Helena on the Move

The Makings of a Medieval Saint Relics played a key role as early Christian veneration of the martyrs transformed and developed into the medieval cult of the saints.

5   Curiously, these material manifestations of the living presence of the saints on earth are remarkably uncommunicative objects by themselves. As has been argued by Patrick Geary, a relic has few properties that can directly convey a specific message compared to a text, an image, or an artwork.
The cultural significance of relics almost entirely depends on the external forces of a good story, a tradition to supply meaning. Hagiography makes up for what relics
10   lack: clear links with the saint they represent, with communities of the faithful, and with the geographical locations where relics offer contact with the sacred.
This essay investigates the role of narratives about relic mobility in the creation of medieval sainthood. It pays particular attention to relics' connections with
15   history and specific geographical locations, taking as its case-study Helena Augusta (c. 250–330), mother of Constantine the Great.
Today Helena's saintly status within Roman Catholicism is a widely accepted given; so much so, that assumptions about the universality of her saintly status are often erroneously projected back onto the late antique and medieval period.
20   In reality Helena's sainthood developed through a long and meandering process which gained speed only many centuries after her lifetime and lasted well into the seventeenth century. What little we know about the historical empress became interwoven with the legend(s) of the finding of the true cross soon after her death, but this did not immediately result in her sainthood in Western Christianity. Only
25   from the ninth century onward did Helena become venerated as a saint at an increasing number of regional cults, most notably in the Rhineland. There are very few signs that Helena was venerated in Rome until the late fifteenth century, but once her cult caught on there during the course of the sixteenth century, the omphalic quality of the eternal city seems to have eventually ensured her status as one of the most
30   important female saints of early modernity.
The aim of this essay is to reconstruct Helena's route to becoming a key figure in Catholicism — honoured with a chapel and a colossal statue at Bernini's monumental crossing at St Peter's in Rome in the 1630s — by analysing the medieval history of her route to sainthood.
35   While the facts about her life, her role in the true cross legend, her cult in the Rhineland, and her legend in Britain have been studied, it remains unclear how and why Helena eventually became ever more universally venerated. The inventio crucis legend is often (somewhat vaguely) invoked as explaining her sainthood, but it does not provide clear answers.
40   Hagiographical mobility and relic mobility are crucial for understanding the development of Helena's cult in the West: the potential of her story and her relics to cross boundaries and to (re-)anchor at different locations.
In order to reconstruct Helena's trajectory to sainthood — from regional, to Roman, to universally revered Roman Catholic saint — I first examine the life of the
45   historical empress, giving particular attention to the places which she visited and to how her travels were first construed as pious mobility. The following section then elucidates how the finding of the cross legend magnified both her (perceived) historicity and her piety (and pious mobility), without making her a saint. The third and fourth sections analyse how the core of Helena's medieval cult was first created
50   and was fundamentally characterized by narratives about relic mobility and border crossing. As it developed through a complex conversation between various locations, historical periods, literary forms, and (holy) objects, and by their transmission across Europe, her cult crossed numerous boundaries — both geographical and temporal.
Helena's relics acquired significance as they moved from place to place, and once she
55   became known as a supplier of Holy Land relics, links with Rome and Jerusalem became increasingly important, too. By foregrounding the interplay between holy objects and hagiography, a versatile, transregional paradigm of sainthood emerges. Helena's circuitous path to sainthood showcases the dynamism of hagiography as an expansive generic category which encompasses dialogues between various types of texts,
60   including secular and sacred historiography.
It also emphasizes the importance of the interactions between these texts and material culture (holy objects) as fundamental for the business of medieval saint making.

The Historical Helena
65   Helena's historicity provided a foundation for her cult as it developed in later centuries. Historicity helped authenticate her as a saint. A real-life Christian empress, whose ties with places such as Rome and Jerusalem were backed up by

respected historical writings, could make for a much more convincing case. The
historical facts about Helena have, with time, become so entangled with historical
70   legend that (parts of) the legend have come to be — and sometimes still are —
accepted as historical truth. This has been discussed in several modern analyses of
Helena's life structured along the lines of 'fact and fiction' and 'truth and
legend'.

It is worthwhile to briefly retrace the steps of this literature and to establish the
75   historical facts about her life before moving on to discuss its legendary aspects.
Only by first peeling off and then reconstructing step by step the intricate tissue
of multiple legends that surround Helena's person does it become possible to bring
into focus the process of hagiographic innovation which is the subject of this essay.
We have little solid information about the historical Helena. Her place of birth is
80   unknown. Although several suggestions have been made — Drepanum (later called
Helenopolis [Hersek, modern-day Turkey]), various towns in Mesopotamia, Edessa,
Trier, and Colchester — none of these can be incontrovertibly substantiated.
The approximate years of her birth and death (c. 248/249–c. 328/329) can be
reconstructed based on her age (around 80) at the time of her death, which occurred
85   shortly after her journey to the eastern provinces of the empire (c. 326–328), as
well as the sudden cessation in the issue of Helena-coinage after the spring of 329.
Contemporary sources say nothing about her social origins, while later sources
suggest these were humble.

She may have been working at an inn, possibly as a prostitute, when she met
90   Constantine's father Constantius Chlorus (c. 250–306) in the 270s. The couple seems
to have had a stable relationship, which probably consisted of concubinage, an
arrangement which was usual for couples of unequal social standing. Constantine was
born at Naissus (Nis, modern-day Serbia) on 27 February 272 or 273. In 289
Constantius married the more well-connected Theodora, a lady of imperial standing,
95   and Helena's whereabouts cannot be inferred until Constantine's succession of his
father in 306. She probably then joined her son's court, which first mainly resided
in Trier and later in Rome. Despite the suggestions of later traditions, no
substantial evidence of Helena's presence in Trier survives.

