

***The Revival of Saint Helena's Cult in the Middle Ages: An Examination of Her Relics***  
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Flavia Julia Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, was a Christian saint from the early fourth century. She gained prominence within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions due to her purported role in the discovery of the True Cross (or *inventio crucis*). As an imperial figure and mother of the first Christian emperor, she oversaw elements of the Christianization of the empire, particularly the construction of churches and the dissemination of the Christian faith through pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup> Despite her prominent role in Constantine's Christianizing efforts and the several accounts that credited her with the discovery of the True Cross, Helena was not highly venerated during her lifetime or in the centuries following her death. Her significance to the cult of the True Cross augmented her designation as a saint; however, a cult dedicated solely to her piety and works did not emerge until the Medieval period. From the late sixth century to the end of the Middle Ages, the expansion of Helena's cult is primarily evidenced by the increased veneration of her corporeal relics, contact relics, and relics that depicted her likeness.

Helena's humble familial origins and later divorce from Constantine's father, the Praetorian Prefect and Emperor Constantius, initially relegated her to historical obscurity. However, Constantine's ascension to emperorship in 306 and his triumph over Licinius in 324 restored her to the foreground. Upon his acclamation, Constantine granted Helena the title *Augusta*, and gold coins were struck in her name at every imperial mint.<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of her life, Helena attended a pilgrimage through the Eastern provinces to Roman Palestine. The letters of Saint Paulinus of Nola to Sulpicius Severus indicate that the "revered queen" was given

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding the True Cross* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1992), 55.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Hillner, *Helena Augusta: Mother of the Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 125.

complete access to the imperial treasury to facilitate her pilgrimage, the discovery of relics, and the establishment of churches.<sup>3</sup> The most contemporary account of her pilgrimage is found in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine*, a panegyric produced roughly a decade after the Empress' death. Throughout her pilgrimage to the Levant, Helena performed several acts of piety, such as giving alms to the poor and liberating the oppressed. The official occasion for her pilgrimage was the founding of several churches throughout the Holy Land. Eusebius attributes Helena with the establishment of both the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church on the Mount of Olives.<sup>4</sup> Writing approximately seventy years after Eusebius, Sulpicius Severus also attributes the construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to Helena Augusta.<sup>5</sup> It is during the initial excavations of the latter church that later accounts claim she uncovered the True Cross and its implements.

During the late fourth and early fifth centuries, church historians began to credit Helena with the discovery of the True Cross. E. Gordon Whatley asserts that the lack of clarity regarding the disposal of the cross, nails, and titulus following Jesus' burial and resurrection "stimulated rather than impeded interest" in their ultimate locations and rediscovery.<sup>6</sup> The *Catechetical Lectures* of Cyril of Jerusalem, written in the mid to late fourth century, make mention of the discovery of three crosses on Golgotha and the dispersal of these relics such that the world was "filled with pieces of the wood of the Cross."<sup>7</sup> Although this early account does not attribute the discovery to a specific person, a letter from Cyril to Constantius II written in 351 states that "in the days of your imperial father, Constantine . . . the saving wood of the Cross was found in

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<sup>3</sup> Paulinus of Nola, "Letter 31," in *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, 2 vols., ed. P. G. Walsh (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1967), 2: 129-30.

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius of Caesaria, *Life of Constantine*, 3.43.

<sup>5</sup> Sulpicius Severus, *Sacred History*, 2.33.

<sup>6</sup> E. Gordon Whatley, "Constantine the Great, the Empress Helena, and the Relics of the Holy Cross," in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Routledge, 2001), 77.

<sup>7</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.10.

