



Helena's Mule

by Peter E. Lewis

Photos of mules courtesy Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 1 – Statue of Helena in the Exhibition at the Colosseum in Rome in 2013. It dates from the 2nd half of the 2nd century, but the head was reworked in the Constantinian period. (Wikimedia Commons)

A mule is a hybrid animal, the result of mating a horse with an ass. It is a mismatch, and in numismatics a mule is a coin that results from mismatching the obverse and the reverse. In this case the obverse is from a coin of Helena, but the reverse is from a coin of Fausta. Helena was the mother of Constantine the Great, the first Roman emperor to be a Christian, and Fausta was his second wife.

Helena (**Figure 1**) was born in about 250 AD in Drepanum, modern Yalova, which was only about 35 kilometres west of Nicomedia, modern Kocaeli. (**Figure 2 – map**) Nicomedia was an important city. It had been the residence of Diocletian when he was the ruler of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. It was an early centre of Christianity, and in 339 the bishop of Nicomedia, Eusebius, became the patriarch of Constantinople, which was the city founded by Constantine. Nicomedia was also one of the major mints in the Roman Empire.

Helena was working as a barmaid when she met Constantius, a soldier who later rose through the ranks to become the ruler of the western half of the empire. They had one child, Constantine, who followed his father in having a military career. Constantine's first wife was Minervina, and they had one son, Crispus. When Crispus was about 11 Constantine married Fausta, the daughter of the Roman emperor, Maximian. What happened to Minervina is unknown: whether Constantine put her aside, divorced her, or she had died. With Fausta Constantine had three sons, Constantine II, Constantius II and Constans. David Sear in *Roman Coins and their Values*, Volume 5, says that Constantine II was illegitimate, but David Vagi in *Coinage and History of the Roman Empire* is certain that Constantine and Fausta were his parents.

Constantius had put Helena aside to marry Theodora, the step-daughter of Maximian. With Theodora Constantius had several children, one of whom was named Anastasia (Resurrection), which has led scholars to think that Theodora

might have been a Christian and that she influenced the family in that direction. On a coin issued in her honour by her step-grandsons in 337 Piety is personified on the reverse. (Figure 3) The image is similar to the Christian icon known as the Virgin Hodegetria shown on a lead seal of Leo III. (Figure 4)

‘Hodegetria’ means ‘she who points the way.’

As Constantine’s mother, Helena remained a member of the imperial household, and on a coin of Antioch she was given the title ‘Augusta’. (Figure 5) Constantine’s god was Sol, the sun-god, and until about 321 he issued coins with

Sol on the reverse with the legend SOLI INVICTO COMITI (to the unconquered sun, comrade). (Figure 6) In 318 Constantine issued a coin with Helena on the obverse and a star on the reverse, which suggests that she was in accord with her son as far as religion was concerned. (Figure 7) When Constantine defeated Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 he became the ruler of Rome, and he went on to control the whole Roman Empire. Later when Christianity became popular he claimed that Christ had given him the victory at the Milvian Bridge and he subsequently promoted Christianity throughout the empire.

It is understandable that Helena might have been close to Crispus, her eldest grandson, and she would have been proud when he became a successful general in the Roman army. In 326, however, something terrible happened. Apparently Fausta accused Crispus of wrong-doing. Exactly what it was is unknown: she might have told Constantine that Crispus was planning to replace him or that he had made sexual advances towards her, or both. Fausta naturally wanted her sons to eventually succeed Constantine, but Crispus stood in the way. Constantine believed Fausta, and Crispus was executed in 326.

Some months after Crispus was killed, Fausta died, but how and why was never revealed. Constantine ordered that the names of Crispus and Fausta be erased from the records. Later historians gave