As for Rome, sometime after 312 Helena owned a considerable estate southeast of the
100   city, the fundus Laurentus, which included an imperial residence, the Sessorian
palace, where she likely resided. She was certainly buried in the mausoleum on the
Via Labicana, located on the same fundus. Four inscriptions recovered in this area
attest to Helena's involvement with the water supply and reconstruction of a bathing
complex known as the Thermae Helenae.
105   Helena's status increased significantly toward the end of her life. A small number of
coins, minted in Thessalonica with Helena's image and the inscription NF, suggest
that she had received the title Nobilissima Femina, indicating membership in the
imperial family. It is not clear when she received this title or when these coins
were minted.
110   In 324, the year that Constantine became sole emperor, he granted both his wife
Fausta and his mother the title of Augusta, symbolically sharing his power with them.
Helena was thus raised to the status of empress. Large numbers of Helena Augusta-
coins were minted all over the empire, typically with the legend securitas
reipublicae. Combined with evidence from inscriptions, it appears that Helena had
115   been allotted an important role in imperial propaganda as the matriarch of a stable
dynasty and state.

Appearances of stability were soon afterward seriously threatened when Constantine
had his eldest son Crispus and his wife Fausta put to death in 326. The reasons
behind these executions remain unclear; there is no evidence that Helena had a hand
120   in them.

This familial turmoil directly precedes the act for which Helena is most famous, her
journey to the eastern provinces of the empire in c. 326/328.
The only contemporary source that mentions her trip is the Life of Constantine by
Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (c. 260/265–340). After discussing the discovery of the
125   Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and Constantine's orders to erect a church over it,
Eusebius briefly describes Helena's visit to the east, presenting it as primarily
motivated by religious reasons. He suggests that she founded the Nativity Basilica in
Bethlehem and a church on the Mount of Olives and describes her munificence to the
inhabitants of the eastern provinces, especially the needy. Eusebius praises Helena's
130   piety profusely and describes how Constantine honoured her memory with a stately
burial in 'the imperial city' (meaning Rome, as elsewhere in the Life, but this would
soon lead to enduring confusion with Constantinople).
15 Based on Eusebius's account, Helena's journey has often been interpreted as a
pilgrimage, motivated by personal piety. Eusebius's text cannot be taken at face
135   value, however; it is a highly partial panegyric of the first Christian emperor and
his pro-Christian policies.

It casts Helena as the exemplary and pious Christian dowager empress in order to further accentuate her son's prowess and to celebrate his Church-building in the east. Several interpretations have emphasized the public (non-personal) nature of Helena's journey: an affair of state aimed at garnering support for the emperor in the east.

Its religious overtones apart, Eusebius's account coincides with all the conventional trappings of an iter principis or imperial progress: the empress distributed gifts to the people and the troops, sponsored public building activities, and granted pardons. This much can be reliably established about Helena without overinterpreting or projecting back later traditions to the historical person. While she was not venerated as a saint or credited with miraculous deeds during her lifetime, it is possible to identify historical aspects which were to become important ingredients for her later legendary persona. Helena's historicity — as empress and mother of the first Christian emperor of Rome — could lend credibility to later traditions. Moreover, her documented presence at the important religious centres of Rome and Jerusalem could provide a basis not only for veneration in those cities, but also for cults further afield, wishing to invoke their sacred grandeur. Eusebius's account of her journey to the eastern provinces facilitated such long-distance associations, since he had — crucially — interpreted Helena's trip as a form of pious mobility. Mobility would go on to become a defining feature of her cult. Helena first became a saint through a narrative about relic mobility: the translatio of her relics from Rome to France. Later on Eusebius's piously travelling empress morphed into a major supplier of Holy Land and other relics. Yet the historical empress Helena could only transform into a travelling, relic dispensing saint after several layers of legend had been added to her story.

The Inventio Legend: From Legendary Founder to Auxiliary
The next, posthumous step in Helena's route to sainthood was shaped by the legend of the finding or inventio of the true cross. Its main holy protagonist is the cross; however, as its finder, Helena eventually also acquired a degree of saintliness by association. The medieval inventio crucis legend and the connected veneration of the cross were extremely widespread, complex, and diverse phenomena. I briefly analyse the legend's development in Western Christianity to illustrate how Helena — hitching a lift with the inventio legend — became a widely known quasi-saintly character. While the legend did not transform her into a saint directly, it did fortify the foundations for her later sainthood by magnifying both her (perceived) historicity and her exceptional piety. My discussion also aims to facilitate differentiation between Helena as cross-finder (an essentially auxiliary character) and Helena as a saint in her own right, with her own vita, relics, and geographically anchored cults (which will be discussed in the next sections). Veneration of the cross apparently preceded the legend about its miraculous discovery. Its cult was first recorded by Cyril (315–386), Bishop of Jerusalem, who around 340 wrote in his Catecheses that wood of the cross was present and venerated in Jerusalem (presumably at the Holy Sepulchre basilica), and that from there pieces of it had spread all over the world. In 351 Cyril wrote a letter to Constantine's son, Constantius II (317–361), informing the emperor about the appearance of a luminous cross in the sky above Jerusalem, also mentioning the discovery of the cross in the same city in the times of the emperor's father. Helena is not mentioned.

For comparison's sake, we can recall that Eusebius's Life of Constantine had neither referred to either (the finding of) the cross, or suggested any connection between it and Helena.