Jerusalem.”<sup>8</sup> In 395, approximately sixty-five years following Helena’s death, Saint Ambrose of Milan delivered a funerary oration at the death of Theodosius I during which he credited the Empress with the *inventio crucis*.<sup>9</sup> This version appears to be based on an earlier written account by the Bishop of Caesarea, Gelasius. Although the only extant parts of Gelasius’ work are fragmentary, it appears that the histories of Rufinus of Aquileia, Sozomen, Theodoret, and others are based largely on Gelasius’ *Church History*.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the lapse in time between these Church historians’ accounts and Helena’s death in c. 330 has led modern historians to regard them as historical fiction. However, the historicity of the events of Helena’s life and the extent of her involvement in the construction of churches in the East are not at issue in this paper. The “Helena Legend” that developed out of the accounts of Gelasius and Ambrose was regarded by Christians of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages as undisputed truth, and it is the increased veneration which her cult experienced during these periods that will be examined.

The genre of relics made up of pieces of the True Cross, titulus, and Holy Nails each act as substitutes for the resurrected physical remains of Christ. Thus, in both late antique and modern literature they are largely regarded as relics of Christ alone. However, Helena’s role in the *inventio*, marked by her physical unearthing of the True Cross, imbued the Cross, titulus, and Nails with a dual status as contact relics of Saint Helena. This association was definitively made by Medieval Christians, and it is evidenced foremost by the plethora of engravings, paintings, and illustrations of Helena that depict her holding the True Cross. It is further demonstrated by the female saints of the Early Medieval period who sought fragments of the Cross, and whose hagiographers likened their pursuits to Helena’s pilgrimage. These hagiographers utilized Helena as a quintessential

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<sup>8</sup> Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 82.

<sup>9</sup> Ambrose of Milan, *De Obitu Theodosii*, 40-8.

<sup>10</sup> Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 98.

“holy exemplar” for the women they eulogized. Peter Brown asserts in his article on saints as exemplars that late antique and Early Medieval Christians continued the classicizing method of emulation by drawing upon specific aspects of a particular exemplar.<sup>11</sup> While Brown’s analysis is applied predominantly to the early ascetics of the pre-Christian Mediterranean, the unique dichotomy of Helena’s secular and religious authority provided a sovereign female exemplar to several Medieval women, thus creating a “model of medieval queenship.”<sup>12</sup> The accounts of the following women demonstrate continuity between the establishment of Helena’s sainthood in the early fifth century and her veneration in subsequent centuries; however, it does not yet appear that a cult exclusive to Helena was definitively existent.

The late sixth-century Empress Sophia, the niece of Theodora and Justinian I and the wife of Justin II, was praised by Venantius Fortunatus in his work *Carmina* for her generosity in donating a piece of the Cross to a Frankish Benedictine abbey in 567.<sup>13</sup> Fortunatus compared her distribution of relics of the True Cross to the diaspora of such relics under the authority of Helena Augusta two centuries prior. Leslie Brubaker and Helen Tobler draw further parallels between Sophia and Helena based on their respective coinages. They argue that the coins minted during Sophia’s reign were of a style termed “empress coins” which began under the authority of Constantine. Sophia’s coins illustrate a “new departure” within the style which represented “the shared nature of imperial prestige” between herself and Justin II.<sup>14</sup> The similarities between the iconography of their coins were likely intentional, and they illustrate either Justin II’s or Sophia’s desire to establish a continuity between the sixth-century Empress and Helena Augusta.

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” *Representations* 2 (1983): 21.

<sup>12</sup> Jo Ann McNamara and others, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 97.

<sup>13</sup> Erin T. Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 35.

<sup>14</sup> Leslie Brubaker and Helen Tobler, “The Gender of Money: Byzantine Empresses on Coins (324–802),” *Gender & History* 12 (2000): 577, 583.

