

Series #24: Women of the Early Church
Session #9 – St. Helena & Egeria
Tuesday, June 29, 2021

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 Herculius. 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.



Theodoret of Cyrus, an influential theologian, wrote that that during her search, Helena also discovered the nails of the crucifixion. She had one of the nails placed in Constantine's helmet and one in the bridle of his horse to aid him with their miraculous powers. Churches were built at these sites, as well.

Several of the relics believed to be found by St. Helena are located in Cyprus. Among these are parts of Jesus' tunic, pieces of the holy cross, and pieces of the rope used to tie Jesus to the cross. When

Helena returned to Rome from Jerusalem in 327, she brought parts of the True Cross back with her. She stored these in her palace's chapel. They can still be seen to this day, though her palace has been converted to the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem.

St. Helena died around 330 with her dearly devoted son by her side. She was then buried in the Mausoleum of Helena outside of Rome. Her sarcophagus can be seen in the Pio-Clementine Vatican Museum.

St. Helena was renowned for helping not only individuals, but entire communities through her works of charity. She often sought out to help the poor and destitute. She would visit churches and leave them with rich donations. St. Helena was a very devout servant of God, so much so that one would easily believe her to have been a follower of Jesus Christ from birth. Through her influence and work, Christianity continued to spread throughout the known world.

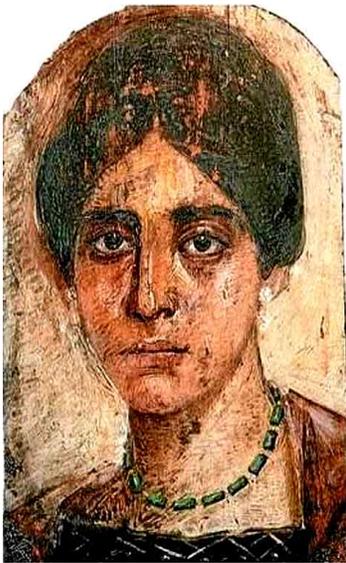
St. Helena is the patron saint of new discoveries and her feast day is celebrated on August 18.

https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=123

Egeria

Egeria was a Western European Christian woman, widely regarded to be the author of a detailed account of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land about ca. 381–386. The long letter, dubbed *Peregrinatio* or *Itinerarium Egeriae*, is addressed to a circle of women at home. Historical details it contains set the journey in the early 380s, making it the earliest of its kind. It survives in fragmentary form in a later copy—lacking a title, date and attribution.

The middle part of Egeria's writing survived and was copied in the *Codex Aretinus*, which was written at Monte Cassino in the 11th century, while the beginning and end are lost. This Codex Aretinus was discovered in 1884 by the Italian scholar Gian Francesco Gamurrini, in a monastic library in Arezzo. In 2005 Jesús Alvaro identified two new fragments from one manuscript circa 900 in Caroline script. Gamurrini published the Latin text and theorised the author was Saint Sylvia of Aquitaine. In 1903 Marius Férotin claimed the author is one Aetheria or Egeria, known from a letter written by the 7th century Galician



monk Valerio of Bierzo. He dated her pilgrimage to about 381–384, during the reign of Theodosius I. Férotin believed she was from Gallæcia, but in 1909 Karl Meister disputed Férotin's theory about the date of Egeria's pilgrimage and her identity. Meister argues that her language shows no evidence of Spanish dialect, but rather, suggests that she may have been from one of the well known religious houses of 6th century Gaul; according to this theory her pilgrimage took place in the first half of the reign of Justinian (r. 527–565).[5]:viii f. John Bernard noted that certain details of Egeria's account that support the earlier dating — two churches mentioned in the *Breviarium* and *Peregrinatio Theodosii* (both circa 530)—are absent from Egeria's otherwise detailed description of Jerusalem and thus confirm the 4th century dating. Most scholars favor the 4th century date.

It is through Valerio's letter that we first see the name Ætheria or Egeria, and have much of the biographical information. He praises Egeria and identifies her as a nun, perhaps because she addresses her account to her "sorores" (Latin for "sisters") at home. However, others (including

Hagith Sivan, 1988) have pointed out that during Egeria’s time it was common to address fellow lay Christians as “sisters” and “brothers.” It is possible that Egeria used the term to address her Christian acquaintances. Valerio may also have believed her to be a nun because she went on such a pilgrimage, although lay women of the time are known to have engaged in such religious tourism. Egeria’s ability to make a long and expensive journey by herself, her numerous acquaintances and attentive guides in the places she visited, and her education indicate her middle or upper class wealthy background. In his letter to Egeria, Valerio mentioned the shores of the “Western sea” or “Ocean” from which Egeria was sprung, which suggests he was writing about a person travelling from the Roman Gallæcia, but Meister believes that her reference to the river Rhone supports his theory of Gaulish origin.

Travels of Egeria

Egeria set down her observations in a letter now called *Itinerarium Egeriae* (“Travels of Egeria”). It is sometimes also called *Peregrinatio Aetheriae* (“Pilgrimage of Aetheria”) or *Peregrinatio ad Loca Sancta* (“Pilgrimage to the Holy Lands”) or some other combination. It is the earliest extant graphic account of a Christian pilgrimage. The text has numerous lacunae. The text is a narrative apparently written at the end of Egeria’s journey from notes she took en route, and addressed to her ‘dear ladies’: the women of her spiritual community back home. In the first extant part of the text, she describes the journey from her approach to Mount Sinai until her stop in Constantinople. Staying for three years in Jerusalem, she made excursions to Mount Nebo and to the tomb of Job in ancient Carneas or Karnaia (modern Al-Shaykh Saad, Syria).

Additionally, she visited the burial places of Haran, the brother of Abraham, as well as the site where Eliezer met with Rebecca. She spent time at the Sea of Galilee and comments on the traditions, which include that of Christ feeding the multitude and the place where he performed his miracles. On her way back to Europe she stopped at Hagia Thekla—i. e. the shrine of Saint Thecla’s near Seleucia Isauriae (modern Silifke, Turkey), particularly venerated by women. Upon her return to Constantinople, she planned to make a further trip to St. John’s at Ephesus.

The second portion of the text is a detailed account of the liturgical services and observances of the church calendar in Jerusalem (most likely, under Cyril). The liturgical year was in its incipient stages at the time of her visit. This is invaluable because the development of liturgical worship (e. g. Lent, Palm or Passion Sunday) reached universal practice in the 4th century. Egeria provides a first-hand account of practices and implementation of liturgical seasons as they existed at the time of her visit. This snapshot is before universal acceptance of a December 25 celebration of the nativity of Jesus; this is very early and very helpful in cataloguing the development of annual liturgical worship.

Philologists have studied Egeria’s letter, which contains a wealth of information about the evolution of Latin in late antiquity into the “Proto-Romance” language, from which the medieval and modern family of Romance languages later emerged. For example, expressions such as “*deductores sancti illi*” (meaning “those holy guides” in classical Latin, but here rather simply “the holy guides”) help to reveal the origins of the definite article now used in all Romance languages (except Sardinian)—such as Spanish (“*las santas guías*”) or Italian (“*le sante guide*”). Similarly, the use of *ipsam* in a phrase such as “*per mediam vallem ipsam*” (classical Latin “through [the] middle of [the] valley itself”) anticipates the type of definite article (“*péri su mesu de sa bàdde*”) that is found in Sardinian (“*sa limba sarda*”).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egeria_\(pilgrim\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egeria_(pilgrim))