In any case, several other witnesses confirm that the cult of the cross had begun in, and was spreading from, Jerusalem during the second half of the fourth century. The earliest written evidence of the inventio legend which also involves Helena is found not in a hagiographical text (narrowly defined), but in a funeral oration: De Obitu Theodosii Oratio (395), which was delivered by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (c. 340–397) forty days after the death of Emperor Theodosius I (r. 379–395). Towards the end, Ambrose imagines that Theodosius can now greet Constantine in heaven, thanks to the latter's deathbed baptism and having left a 'heritage of faith to princes'. Ambrose then refers to Zachariah 14. 20 and states that Helena fulfilled this prophecy. She travelled to Jerusalem and confronted Satan on Golgotha, accusing him of hiding Helena cross. By finding it she was the second to beat Satan (the first being Mary, by giving birth to Christ). Helena found three crosses and identified Christ's cross (the middle one, marked with the titulus crucis). She also looked for and found the crucifixion nails, which she has worked into the bridle of Constantine' horse and the emperor's diadem. According to Ambrose the nail in the diadem then transformed Roman emperors from persecutors to preachers of the Christian faith, and the nail in the bridle reined them in as Christians, thus fulfilling the prophecy in Zachariah 14. 20.

205 Ambrose thus attributes the consolidation of Christianity as the hereditary faith of the emperors to Helena.
His extremely favourable account of Helena (overcoming Satan, comparable with Mary, founding the Christian empire) was likely directed at the women of the late Theodosius's court.

210 As co-foundress of the Christian
Empire, Helena indeed went on to become a powerful and empowering model for Byzantine imperial ladies.
The initial lustre of Ambrose's Helena wanes in subsequent traditions, while at the same time the perceived historicity of the legend increased, since it was mostly
215 discussed in historiographical texts. The next to record the inventio legend is the monk and theologian Rufinus of Acquileia (c. 345-411) in book X of his Church History (c. 402). In this version, visions inspire Helena to travel to Jerusalem, where a heavenly sign helps her find three crosses. To identify the right one, Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, tests them on a dying woman, who is miraculously cured after
220 touching Christ's cross. Helena then builds a church on the site of discovery and sends a part of the cross to Constantine (the other part remains in Jerusalem), as well as the nails (for his helmet and horse's bridle). She hosts and serves at a banquet for holy virgins. Rufinus may have translated/adopted the story from Bishop Gelasius of Caesarea's now lost Church History (c. 390), written at the request of
225 this cousin Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, which would point to a Levantine origin for the inventio legend.
However, adding Helena to the legend may have also been an original touch by Rufinus himself. Combined with the early interest in Helena as cross-finder shown by Ambrose of Milan (in 395), Paulinus of Nola (in 403), and Sulpicius Severus (in c. 403), a
230 Western origin also becomes conceivable.
At any rate, the legend (with slight variations) also became known in the East, judging from the fifth-century Greek Church Histories by Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen, and Theoderet of Cyrrhus.
On the basis of these histories, the Roman statesman and scholar Cassiodorus (c. 485-
235 c. 585) compiled the influential Historia Tripartita, ensuring that a synthesis of these three Greek accounts of the inventio legend became widespread in the Latin west Europe.
Although the earliest versions of the legend feature Helena as cross-finder, she was not the only character to play that part. The slightly later Protonike legend, first
240 recorded in Syriac, has a fictitious empress called Protonike find the cross.
Around 415-440, a third version of the legend appeared: the Judas Cyriacus legend. Although the oldest surviving witness of this legend is recorded in Syrian, it was likely first composed in Greek in Jerusalem.
In the Cyriacus legend Helena interrogates representatives of the Jewish population
245 of Jerusalem about various scriptural prophecies, particularly a certain Judas, whom she eventually pressures into finding the cross for her through his prayer. Three crosses are unearthed, the true one identified by testing on a dead youth who is revived. Helena builds a church on the site of discovery.
Judas is baptized Cyriacus. When Helena looks for the nails, they are again revealed
250 by Cyriacus's prayer. The nails are used for the bridle of the emperor's horse and kept as imperial trophies.
In this anti-Jewish version of the legend the main character is Judas, an example of a Jew converting to Christianity, rather than Helena.
The Judas Cyriacus legend eventually became the most widespread version in the
255 medieval West, thanks to initial dissemination via influential sources like the Roman Book of the Popes or Liber pontificalis and Gregory of Tours's Ten Books of Histories, as well as later via the Legenda aurea by Jacopo da Varazze (1229-1289) (see below).
Helena's occasional appearance in legends about other historical persons, such as
260 myths about Constantine and/or Silvester (Bishop of Rome in 314-335), further magnified the (perceived) historicity of her persona.
These legends could add new details to her biography. For example, according to the Silvester legend Helena was Jewish. In it, Constantine is afflicted by leprosy. He refuses the recommended treatment of bathing in infants' blood, opting instead for
265 baptism by Silvester, which cures him and convinces him to convert. Helena initially opposes his conversion, favouring Judaism instead, but eventually also converts.
The inclusion of both the Silvester and the (Cyriacus) inventio legends in the Legenda Aurea (1260s) compiled by Jacopo da Varazze firmly established Helena's status as a major saintly supporting actress. This extremely popular compendium
270 (transmitted through about 1000 Latin and 500 vernacular manuscripts) does not discuss Helena as one of its 153 saints, but she is briefly mentioned in the readings about the birth of Christ, Silvester, Epiphany, and the exaltation of the cross.