The abbey to which Empress Sophia sent the True Cross relic was subsequently renamed the Abbey of the Holy Cross and the recipient of the fragment was the queen, saint, and abbess Radegund. Baudonivia, a nun from the Holy Cross convent, composed a hagiography of Saint Radegund in the early seventh century, and her account draws several clear parallels to the works and “humble piety” of Saint Helena.<sup>15</sup> As the wife of the Frankish king Clotaire I, Radegund shared a unique temporal authority comparable to Helena’s. Shortly after their marriage, Radegund founded a monastery in Poitiers where she began a collection of relics. Baudonivia describes Radegund’s petitions to the Eastern Roman emperor for a piece of the Cross to be sent to Poitiers, stating: “What Helena did in oriental lands, Radegund the blessed did in Gaul!”<sup>16</sup> Jo Ann McNamara asserts that in her hagiography Baudonivia intentionally quoted directly from the legend of the *inventio crucis*, and placed particular emphasis on Helena’s role in the discovery while marginalizing other figures.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Baudonivia stated that the obstacles that Radegund faced receiving the cross relic for her convent were due to those who “played the role of the Jews,” another parallel to the Helena Legend and the Jews who refused to show Helena the location of Golgotha in the Ambrosian version of the legend.<sup>18</sup> Another similarity appears to draw from Gregory of Tours’ *Glory of the Martyrs*. Gregory states that upon her return from the Holy Land, the ocean became erratic and Helena’s ship nearly capsized.<sup>19</sup> To calm the sea, she threw one of the four Holy Nails into the ocean. This legend is remarkably similar to the story told by Baudonivia of the return of Radegund’s servants from a journey to the East shortly after she received the Cross relic. She states that during their travels “the sea became rough ... for forty

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<sup>15</sup> Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> Baudonivia, *Life of St. Radegund*, 1.16.

<sup>17</sup> McNamara and others, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 97.

<sup>18</sup> McNamara and others, eds., *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, 98.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*, trans. Raymond Van Dam (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 7.

days and nights.<sup>20</sup>... And seeing their great danger, they raised their voices to heaven, crying aloud: “Lady Radegund, help your servants lest we perish by drowning while in your service!” and immediately “Great tranquility descended over the midst of the sea.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, several details of Helena’s various hagiographic traditions were not only known to Baudonivia but were also utilized in her *vitae* of Saint Radegund.

Although Jacques Fontaine argues in his analysis of the two *vitae* of Radegund that the “militant sanctity” portrayed by Baudonivia was intended to emulate the virtues of Saint Martin, Radegund’s dualistic political and saintly nature is also deeply emblematic of the Christian empress archetype established by Helena.<sup>22</sup> In particular, Radegund’s interactions with Justin II as well as local religious and secular authorities exemplified a “regal demeanour” only attainable by those with her unique role as both Queen and clergy. For instance, her petition for a relic of the Cross was sent directly to King Sigebert rather than through the local chain of command beginning with the bishop of Poitiers, Maroveus.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a letter written in 561 by Radegund preserved in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours fully illustrates the overlap of her religious and temporal authority. The letter was addressed to “all the bishops” and implored those in apostolic office if they “wish not to be tormented by the Tyrant” to ensure that her abbey remained untouched by any person who aimed to interfere with her community after her passing.<sup>24</sup> This letter is indicative of Radegund’s familiar relationship with local clergy, and the influence she wielded as both a prominent Abbess and the former Frankish Queen.

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<sup>20</sup> Baudonivia alludes to several biblical narratives which detail trials and temptations lasting forty days. Among these are the temptation of Christ (Luke 4:1-13), the Great Flood (Genesis 7:12), and Moses’ time on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18; Exodus 34:27-28).

<sup>21</sup> Baudonivia, *Life of St. Radegund*, 1.17.

<sup>22</sup> Jaques Fontaine, “Hagiographie et politique, de Sulpice Sévère à Venance Fortunat,” *Revue d'histoire de l'Église de France* (1976): 134-5.

<sup>23</sup> Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines*, 70.

<sup>24</sup> E. T. Dailey, *Radegund: The Trials and Triumphs of a Merovingian Queen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 172.

Jane Tibbets Schulenburg states in her work on female sainthood in the Medieval period that, although contemporary sources do not explicitly state as much, people of the Middle Ages credited Empress Helena with the conversion of her son Constantine, and thus she became “an important exemplum or role model of domestic proselytization for other queens and noblewomen.”<sup>25</sup> Schulenburg applies this dynamic to the sixth-century queen of the Franks, Saint Clotilda. Her hagiographer refers to her as a “second Helena” due to her role in the conversion of her husband, King Clovis, from Frankish paganism to Christianity. Nearly contemporaneously, Bertha of Kent, the Catholic wife of the pagan King Ethelbert, was compared by Pope Gregory the Great to Empress Helena for her hand in both the conversion of her husband and, consequently, the English people.<sup>26</sup> Thus, by the beginning of the seventh century, the hagiographic tradition of several female saint-rulers employed Helena as an example of humility and piety, and their hagiographers purposefully related their proselytizing efforts and acquisition of relics to her example.

