarcophagus of the Empress was found here, and is now among the countless treasures of the Vatican.⁵

¹ *Antiquary*, xxiii., p. 51.

² Riley, *Athos* 260, 375.

³ An account of this cross by Rev. J. T. Fowler, F.S.A., occurs in *Archaeologia*, lii., 73,

⁴ Ormsby, *Dioc. Histories*, York, p. 208.

⁵ R. R. Madden *Shrines and Sepulchres* ii, 484, Quoting *Rome in the Nineteenth Cent.* ii, 204; c.f. Butler, *Lives of the Saints*, Aug. 18.

Saint Helen is said to have brought the bodies of the three Wise Men from the far east to Constantinople, from whence, in a latter time, they were transferred to Cologne.¹ No catalogue of the pictures of St. Helen has hitherto been compiled. Such a work would be of much service to archæologists. There is a painting of her in the Church of St. Roche at Venice, and another in the Manfrini gallery in the same city, where St. Peter and St. Helen are represented in attendance on our Blessed Lady.²

As well as church dedications in honour of St. Helen, we meet with several separate altars at which she was invoked. Of these there is at present no list. There was probably a St. Helen's altar in the church of Horncastle, co. Lincoln, for in a will of the year 1536 we find a bequest to St. Helen's light.³ Saint Helen's Lane, Walkerley, near Sheffield, seems to point to a chapel in her honour having existed at one time in that neighbourhood.⁴ In some parts of England her feast-day appears to have been kept with special honour, for in the Churchwardens Accounts of Leverton, near Boston, there is a charge for "reed wyne to syng wyth agaynes saynt Elyne daye"⁵ The feast day of St. Helen is on the 18th August, but the festival of "The Invention of the Cross," May 3rd, was often called St. Helen's day in Spring. It was long kept in memory among rural people as a term for paying rents, and a proper time for turning stock on commons, cleansing ditches, and repairing banks. In the Court Rolls of the Manor of Scotter, a village in Lincolnshire, once a possession of the great Benedictine Abbey of Peterborough, the following order occurs in the year 1557:—"Every one dwelling in ye Coote houses or Suswarth shall both ring and yock ther swynne⁶ before Seynt Ellen daye."⁷

James Pilkington, one of the Elizabethan revisers of the Book of Common Prayer, Bishop of Durham 1561-1576,

¹ Horstmann, *The Kings of Cologne*, (E.E.T.S.), xix.

² Webb, *Continental Ecclesiology* 292, 293.

³ Maddison, *Lincoln Wills*, 16; *The Antiquary*, xxiii, 248.

⁴ Addy, *Sheffield Glossary* (E.D.S.) 197.

⁵ *Archæologia*, xii, 348.

⁶ A pig-yock is, or perhaps we ought

to say was, a wooden yoke or collar with projecting bars, put around the necks of pigs to hinder them from forcing their way through hedges. "What is the use of that wooden yoke on your neck?" "To keep us from breaking through our drivers fences." Porson.—*Catechism for the Swinish Multitude*.

⁷ *Archæologia*, xlv, 379.

speaks of St. Helen's day, evidently meaning May 3rd, as a term at which some persons paid their rents, and adds that it was, along with Michaelmas, Martinmas, and the Feast of the Annunciation of Our Lady regarded by some persons as the beginning of the year.¹

Saint Helen was the patroness of cloth-dyers in certain parts of Germany,² and in Virginia potatoes acquired the name of Saint Helen's paternosters.³

In our own island and elsewhere folk-lore has gathered around Saint Helen's name. On her festival in Cleveland branches of the rowan-tree were gathered for the sake of warding off enchantments,⁴ and in France the following superstitious rite was observed for discovering thefts. A crystal glass was taken, on which the sign of the cross was made, and under it was written, "Sancta Helena." The glass was then given to a child of ten years of age, who was chaste and born in lawful wedlock; behind the child some one said, kneeling, "Deprecor te Domina sancta Helena mater Regis Constantini." It was then believed that the child would see an angel in the glass, who, on being asked, would tell the name of the thief.⁵

Saint Helen was, and we believe still is, held in great honour by the Bretons. Half a century ago it was the custom for the peasants to act a mystery play, in which she appeared as the chief character. It was in the native tongue of the people, and very long, the performance lasting a week.⁶ We cannot ascertain that this curious drama has ever been printed.

The above notes are but a very slight sketch. The writer trusts that someone who has the means and leisure may be induced to treat this interesting subject in a more worthy manner.

¹ *Works* (Parker Soc.) p. 15.

² G. L. Von Maurer, *Geschichte der Stadteverfassung*, ii, 403.

³ *Dublin Review*, Jan, 1890, 77.

⁴ Atkinson's *Cleveland Glossary*, 417.

⁵ Jean-Baptist Thiers, *Traité Des Superstitions*, Avignon 1777, vol. i, p. 419.

⁶ T. A. Trollope, *A Summer in Brittany*, ii, 1-4.