Helena figures most extensively in its inventio crucis legend, although she is
arguably not the most important character in Da Varrazze's version.
275 Constantine sends her to Jerusalem to find the cross. Once there she rounds up all
Jewish men, threatening to burn them all if they do not help her, and Judas is handed
over to her. Helena starves Judas in a pit for a week, after which he agrees to help.
Judas's prayer reveals the cross (and later the nails), he accepts baptism, and
becomes bishop of Jerusalem. Helena sends a piece of the cross to her son, the rest
280 remaining where it was found. Two nails are worked into the emperor's bridle, a third
in a statue of Constantine in Rome, and a fourth is cast into the Adriatic to pacify
the sea.
In the Legenda Helena has little agency: she carries out Constantine's orders, while
Judas Cyriacus performs the miraculous findings. This is also, by and large, the
285 Helena that made her way into various visual representations of the inventio legend,
including monumental cycles like Piero della Francesco's inventio-cycle at Arezzo.
In visual representations Helena often (but not always) appears haloed, and the
Golden Legend occasionally calls her a saint.
Yet it was not the inventio legend that initially turned Helena into a saint,
290 although it did play an important role in that trajectory. Since the legend was the
stuff of church histories, it did magnify her historicity as well as her piety. It
transformed Eusebius's piously travelling empress into a lady who purposefully went
to the Holy Land to recover the cross. Moreover, it first added the dimension of
relics to Helena's story. The relics she was said to have collected in the Holy Land
295 do not (yet) travel far in the inventio legend: they stay in Jerusalem, go to the
bottom of the sea, or are worked into objects for Helena's son to support the
Christian empire (according to the version of the Golden Legend). At a later stage,
Helena's potential as a mobile, travelling character who could supply Holy Land
relics would become a central feature of her cult in Western Europe. This will be
300 explored in the final portion of this essay, but first we examine how Helena did in
fact become a saint.

Helena's Move to Sainthood
Narratives about relic mobility and relics' meaningful connection to geographical
place are crucial for understanding how Helena's cult first began. Pre-existing
305 legend/history also mattered: the inventio- and related legends established Helena's
image as a devout historical figure, but perceived 'history' by itself was not enough
and it initially did not lead to veneration in the West. In what follows I trace the
(legendary) fate of Helena's own bodily remains in order to elucidate how stories
about relic mobility and the crossing of boundaries were crucial for the creation of
310 her sainthood. The hagiographical narrative in question did not concern a cross
relic, but rather Helena's body, which had been interred in Rome.
Following her death in c. 328-329 Helena was buried in the imperial mausoleum just
outside Rome at the third mile of the Via Labicana (situated on the fundus Laurentus
formerly owned by herself). While both this mausoleum and the porphyry sarcophagus in
315 which she was buried may have originally been intended for a male member of the
imperial family, it is clear that she was buried here.
This is confirmed by sources such as the Liber Pontificalis which reports that during
the pontificate of Silvester (314-335) Constantine built a basilica for Marcellinus
and Petrus `ubi mater ipsius sepulta est Helena Augusta, via Lavicana millario III'.
320 He also endowed the site with precious gifts 'for the love of his mother and the
veneration of the saints'.
Three seventh-century pilgrims' guides to Rome also link this location to Helena,
referring to it as ad Helenam, ecclesia Helenae and sancta Helena in sua rotunda;
'church of Saint Helena (Sancta Elena), where her body lies'; and 'Beata Helena'.
325 The epithets sancta and beata in these seventh-century guides have been interpreted
by Seelinger as possibly already indicating saintly holiness instead of imperial
titulature, especially combined with a Greek graffito at the site which invokes
'Saint Helena'.
This may possibly suggest veneration of Helena in Rome while the city was under
330 Byzantine overlordship. However, if Helena was venerated in Rome during the early
Middle Ages, her cult does not seem to have been embraced with much enthusiasm. This
is corroborated by liturgical sources: Helena is not included in the Roman Canons of
the Mass. She does not appear in liturgies of the cross or in martyrologies until the
ninth century; these later inclusions stem from her Carolingian cult.
335 Even more telling is the obscure fate of Helena's remains in and around Rome. The
status of the mausoleum-cum-catacombs complex (also called inter duos lauros) at the
Via Labicana gradually declined.
In 774 Pope Hadrian I still ordered a renovation of the cimiterium of Marcellinus and
Petrus and during the pontificate of Stephen IV (816-817) new gold decorations for
340 the basilica beatae Helenae are reported.

The translatio of the relics of Marcellinus and Petrus to Seligenstadt in 827, famously ordered and recorded as a furtum sacrum by the Carolingian court historian Einhard (c. 775-840), marks a turning point in the prestige of the complex.

345 Not long after this, around 840, the theft of Helena's remains and their transportation to the abbey of Hautvillers in France was reported by a monk of that abbey (who may have been writing decades after the event).

The mausoleum seems to have nevertheless remained in use until the middle of the twelfth century, when Helena's porphyry sarcophagus was moved to the Lateran basilica so that Pope Anastasius IV (d. 1154) could be buried in it, a repurposing which

350 bespeaks little respect for either the empress or (possibly) the saint.

The site subsequently became ruinous, was used as private residence and stone quarry, and memory of Helena's burial there was lost until rediscovery in 1594 by catacomb-explorer Antonio Bosio (c. 1575-1629).

What stands out about the removal of Helena's relics to the city of Rome is that the

355 event hardly caused a stir. A single thirteenth- to fourteenth-century liturgical manuscript from an abbey in Castel Sant'Elia (Viterbo) briefly records the event. It contains readings for Helena's feast (based on Altmann of Hautvillers's vita), and concludes with a supplementary reading which relates that during the Pontificate of Innocent II (1130-1143) Helena's mausoleum was plundered for precious materials.

360 Helena's head and larger bones were then brought to the city for safety first, while the smaller bones later went along with the sarcophagus to the Lateran's, from where they were distributed among various churches.

However, where exactly the relics went within Rome is far from clear; contemporary translatio-narratives triumphantly claiming Helena's remains for a Roman church do

365 not survive. Where her relics may have gone can only be reconstructed from (much) later sources, which suggests that Helena's status as a saint in medieval Rome was humble at best, if she was venerated at all.