As previously discussed, the relics commonly attributed to Saint Helena, including the Cross and its implements, were not exclusive to her cult. The obscurity of her early life and the tenuous adoration shown to her when she died meant that no secondary relics such as clothing or other belongings were retrieved for the purpose of veneration. Thus, during the first several centuries of her sainthood, the only relic that could be exclusively attributed to Helena was her body. Unfortunately, contemporary sources bear conflicting information regarding the date of her death and the exact location of her burial.<sup>27</sup> Socrates Scholasticus asserted in his work *Historia Ecclesiastica* that she was buried at the Apostoleion in Constantinople, while the graffiti outside

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<sup>25</sup> Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society ca. 500-1100* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 180.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Gregory the Great, *Epistles*, 11.29.

<sup>27</sup> Mark J. Johnson, “Where Were Constantius I and Helena Buried?” *Latomus* 51 (1992): 145.

of a mausoleum along the Via Labicana appears to support Eusebius' claim that she was buried in Rome.<sup>28</sup> The Roman mausoleum was likely originally intended for Constantine, and the porphyry sarcophagus decorated with masculine imagery such as cavalymen in which the empress was allegedly buried was either intended for Constantine or even Maxentius – further confirmation that her cult was tenuous at best upon her death.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the ambiguity of her burial and the diminutive nature of her early cult led to her corporeal relics being left without veneration for several centuries. However, in the ninth century, various traditions regarding the translation of her bodily relics began to appear.

The first Latin hagiography of Saint Helena, *Vita Helenae*, was written by Almann of Hautvillers in 860 and it included a description of the translation of the remains of Helena's body from the Mausoleum of Helena in eastern Rome to a reliquary in Hautvillers Abbey approximately twenty years prior.<sup>30</sup> This account is further corroborated by Flodoard's tenth-century work *History of the Reims Church* and Sigebertus Gemblacensis' twelfth-century work *Chronica Sive Chronographia Universalis*.<sup>31</sup> In the nineteenth century, these remains would be transferred once again by the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre to Église Saint-Leu-Saint-Gilles in Paris.<sup>32</sup> Another Medieval tradition held that Helena bore a strong connection to the Trier Cathedral due to Constantine's residence in the city and that during her lifetime Helena donated the seamless robe of Christ (or *tunica Christi*) to the cathedral. After her death, the cathedral claimed that it acquired the head of Saint Helena.<sup>33</sup> However, Jan Drijvers asserts that there is a lack of pre-ninth-century

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<sup>28</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.17; Eusebius of Caesaria, *Life of Constantine*, 3.47.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Willem Drijvers, "Helena Augusta and the City of Rome," *Monuments & Memory* (2016): 148.

<sup>30</sup> Jan Willem Drijvers, "Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Myth: Some New Reflections," *Millennium* 8 (2011): 131.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, "Where Were Constantius I and Helena Buried?," 149.

<sup>32</sup> Elias Feitosa de Amorim Júnior, "Madeira, tecido e vidro: Notre-Dame de Chartres e suas relíquias," *Colloquium of the Brazilian Art History Committee* (2016): 82-3.

