

St. Helena



St. Helena was the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great and an Empress of the Roman Empire. Very little is known about Helena's early life, but it is believed she is from Drepanum (later known as Helenopolis) in Asia Minor and born into a poor family and lower class in the Roman culture of the day. St. Ambrose described Helena as a "good stable-maid." Despite her background, Helena married Constantius Chlorus. With him she birthed her only son, Constantine. around the year 274. Nearly two decades later in 292, Constantius, now co-Regent of the West, got swept up in his rising stature and divorced Helena for Theodora, the step-daughter of Emperor Maximianus Herculus. It is believed he did this to advance his own reputation and advance his standing in the Roman society.

Constantine was forever loyal to his dear mother, whom he loved very much. As he grew and became a member of the inner circle, he never left Helena's side. Following the death of Constantius in 308, Constantine became Emperor and summoned his mother back into inner circle and the imperial court. Helena received the title of Augusta. Constantine ordered all to honor his mother. He even had coins minted, bearing her image. Through her son's influence, Helena began to embrace Christianity. With her title of Augusta Imperatrix, Helena was given free reign over the imperial treasury. She was tasked with locating relics of Christian tradition.

Between the years 326-328, Helena took a trip to the Holy Places in the Middle East. During her journey, Helena had many churches constructed, including the one at the site of Jesus Christ's birth - the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem and another at the site of his ascension - Church of Eleona on the Mount of Olives. During this time Jerusalem was still being rebuilt after Titus' destruction. Around the year 130, Emperor Hadrian had a temple built over the site of Jesus' death. This temple was believed to be dedicated to Venus. Helena had this temple destroyed and chose a site in this location to be excavated. This led to the discovery of three crosses.

Tradition says Helena brought a woman near death to the crosses. There she had the woman place a hand on all three crosses. Nothing happened when she touched the first two crosses, but when she placed her hand on the third cross she suddenly recovered. Helena declared

the third cross to be the True Cross. At this site, Constantine ordered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to be built.