The apparent disinterest in the whereabouts of Helena's Roman relics is telling, since relic mobility required a story proving provenance, authenticity, and purpose

370 in the new location, in order to ensure continued cultural significance.

The fact that Helena's remains could be transported in and around Rome without an accompanying narrative tradition elucidating where they came from, where exactly they went, and why, suggests that her remains had little to no cultural significance as saintly relics at this time and place.

375 The importance of narratives about the mobility and geographical anchoring of relics becomes especially evident when the Roman situation is compared with the vibrant Helena cult which first developed in ninth-century France. Its earliest witness is a translatio account, a hagiographical form which creates or reinvigorates a cult by foregrounding the transportation of relics from one place to another.

380 In a hagiographical dossier on Helena, the Benedictine monk Altmann relates how her relics were stolen from Rome and taken to his abbey at Hautvillers in the diocese of Reims around 840 CE.

Whether the theft of Helena's remains from Rome and their transportation to the diocese of Reims actually happened is impossible to establish; it may not have.

385 This is not out of character for Carolingian reports about relic theft, which often disguised relic purchase or could be entirely fabricated.

Following more general Carolingian practice, Altmann composed a hagiographical dossier about Helena — containing a vita, a translatio, and miraculae (in that order) — offering, as it were, all the ingredients for sainthood in one package.

390 The vita records Helena's exemplary holy life and deeds, the translatio authenticates her relics and their presence at Hautvillers, and the miracles prove that Helena, i.e. her relics, performs as may be expected of a saint. In the vita and translatio in particular Altmann weaves together history and meaningful connection to place to provide a foundation for this new cult. Relic mobility plays a crucial role in tying

395 together this argument: it serves to connect the remains of the historical empress who had been interred in Rome with the relics which arrived in the diocese of Reims in the ninth century.

Moreover, by inventing a new layer of 'history' — the suggestion that Helena had been born in Gallia Belgica — Altmann turns the relic transferral into a meaningful return

400 to home ground; the crossing of the borders to her Gallic fatherland is a transformative moment in this narrative.

For his account of Helena's life, Altmann used historical texts well -known to his contemporaries, such as those by the ancient Church historians Paulus Orosius (c. 375/385-c. 420) and Rufinus of Acquileia (see above). For the inventio crucis he

405 relied on Cassiodorus's Historia Tripartita (see above). While Altmann knew the Judas Cyriacus legend, Judas is not mentioned, probably because this would detract from Helena's lustre.

Rather than other saints' lives or legends, Altmann's main hagiographical example was the Epitaphium Paulae in which Jerome of Stridon (c. 347-420) commemorates his friend

410 Paula, casting her as a model of matronly saintliness, including travel to the Holy
Land.
Altmann thus underscores the historicity of Helena, a lady whose holy deeds were
previously recorded by respected historians. However, these traditions had not — so
far — given rise to veneration of Helena in the West. Altmann needed to offer
415 something new, but equally authentic and trustworthy, to legitimize the cult that had
newly sprung up at Hautvillers. He accomplished this by retelling Helena's story in
the shape of a saint's vita and — crucially — by authenticating her relics and their
presence at Hautvillers by means of the translatio: the story of how the relics moved
there.
420 Proving that these relics were indeed authentic was essential, all the more because
it seems that Helena's relics arrived at the abbey at a less than ideal moment.
Altmann dates their arrival to 840, when — he says — the archiepiscopal seat of Reims
was vacant (due to altercations related to Carolingian dynastic succession). This
dating implicitly suggests two problems concerning Helena's relics. First, they could
425 not be authenticated by a bishop directly upon arrival. Second, they were acquired by
Halduin (not mentioned by Altmann), then abbot of Hautvillers. This abbot was deposed
in 853 because of his ordination by Bishop Ebbo of Reims (epis. 817-835; 840-841),
eventually disgraced for choosing the wrong side in dynastic conflicts. Altmann
explicitly indicates that he wrote Helena's vita at the request of Hincmar (epis.
430 845-882), the next Archbishop of Reims. Hincmar probably also acted as superior of
Hautvillers, since the abbey was apparently without abbot during this period.
Combined with the inquiry into and authentication of Helena's relics at Reims
(probably in 849), this suggests that the hagiographical dossier may have formed part
of a concerted effort to straighten out the problematic start for Helena's relics in
435 the diocese.
The narrative about the transferral of the relics to Hautvillers played an essential
role in solving these initial complications.
Authentication was therefore at the forefront of Altmann's mind when he composed his
dossier on Helena, sometime between 850 and 890 CE.
440 Apart from cleverly valorizing her historicity, he also aimed to silence any doubts
surrounding the provenance of her relics as well as to validate their rightful place
at Hautvillers. This is where Helena's furtive translatio comes in. Starting with a
chapter titled 'How the body of St Helena was taken to the Gallic fatherland (patria
Gallie)', Altmann relates the story of Theogesius, a Remois priest who had wanted to
445 go on pilgrimage to Rome for years, but could not on account of his bad health, until
he sought the intercession of Helena. The moment he set out, he started feeling
better, and he arrived in Rome cured. In the church where Helena was buried,
Theogesius stayed on after vespers and stole her relics at night (with God's
blessing, Altmann underlines), leaving for home the next morning.
450 So far so good. However, when Theogesius came to 'the borders of our fatherland',
things got sticky: 'useful doubts were born in the chests of many', who wanted to
know how such a great saint could be transported by such a lowly priest.
Altmann thus emphasizes that within the borders of the Gallic fatherland people
entertain a healthy distrust of obscure wandering priests claiming to possess
455 valuable relics.
He then goes on to demonstrate that in Theogesius's case their misgivings eventually
proved unfounded. Since doubts and altercations persisted, it was decided to hold an
assembly in the cathedral of Reims, at which a map of Rome and histories were
consulted. After much discussion the assembly unanimously concluded that Helena had
460 indeed been buried in Rome.
This still left open the question how such a great saint could ever reside at the
insignificant monastery of Hautvillers, giving rise to continued unrest. The monks of
Hautvillers then subjected themselves to much praying and fasting, before seeking the
truth through a 'legal examination', which again turned out in their favour.
465 To convince absolutely everyone, the (bishopless) cathedral of Reims, finally sent
three Hautvillers monks to Rome to inquire; they came back with more assurances about
the authenticity of Helena's relics and, as an additional bonus, relics of Polycarp,
Sebastian, Urban, and Quirinus.
With this Altmann considers the provenance of Helena's relics and their destination
470 exhaustively validated and authenticated and concludes the translatio portion of the
dossier.
Highlighting the special connection between Helena and Gallia Belgica and suggesting
that within this region her relics are more meaningful than elsewhere are the primary
aims of the dossier. Therefore, geography and the crossing of geographical borders
475 play an important role in the reasoning that Altmann uses to meaningfully connect
these — potentially problematic — relics to the right saint, to their previous and
new locations, and to the community that welcomes them. His suggestion that a map of
Rome was consulted at the assembly at Reims cathedral is a case in point. Geography

