

HILLNER, Julia

*Helena Augusta: Mother of the Empire*

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Those of us who have regularly followed Julia Hillner's online activity are in good fortune. Seven years ago, Hillner began a blog on *wordpress.com* under the name *Writing Helena*, with the aim of documenting and discussing her process of research and authoring her most ambitious project to date: the preparation of a complete and definitive biography of the Empress Helena. With the publication of this monograph under the title *Helena Augusta: Mother of the Empire*, Hillner's initial goal has been achieved, and the activity of a blog that has shone in recent years as a stimulus for research at the highest level, but also as a forum for debate on subjects that often, due to the implicit constraint of scholarly norms, have not had the ideal space to be debated in the format of academic journals, comes to an end.

The book's author, Julia Hillner, is a German historian specialised in social history and one of the leading representatives of the current vanguard of gender studies in Late Antiquity. The publication of this book comes at the height of her career as a historian: recently appointed full professor at Bonn, Hillner has made a name for herself with her studies of mobility and exile in Late Antiquity through the application of social network analysis. At the same time, this biography has been materialised in the most prestigious collection of biographies with gender studies in the ancient world, *Women in Antiquity*, edited by Ronnie Ancona and Sarah Pomeroy. This marks the end of a period of Hillner's publications devoted to the women of the Constantinian dynasty, including her highly detailed entry "Constantia, half-sister of Constantine and wife of Licinius" for the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

The book, as its title suggests, focuses on the figure of Helena, a fourth-century Roman empress. Helena, beyond her tra-

dition as Saint Helena of Constantinople in Christian rites and being the namesake of such important places as the dangerous North American volcano or the small African island where Napoleon died, was, in fact, a woman of flesh and blood. She has been celebrated in common history for two events in her life: for being the mother of such an eminent figure as the Emperor Constantine and for her work promoting Christianity on behalf of her son.

Between the years 326 and 328, Helena embarked on a pilgrimage to Syria-Palestine, which, for centuries, shaped the itinerary of the sites linked to the life and passion of Jesus. Hillner's work, as she presented it in the inaugural entry of *Writing Helena*, was conceived with the hope of overcoming this historiographical cliché: "I've come to the conclusion that we don't give enough justice to Helena the woman if we reduce her to the two years of her life that late antique men found important to commemorate". Hillner delves into every aspect of Helena's life with the aim of reconstructing a historical, rather than mythographic, subject with a specific agency that goes beyond the image promoted by the Constantinian dynasty of a beatifical dowager empress. To this end, the work is divided into four major blocks, each relating to the different chronological stages of her life.

The first of these, "Extra (c. 248-c. 289)" (p. 15-51), deals with the life of Helena from her birth until the accession of Constantius, Constantine's father, as Caesar of the Tetrarchy. What is interesting about this whole section is obviously the two controversies surrounding the life of the woman who was to become the mother empress par excellence in the history of Rome. First of all, there is the status of her relationship with

Constantius: from legal wife, as *Origo's* pamphlet puts it, to *stabularia*, as the bishop of Mediolanum, Ambrose, asserts. The nature of the relationship of Constantine's parents was a major issue in Antiquity, and Hillner (p. 30-31) seems to favour the second option. As for the enigma of her origins, the author suggests identifying Drepanum as her *origo* (p. 20).

The second section, "Off stage (c. 289-c. 317)" (p. 55-108), deals with the years in which Helena disappeared from the surviving historical record, focusing on two central themes. One is her participation in the formation of Constantinian dynastic ideas. The other is her active and influential role in promoting Christianity within the family circle, an approach that she understood as sincere devotion rather than political calculation. Of this idea, Hillner's proposals on the relationship between Lucian of Antioch and Helena's intellectual and religious training (p. 76-78) and the empress's subsequent influence on her son (p. 77-79) are particularly brilliant.

This is followed by "Center stage (c. 317-c. 329)" (p. 111-243), the heart of the book, which looks at the period when Helena became a key figure in Constantinian politics. This is probably the part of the narrative that has received the most attention from historians and, as a result, perhaps the most redundant section of the book. But that does not make it any less interesting. Of particular note is Hillner's view that Helena is the key to Constantine's post-Nicene change of favour towards the Arians (p. 226-29). And, of course, the chronicle and subsequent analysis of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land (p. 229-43), where Hillner presents us an image of the empress that goes beyond

the promoter of public works or the good Christian mother, but instead serves as a political agent in the dynasty's efforts to shape the new socio-religious spaces of the East.

The final and fourth part, "Curtain and encores (c. 329-c. 600)" (p. 247-346) deals with the most fundamental part of any character's life: the *ethos* that remains in Eternity. "Otra vida más larga de fama tan gloriosa", as Jorge Manrique would say. Based on this *fortleben* of Helena, Hillner highlights aspects such as the significance of Helena's burial and the use of her mausoleum as an element of urban transformation in the city of Rome and symbol of the power of the dynasty in the capital, as well as the use of the figure of Saint Helena in the medieval imaginary. But the most significant feature of this section is the development of her biography in a strictly ancient sense: as a moralising figure who becomes an archetype of behaviour. In this part, the influence of the figure of Helena as a model of conduct for Theodosian empresses is highlighted (p. 328-38).

Finally, and returning to the initial entry of *Writing Helena*, it is worth recalling how Hillner referred to this monograph, when it was still a nascent process: "while it will be a challenge to be able to say more, it will be fun to try".

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