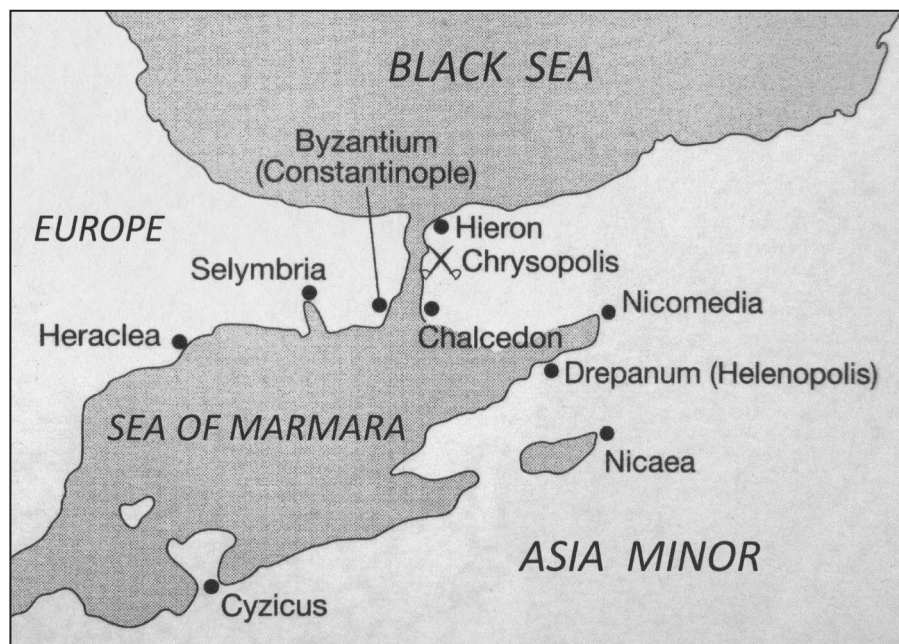


Figure 2 – Map of the north-west corner of Asia Minor in the 4th century. Chrysopolis was the site of a battle between Constantine and Licinius. (Map based on the map in ‘Constantine’ by Paul Stephenson.)



Figure 3 – Billon reduced centenionalis issued in the period 337-40 by the three sons of Fausta in honour of Theodora. Constantine died in 337. The legend on the reverse is PIETAS ROMANA (Roman Piety). The mint is Trier. Sear, Vol. 5, 17499. (Auktionen Meister & Sonntag, Auction 12, Lot 197)



Figure 4 – Seal of the Byzantine emperor Leo III (716-741). It is 35 mms in diameter. On the reverse Mary holds the Christ Child. Zacos 33. (Gorny & Mosch Auction 122, Lot 2397)



Figure 5 – Billon follis issued in honour of Helena as Augusta at Antioch in 324. Sear, Vol. 4, 18659. (Collection of St John’s Cathedral)

various reasons for Fausta's death. According to one account Helena "rebuked" Constantine who then had Fausta drowned in a hot bath. The "hot bath" recurs in the accounts, which led David

Woods in 1998 to suggest that Fausta died trying to have an abortion because at the time hot baths were part of the method used. In his 2009 biography of Constantine, Paul Stephenson follows

the suggestion that Fausta had an abortion. She might have had sexual intercourse with her stepson or more likely another man. Whatever the circumstances Helena would have been very involved in the subsequent events.

To distance herself from these tragic events Helena went on an extended tour of Palestine, probably during the years



Figure 6 – Billon follis of Constantine minted at Trier in 317. It shows Sol on the reverse with the legend SOLI INVICTO COMITI. Sear, Vol. 4, 16063. (Numismatik Naumann Auction 9, Lot 769)



Figure 9 – Solidus of Constantine I minted at Nicomedia in 335. On the reverse Victory inscribes VOT XXX on a shield held by a small winged figure. The legend means 'The Victory of the Augustus Constantine'. Sear, Vol. 4, 16759. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 7 – Billon centenionalis issued in honour of Helena in 318. On the obverse N F after HELENA stands for Nobilissima Femina (most noble woman). On the reverse the star in a wreath suggests a connection with Sol Invictus (the unconquered sun) who is Constantine's comrade. There is a sun-symbol at the top, and the star probably represents Constantine as Saturn, the highest of the seven levels of Mithraism. Sear, Vol. 4, Lot 16583. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)



Figure 8 – Helena's mule. It is a billon centenionalis, 19 mms in diameter, weighing 3.29 grams and in uncirculated condition. The alignment is 7h. (Collection of St John's Cathedral)

327 and 328. The purpose was to inspect the eastern provinces and see the holy places where Jesus Christ had lived and died. In Palestine whatever Christian faith she had would have been greatly strengthened by the experience. She would have been almost constantly in the company of enthusiastic bishops. On her return trip to Rome she would have stayed at Nicomedia near her hometown. Nicomedia was on the main road from the east, and it is likely that she died there in about 329.

Although her place of death is listed as Nicomedia in the New Encyclopaedia Britannica this is not stated in the an-

cient sources. The historian Eusebius of Caesarea was alive at the time and in his *Life of Constantine* he said that after her death she was carried up to the "imperial city". This could be either Rome or Constantinople, but in either case it means that she did not die in those cities, and Nicomedia becomes the most likely place. She did not die suddenly and Eusebius informs us that "when she was very near the end she made arrangements and dispositions, drawing up her last will in favour of her only son the Emperor, the monarch and world-ruler, and his sons the Caesars, her own grandchildren. Having settled

her affairs in this way, she finally came to the end of her life."

In the collection of St John's Cathedral in Brisbane there is a coin that is extremely rare and probably unique. It is Helena's mule. (Figure 8) Helena is on one side and Fausta on the other. It was acquired from a reputable dealer in Germany and there is no doubt that it is authentic. It is currently on display in the cathedral together with other coins of Helena and a gold coin of Constantine the Great. (Figure 9)

Using computer search engines it has been possible to find coins made from the same dies as Helena's mule. The identical



Figure 10 – Billon centenionalis of Helena minted at Antioch in 328-9. The mint mark is SMANTI preceded by a dot. I = 10, i.e. the 10th factory. On page 672 of RIC VII it is explained why coins from the 10th factory were the last to be minted. The last stage of development was the ladder-shaped diadem with a single pearl in each division. Sear, Vol. 4, 16628. (Gerhard Hirsch Nachfolger Auction 296, Lot 2367)