480 really begins to matter, however, the moment that Helena's relics cross the borders of the Gallic fatherland and their authenticity suddenly becomes an issue. He thus accentuates that inside this fatherland the potential significance of her relics was greater than outside of it. The suggestion of Helena's special connection with the Gallic fatherland does not come out of the blue. In the first line of the vita Altmann had already indicated that Helena was born in Trier; he is the first to ever

485 suggest this. There he also points out that her residence in Trier was converted into a church dedicated to St Peter, belonging to the episcopal see: 'the first of Gallia Belgica`.

Historians have sometimes puzzled over this suggestion, because Altmann's patron Hincmar (Archbishop of Reims) was embroiled in a conflict with Trier about which

490 Belgic episcopal seat — Trier or Reims — should take precedence over the other. Altmann's remarks about Trier do make sense, however. First, Trier is a historically plausible birthplace for Helena (more so than Reims at least), since Trier had been the imperial capital of both her partner and son.
Second, this also allowed Altmann to style the transferral of Helena's body to the

495 patria Galliae as a meaningful return, back to her own fatherland.
Finally, it offered a way of getting back at the see of Trier.
Right at the start of the translatio Altmann explains that it had pleased the Lord to exalt the region of Belgica Secunda (including the diocese of Reims) with the precious relics of a body (Helena), which had been born in Belgica Prima (of which

500 Trier was the capital).
Note the jibe here: Helena was born at Trier in Belgica Prima but Belgica Secunda (the diocese of Reims) received her relics, an even better price perhaps than episcopal precedence.
In Altmann's narrative Helena's relics accrete significance as they move: from

505 relatively indifferent holy props in the adventures of Theogesius, to the initially contested, but eventually very valuable relics of a holy empress returning to her fatherland, offering divine compensation for the political injustice of the primacy of the see of Trier over Reims. Crossing the boundaries of the Gallic fatherland is a transformative moment in this process. In the authentication procedures that ensue,

510 the authenticity of Helena's relics is put to the test by renewed mobility. Three respectable Hautvillers monks retrace humble Theogesius's steps to Rome and back, and since this imitative trip only produces more relics, more sanctity for their monastery, the prototype transferral (of Helena) is considered authentic. Seen from this perspective, Helena's translatio not only makes a double statement about the

515 place of departure and of arrival — as has been cogently argued by M. Caroli about translatio accounts in general — but it also makes a statement about relic mobility: the crossing of geographical boundaries and (renewed) mobility create sanctity.
While Altmann's claims about Helena's translatio from Rome to Hautvillers and the

520 connections which he elaborates between her and Gallia Belgica cannot stand the test of modern historical inquiry, his version of events did resonate with contemporaries. Acceptance of the narrative was undoubtedly helped by the fact that it fitted into an established literary tradition of Rome-to-Rhineland translations, originally started by Einhard's Translatio SS. Marcellini et Petri.

525 Altmann does not cite this archetypal translatio, nor does he say explicitly that Helena's relics came from the same cemetery. He does indicate that she was buried at inter duos lauros on the Via Labicana, citing the Liber Pontificalis (which does name Marcellinus and Petrus).
Whether or not Altmann was hoping to create associations with Einhard's well-known

530 translatio remains unclear. The commonality was not missed by later medieval commentators, in any case.
Two contemporary texts that refer to Helena's translatio — anonymous miraculae (after 882) and the ecclesiastical history of Reims by the Frankish historian Flodoard of Reims (c. 893/894-966) — are primarily interested in the miracles performed by

535 Helena's relics as they were on their way to Hautvillers (both based on Altmanns's own miraculae).
Flodoard even rewrites Helena's translatio as an itinerary of successive miracles on the way from Rome to Hautvillers, suggesting that the idea of successful relic mobility (i.e. condoned by the saint herself) appealed to contemporary audiences.

540 With his hagiographical dossier Altmann transformed Helena from a historical figure into a saint, by styling the translatio of her relics as a triumphant return 'home'. Despite Helena's long pre-existing role as auxiliary in the inventio crucis legend, she thus first became a saint in her own right through a story about the mobility and authenticity of her own relics, crucial for the new cult at Hautvillers, rather than

545 a narrative about cross relics. The eventual success of Helena's cult — i.e. its gradual evolution from local, to Roman, to universal — would be ensured by an increasing variety of sacred objects associated with the empress's legendary travels.