<sup>33</sup> Drijvers, "Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Myth," 133.

documentation of Helena's association with Trier, and thus the tradition was likely "invented ... to advance the status of the city."<sup>34</sup> A third translation legend is celebrated to this day by the people of Venice on the shared feast day of Helena and Constantine, May 21<sup>st</sup>, as it holds that Helena's body was transferred from Constantinople by the monk Aycardo in 1211 to the Isola di Santa Elena.<sup>35</sup>

The most widely regarded tradition maintains that her remains in their entirety were transferred in the middle of the twelfth century from the Mausoleum of Helena on the outskirts of Rome to the Basilica Sanctae Mariae de Ara Coeli — the only basilica located on the Capitoline Hill.<sup>36</sup> A transfer of this magnitude is indicative of her rising popularity centuries after her death. A slightly different version quoted by Mark Johnson comes from an undated manuscript cited in the work of Paolo Aringhi which credits the translation of Helena's corporeal relics to a break-in at the mausoleum in Rome.<sup>37</sup> Her remains were subsequently brought to the Basilica of Constantine and her sarcophagus was reused by Pope Anastasius IV. Regardless of the truth of each of these traditions, the various stories of the transfer of Helena's remains between the ninth and twelfth centuries indicate a sudden demand for primary relics, and thus a desire to venerate relics *exclusively* associated with Helena's cult.

This increased veneration of Saint Helena through the acquisition of her corporeal relics beginning in the ninth century was almost simultaneously met by the emergence of a variety of secondary relics – predominantly coins and pilgrimage tokens. The attribution of apotropaic powers to the iconography of coinage was a practice which predated Christianity; however, the

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<sup>34</sup> Drijvers, "Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Myth," 135.

<sup>35</sup> John Wortley, "The 'Sacred Remains' of Constantine and Helena," *Byzantine Narrative* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017), 366.

<sup>36</sup> Johnson, "Where Were Constantius I and Helena Buried?," 149.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, "Where Were Constantius I and Helena Buried?," 149.

Christianization of coinage in the centuries following Constantine's reign provided for depictions firstly of the cross and later, on the solidi of Justinian II, of Jesus Christ. Believers revered these coins and often punctured them to wear as amulets. Throughout the Medieval period, literary sources and hoard finds attest to a Byzantine coin type known as *santalene* or *monete di santa Helena*. These coins were likely used for devotional purposes and were believed to depict Saint Helena and Constantine.

The origin of the name *santalene* comes from Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century work *Convivio*, and was likely an informal term used to refer to ancient Roman coins depicting either imperial busts or Christian symbols.<sup>38</sup> These coins proliferated primarily in the Eastern Empire and were believed to possess talismanic powers, as is demonstrated by the mid-twelfth-century letter of Michael Italikos to Michael Pantekhnes. Italikos sent to Pantekhnes a *santalene* that concealed a "divine power," which was "injected into it by the instruments of the metal workers."<sup>39</sup> The sudden increase in literary accounts attesting to devotion to "coins of Saint Helena" is indicative of an increase in her veneration, at least within the Eastern Roman Empire.

The initial basis for the devotional practices attributed to *santalene* is based on their presence in three Italian hoards – the Ortona hoard buried c. 1030, the Roman hoard buried c. 1185, and the Pisa hoard buried c. 1266.<sup>40</sup> Only one *santalene* is found within each of these individual hoards, a detail that Lucia Travaini believes attests to their status as objects of piety.<sup>41</sup> These hoarded *santalene* are particularly notable because of their iconography as they do not depict a cross flanked by Constantine and Helena as Medieval Christians believed. In fact, no coins with

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<sup>38</sup> P. Toynbee, "The Coins Denominated Santelene by Dante," *Giornale Storico Della Letteratura Italiana* 30 (1897): 348.

<sup>39</sup> Cecile Morrisson, "Byzantine 'Medals': Coins, Amulets and Piety," *Byzantine Religious Culture*, eds. Denis Sullivan, Elizabeth A. Fisher, and Stratis Papaioannou (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 218.

<sup>40</sup> Lucia Travaini, "Les Frontières de l'Éternité? Le Cas d'un Nom de Monnaie: Santalene," *Revue Numismatique* (2008): 170.

<sup>41</sup> Travaini, "Les Frontières de l'Éternité?" 171.

both Constantine and his mother were minted during their lives. Rather, they depict the tenth-century Emperor Basil II (958-1025), bearded and read as Constantine the Great, and his brother Constantine VIII (960-1028), beardless and read as Saint Helena (fig. 1). Travaini argues that these *santalene* were non-circulating and were typically treated as family heirlooms; however, the relative contemporaneity of these coins is notable because it demonstrates that the veneration of such coins likely did not occur much earlier.<sup>42</sup> Had the veneration of Helena's likeness far preceded the early eleventh century, we would expect that these worshipers would have preserved and revered the plethora of fourth-century coins minted with her image throughout her lifetime.