Figure 11 – Billon centenionalis of Fausta minted at Nicomedia in 325-6. On the reverse Fausta holds her two sons. The mint mark is MNA. A = 1, i.e. the 1st factory. Sear, Vol. 4, 16575. (Roma Numismatics, Electronic Auction 5, Lot 885)



Figure 12 – Sestertius of Marcus Aurelius with Faustina on the obverse. On the reverse she holds two of her children. *FECVND AVGVSTAE* means 'the fertility of the empress'. Sear, Vol. 2, 5273. (Classical Numismatic Group, Mail Bid Sale 73, Lot 928)

image of Helena occurs on a coin minted at the 10th factory in Antioch during the period 327-8. (Figure 10) Notice in the left field the pellet which is a tiny flaw in the die. The identical image of Fausta standing and holding her sons, Constantine II and Constantius II, occurs on a coin minted at the 1st factory in

Nicomedia during the period 325-6. (Figure 11)

The coin of Fausta was copied from a coin of Faustina, the wife of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who reigned from 161 to 180 and was highly regarded by the Romans. (Figure 12) Fausta and Faustina even have the same hairdo

(large waves with a bun at the back). On Fausta's coin the legend *SPES REIPVBLICAE* (Hope of the Nation) refers to the children she is holding. The figure holding the children is Fausta herself, not a personification of hope, which is nearly always shown as a woman holding a flower. (Figure 13) Sear and *RIC* both state that the standing figure on the reverse is Fausta.

How is Helena's mule to be explained? First of all it must be emphasized that it was not a mistake. One could imagine a mint-worker at Nicomedia grabbing the wrong die, but this obverse die came from Antioch in Syria! It must have been brought from Antioch to Nicomedia, but why bring a die all the way from Antioch when similar dies would have been available at the nearby mints of Cyzicus, Heraclea and Constantinople? Probably Helena brought the die from Antioch herself. It was the most recent die made by a master engraver in Antioch and it might have been given to Helena as a gift. It shows her wearing the latest diadem which would have been given to her by her son. Because Fausta had died unexpectedly dies of her coins would have been readily available in Nicomedia and neighbouring mints.

A possible scenario for the production of Helena's mule is as follows. At Nicomedia when Helena realized that she was dying she ordered that a special coin be minted. By means of this coin she intended to endorse her grandsons and more importantly re-instate Fausta and honour her publicly. This would imply that Fausta had died of natural causes, thus removing any aspersions of evil-doing on the family.

On the coins previously issued by Constantine in honour of Helena she is



Figure 13 – Sestertius of Claudius with *Spes* (Hope) personified on the reverse. Sear, Vol. 1, 1854. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton V, Lot 1095)



Figure 14 – Billon centenionalis of Helena minted at Nicomedia in 325-6. The mint mark is MNF. $\Gamma = 3$, i.e. the 3rd factory. On the obverse Helena's hairdo makes her look as if she is wearing a crested helmet. Sear, Vol. 4, 16620. (Roma Numismatics, Auction 6, Lot 1000)

shown holding a branch downwards, symbolizing that she and Constantius were at the beginning of this imperial family and that it was in secure hands. (Figure 14) As the matriarch of the family Helena must have felt a degree of responsibility for it. On these coins the reverse legend is SECVRITAS REIPVBLICAE (Security of the Nation) and the figure holding the branch is Helena herself because the personification of Securitas was never previously shown in this way. As she was nearing the end of her life Helena probably felt that she needed to restore the integrity of her family.

On a deeper level Helena might have wanted to forgive Fausta and herself, and in doing so she would have been obeying Jesus' command to love and forgive. Constantine, however, was not prepared to forgive Fausta and the minting of the coin was stopped, but somehow after 1690 years this one amazing coin has come to light to witness to the Christian character of Helena. Eusebius informs us that Constantine was with Helena when she died "ministering and holding her hands", and they would have spoken about the terrible events of 326 and about the Christian faith. Helena eventually became a saint in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. (Figure 15) Her special coin, which we have called Helena's mule, might contain her message to the world.

According to Eusebius, when Constantine was dying in 337 at Nicomedia "he perceived that this was the time to purify himself from the offences which he had at any time committed, trusting that whatever sins it had been his lot as mortal to commit, he could wash them from his soul." He then made a confession to the bishops present and was baptized. He died soon afterwards. So Constantine became a Christian after all. Helena's combination-coin relates to all these matters, and it brings to us a message of love and forgiveness.

NOTE: Dr Lewis' new book, *The Ending of Mark's Gospel: The Key to Understanding the Gospels and Christianity*, is available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com). Although it deals mainly with biblical matters there is a chapter on the Tribute Penny.

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Figure 15 – Saint Helena holds the cross on which Jesus was crucified. According to some late 4th century sources she found the True Cross when she visited Jerusalem. (Painting, oil on canvas, by Palma il Giovani, c. 1593 in Venice. Wikimedia Commons)