This growing assortment of holy things allegedly transported by Helena enhanced the appeal of her cult and allowed it to sail on the currents of not only the cult of
550 corporeal relics, but also that of holy objects (construed more broadly), as discussed by Bianca Lopez in this volume.
Following a Carolingian start, the next phase in Helena's route to universal sainthood was characterized by portable holy things.

Helena as Mover of Relics
555 After starting as a local Hautvillers/Reims phenomenon centred on Helena's own relics, her cult eventually began to spread and to include new aspects: Helena as an imperial local native and founder, as well as a supplier of (Holy Land) relics. In what follows, I highlight the interplay between relics (both Helena and Holy Land relics) and hagiography (as well as reinventions of late antique local history) to
560 demonstrate how her sainthood developed into a versatile paradigm of mobility, of herself and of holy objects.
Altmann briefly suggests that Helena sent various relics (including a Holy Land relic — Christ's last supper knife — but no cross relics) to Gallia, but seems uninterested in Helena as a supplier of relics.
565 Nevertheless this suggestion, and his suggestion of her Trier (or more broadly Western European) origin, set the tone for later medieval cult(s), which often tended to claim Helena as an imperial connection in local/national narratives.
This version of St Helena first developed in the Rhineland and was highly concerned with elaborating connections between local history and ecclesiastical and/or imperial
570 Rome. Transregional mobility was crucial for the connections which these traditions sought to elaborate between Rome, Jerusalem, and their own locale. As a result, it will become possible to elucidate why she attracted veneration at these locations, and not in Rome, during the early and high Middle Ages.
The earliest documented signs of Helena veneration outside the Champagne region (home
575 to Hautvillers and Reims) date to the late tenth century. In 952 a Helena relic was deposited, along with other relics, in the altar of a newly dedicated crypt at the abbey church of St Maximin in Trier.
In the same period, St Maximin's also began to claim that Helena had encouraged Constantine to found this abbey.
580 This claim and the inclusion of the relic point to awareness of Helena's supposed Trier origins, first introduced by Altmann more than a century before. Helena's Rhineland roots must have been widely accepted, since the tenth-century Passio S. Gereonis also proposes that Helena founded St Gereon's church in Cologne, which likewise points to a close association between herself and the region. In both cases,
585 claiming foundation by Helena not only increased prestige, but could also offer political advantages, because of the privileges enjoyed by imperial foundations.
During the eleventh century more and clearer signs of a cult appeared, most importantly in the shape of a hagiographical text which elaborates additional links between Helena and Trier, and which also discusses relics she would have sent there.
590 The Vita S. Helene et S. Agrici episcopi (c. 1050-1072) caters to the interests of Trier cathedral, as well as those of the abbey of St Maximin.
The double vita first briefly describes Helena's life loosely based on Altmann's vita Helene, with as the main innovation the twist that Trier had reverted to paganism while she was away, first finding the cross in Jerusalem and later living in Rome.
595 From there, she then lobbied for the reconversion of her home city with Pope Sylvester, resulting in the successful mission of Agricius, former patriarch of Antioch, to Trier.
The somewhat longer life of Agricius that follows then strives to elaborate close connections between Rome and Trier, emphasizing that the latter's church is an
600 apostolic foundation, a second Rome, in order to promote Trier's independence and primacy as the first see of Gaul and Germany.
The double vita stresses the importance of relics Helena would have sent to her home city by giving them to Agricius to take with him on his mission. According to the vita she prepared a reliquary with relics she had collected in the Holy Land: the
605 body of St Matthew the apostle, a crucifixion nail, and a knife from the last supper (first mentioned by Altmann, see above), plus unnamed 'relics of the Lord' (no explicit mention of cross relics). These relics play a key role in the (forged) 'Sylvester charter', quoted in this text, in which Pope Sylvester would have granted Trier primacy in Gallia and Germania.
610 According to the double vita this privilege was confirmed through the relics sent by Helena.
Helena thus not only initiated Agricius's reconversion mission as a caring imperial hailing from Trier, but she also supplied the tangible evidence of Trier's exceptional mandate as episcopal see in the shape of relics. It seems that the body
615 of Matthew and a crucifixion nail could be worshipped in the city during the eleventh

century; the abbey of St Maximin claimed to possess the knife from the last supper. The double vita (and in it Helena specifically) thus also allowed for authentication of Holy Land relics present in Trier; as a Holy Land pilgrim, she must have surely supplied the real thing.

620 Which appeared first in Trier, these relics or the (possibly orally transmitted) legend that Helena had supplied them, is a chicken-or-egg conundrum. It is clear, however, that the various roles attributed to Helena in the eleventh-century double vita — as an imperial, Christian founder of Trier, as supplier and authenticator of Holy Land relics — converge to further local interests in the shape of ecclesiastical

625 power and assets, namely relics.

The role for Helena in the ecclesiastical history of Trier suggested by the The Vita S. Helene et S. Agrici episcopi provided a common thread for subsequent medieval traditions. For example, the slightly later city chronicle Gesta Treverorum (1101) lists additional relics sent to Trier by Helena in confirmation of the Silvester

630 charter: the body of Matthew, the Holy Robe, a tooth of St Peter, sandals of St Andrew, and the head of Pope Cornelius, also conveniently introducing relics preserved by Trier cathedral.

The Holy Robe, which was moved to the cathedral's main altar in 1196, has enjoyed a particularly long career as one of Trier's prize relics. It was first displayed for

635 Emperor Maximilian I (and to eager crowds) during the imperial diet of 1512, and has attracted popular devotion at many subsequent showings, the last of which occurred in 2012.