Figure 1. Gold histamenon of Constantine VIII and Basil II. Minted 976-1025. OB: Bust of Jesus Christ with Nimbus Cruciger. RV: Busts of Constantine (right) and Basil (left) holding cross. From Coin Archives.

The Byzantine coins regarded as *santalene* by Dante and Italikos were copious (some coins of Justinian II and his son, Tiberius II, were also mistaken as *santalene*) throughout the Eastern Empire and Italian peninsula, yet they were not widely available in Northern Europe as that area was occupied by Germanic kingdoms since the early mid-fifth century.<sup>43</sup> However, the expansion of Helena's cult into the North is still evidenced by coinage. One of the earliest attempts at coinage in Anglo-Saxon England occurred in the seventh century. These coins depicted on their obverse the profile bust of a woman in royal garb with the legend "EILLEIIA AVGVTTV" – a barbarous

<sup>42</sup> Lucia Travaini, *The Thirty Pieces of Silver: Coin Relics in Medieval and Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2022), 26.

<sup>43</sup> Morrisson, "Byzantine 'Medals,'" 220.

imitation of the Latin “HELENA AUGUSTA” legend of fourth-century Roman coins (fig. 2). This imitation bears a striking resemblance to its inspiration, perhaps indicating that extant Roman Helena coins made it to the peripheries of the empire (fig. 3). Moreover, the production of coins with depictions of Helena establishes that, as early as the seventh century, her cult had expanded into the European borderlands and a “particular devotion to the Empress” was widespread among the Anglo-Saxon people.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 2. Obverse of a 7th-century barbarous imitation of a Roman gold solidus. Draped bust of Helena facing right. From the British Museum.



Figure 3. Obverse of a gold solidi of Helena Augusta. Minted 327-328 at Alexandria. Diademed and draped bust of Helena facing right. From Forum Ancient Coins.

Despite the proliferation of *santalene*, Helena coin imitations also appear in Roman regions. As mentioned above, coins in the iconographic style of *santalene* were not produced during Helena’s life. However, numismatist and historian Cecile Morrisson asserts that coins minted in Thessalonica during the thirteenth century depicted Helena and Constantine alongside

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<sup>44</sup> Anna Gannon, *The Iconography of Early Anglo-Saxon Coinage: Sixth to Eighth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 40.

the True Cross.<sup>45</sup> The rarity of these coins implies that they were likely minted as commemorative issues or were struck at the request of a local authority. Irrespective of the nature of their production, the minting of *santalene* nine centuries after Helena’s death indicates that her cult had outgrown the number of extant *santalene*, and this insufficient supply of secondary relics was remedied through the striking of new coins.

The reverence of the so-called *santalene* throughout the Byzantine Empire and Italian peninsula has been documented chiefly through the work of the numismatist and archaeologist Lucia Travaini. Travaini notes that in areas where the coins of either Basil II or Justinian II were unavailable, people of Western Europe venerated coins with Christian symbols such as the Cross, Chi-Rho, or labarum as “coins of Saint Helena.”<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Morrisson describes the “*médailles de sainte Hélène*” in Francia which were found predominantly in Provence, as well as the “*Ochavo de Santa Elena*” minted by Alexios III Angelos (r. 1195-1203) which continued to proliferate throughout the Iberian peninsula until the twentieth century (fig. 4).<sup>47</sup> It is notable that the “*Ochavo de Santa Elena*” continued to circulate as coins of Saint Helena despite the iconographic change initiated by Alexios III — the reverse featured two figures which were both bearded men — likely intended to represent the incumbent king and Constantine.



Figure 4. Hyperpyron of Alexios III Angelos. Minted c. 1195-1203. OB: Christ standing, nimbate, holding the Gospels. RV: Two bearded figures flanking the Cross. From Wildwinds.

<sup>45</sup> Morrisson, “Byzantine 'Medals,’” 219.

<sup>46</sup> Travaini, “Les Frontières de l’Éternité?,” 176.

<sup>47</sup> Morrisson, “Byzantine 'Medals,’” 228.

The increased veneration of Helena's secondary relics — coins — is demonstrated finally by the production of terracotta tokens in the Holy Land. These 'pilgrim tokens' were molded out of a type of clay made partially from the ground of holy sites and were then crudely impressed with icons. Their iconography attempted to mirror the silhouettes of *santalenes* – the busts of two figures appear underneath a cross (fig. 5). Against the popularly supported dating of these tokens to the sixth and seventh centuries, Travaini argues that “non-destructive thermoluminescence analysis” dates the tokens to around 1200.<sup>48</sup> Thus, she argues that their creation coincided with the middle of the Crusades and that there was an “explosion in the market for relics” during the period.<sup>49</sup> The imagery chosen for these pilgrim tokens not only reflects a surge in relics from the Holy Land and a rise in pilgrimage, but also serves as evidence of the widespread popularity of Helena's cult and its impact on the veneration of the True Cross.



Figure 5. Terracotta “True Cross” Pilgrim Relic. Created c. 7<sup>th</sup> century (or 13<sup>th</sup>). Two roughly engraved figures beneath the Cross on the obverse. From CNG Coins.

At the close of the Middle Ages in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the literary accounts and hoards composed of *santalene* reached their pinnacle. Several literary accounts refer to the production of *santalene* imitations (including wax impressions), their use in Christian ritual, their discovery among hoards of coins, their thaumaturgical powers, and even their presence in

<sup>48</sup> Travaini, *The Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Travaini, *The Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 24.

“Italian mathematical treatises and medieval merchant notebooks.”<sup>50</sup> The role of *santalene* as secondary relics of Saint Helena culminated in the late sixteenth century with the discovery of the Lateran hoard. During renovations to the foundation of the Lateran Palace in 1586, a hoard of coins was discovered, and it was documented that Pope Sixtus V “donated one of those coins of Saint Helena to each of the cardinals who accompanied His Holiness.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, despite the variety of iconography, these coins were all regarded as *santalene* — coins of Saint Helena. In the subsequent year, Pope Sixtus V issued a papal bull granting these coins the status of apostolic indulgences, thus solidifying the thaumaturgical and absolving nature of Helena’s secondary relics.

For all her contributions to the Early Christian Church, we would expect that Saint Helena Augusta would have enjoyed a substantial and dedicated cult either immediately following her death or shortly after she was credited with the invention of the Cross. However, this is not the case. Helena’s inextricable connection with the cult of the True Cross afforded her veneration and facilitated her designation as a saint; however, a cult exclusively dedicated to her piety and works was not explicitly evident until the Medieval period. From the late sixth century to the end of the Middle Ages, the rapid development of Saint Helena’s cult is best evidenced by an increase in the veneration — and production — of her primary, secondary, and tertiary relics. Her tertiary relics — contact relics comprised of fragments of the Cross and its implement — were widely distributed and used by Medieval women to establish their temporal and religious authority through association with Helena’s “distinctive, exemplary traits.”<sup>52</sup> Stories detailing the transfer of her primary or corporeal relics between the ninth and twelfth centuries demonstrate that the possession of her remains afforded cities and individual monasteries a heightened status, and the interest in

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<sup>50</sup> Travaini, *The Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 25-9.

<sup>51</sup> Travaini, *The Thirty Pieces of Silver*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” 13.

the location of her remains indicates that her cult was expanding. As the popularity of Helena's cult reached its pinnacle in the mid-to-late Medieval period, secondary relics of Saint Helena became highly sought-after. This is evidenced by the coins and pilgrim tokens which were venerated for their iconographic portrayals of Helena and Constantine flanking the Cross. These *santalene* were regarded since the thirteenth century as objects infused with thaumaturgical powers, a belief that was legitimized by a 1587 papal bull that granted them the status of apostolic indulgences.

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