Outside of Trier, in the wider Rhineland region, legendary associations between Helena and the Theban Legion — a Roman legion which converted to Christianity and was

640 collectively martyred by the end of the third century CE — were important for her cult. From the tenth century onward, she was typically credited with founding churches to house the remains of sainted Theban soldiers, such as St Gereon's at Cologne (see above) and St Victor's at Xanten. Menager cogently analyses these traditions as offering counterweight to the (Helena-based) claims and ambitions of

645 Trier, while displaying a comparable interest in the benefits of claiming imperial foundation and in renovatio imperii rhetoric.

With time, Cologne could also boast its own Helena-associated Holy Land relics. The remains of the three Mages were said to have been found and brought to Constantinople by herself, before they had resurfaced in Milan in 1158. The archbishop of Cologne,

650 who accompanied Barbarossa on his campaign against Milan, acquired them there for his cathedral in 1164.

The above illustrates Helena's appeal as a legendary imperial founder of ecclesiastical establishments and bringer of arguably authentic Holy Land relics in the Rhineland. It does not necessarily point to her veneration as a saint. However,

655 in addition to liturgical and hagiographical witnesses, the presence of numerous Helena relics in the area clearly indicates a vibrant cult.

The abbey of St Maximin in Trier possessed a relic already in 952 (see above). During the eleventh century Helena relics started appearing across the Rhineland and beyond.

660 Relics were recorded at Echternach (Luxemburg) in 1039, at Gorze near Metz in 1068 and 1077, at Trier-Euren in 1075, at Bonn in 1135, at Cologne in 1135 and 1219, at Xanten in 1220.

In the category of slightly larger relics, the provost of St Gereon in Cologne acquired an arm-relic of Helena in 1220, the archbishop of Trier received a head-

665 relic from Emperor Charles IV for which the bishop had a reliquary bust made in 1380, and a hand-relic is mentioned in the records of St Victor's at Xanten in 1507.

Contact relics (sanctified by proximity to Helena's person) were also recorded. A monstrance said to incorporate the corona sanctae Helenae was first carried in a

670 procession at St Gereon's in Cologne in 1266.

Various Helena-related objects were reported at Trier cathedral at several points during the later Middle Ages, such as another crown, an ancient drinking bowl, a comb, and a brooch.

From the long eleventh century onward, Helena became widely venerated as a saint in

675 the Rhineland, while at the same time becoming a key character in local ecclesiastical histories, as an imperial local native, founder of churches, and bringer of relics. This version of Helena, both in her saintly and her imperial capacity, continued to shape local historiography and devotion. The Medulla Gestorum Treveren (1514) by auxiliary bishop and university rector Johan Enen (c. 1480- 1519),

680 for example, emphasizes the apostolic and imperial roots of ecclesiastical Trier according to the same paradigm first presented by the eleventh-century double vita of Helena and Agricius. This sixteenth-century description of the religious foundations and sacred objects in Trier reserves a large role for Helena in the history of this 'holy city'.

685 Her impact on the present is also discussed, in the shape of important relics
preserved at Trier cathedral.
Enen first stresses that this cathedral was converted from Helena's palace, and then
discusses her head-relic as one of the prize heiltumb of this establishment, others
of which included several relics she had supplied: the body of St Matthew, a
690 crucifixion nail, the head of Pope Cornelius, and above all the Holy Robe.

Late Medieval Developments and Concluding Remarks
It has been my object to demonstrate that Helena's medieval sainthood was not made by
the inventio crucis legend (although it provided an important narrative foundation),
but by narratives about relic mobility and the potential of her legendary personage
695 for elaborating physical connections (in the shape of relics) with the major
religious centres elsewhere, most importantly Rome and Jerusalem. Altmann of
Hautvillers first created her as a saint in the ninth century by telling the story of
the translatio of her relics from Rome to the diocese of Reims. His innovative claim
that Helena had been born in Gallia gave meaning to this furtive relic relocation:
700 the empress was returning home to honour her home region. During the long eleventh
century, meaningful relic transfer became even more important for Helena's cult as it
spread in the Rhineland, and she received an additional role as supplier of Holy Land
relics, which in turn also confirmed connections with ecclesiastical and imperial
Rome.
705 The relic-obsessed Rhineland paradigm for Helena's sainthood, fundamentally
characterized by relic mobility and interested in imperial allure, would go on to
shape several subsequent variants of Helena's legend and cult. During the later
Middle Ages it also co-existed — and sometimes competed with — variant traditions.
Cults in France remained more Hautvillers-oriented: the cathedral at Orleans received
710 Helena relics from the abbey in the thirteenth century, and Helena's head was
venerated at the town of Montier-en-Der (rivalling Trier's head-relic).
During the thirteenth century a new cult developed in Venice; in 1212
Helena's body was said to have been moved there from Constantinople, a translatio
first recorded in the chronicle by Doge Andrea Dandolo (1343-1354).
715 The Rhineland paradigm was paralleled by a largely secular British Helena tradition
which took its cue from Altmann's keenness to 'press the local connection'.
Henry of Huntington's Historia Anglorum (1123-1154) first presents Helena as a
British princess, the daughter of King Cole of Colchester, to establish Constantine's
British nationality in his discussion on the development of the British monarchy; the
720 inventio crucis is not mentioned. Geoffrey of Monmouth popularized this story in his
Historia regum Britannie (c. 1136-1138), portraying Helena as the excellent
progenitrix of English monarchs, including King Arthur.
Geoffrey too is unconcerned with Helena's saintly deeds.
Later chronicle traditions did add religious overtones by referring to the inventio
725 crucis, and the British Helena first entered hagiography with the Vita sancta Helene
(c. 1198-1207) by Jocelin of Furness, but on the whole Helena does not appear to have
been a popular saint in Britain.
Helena again appeared in British hagiography three centuries later in the Nova
Legenda Anglie (1516), an early sixteenth-century revision of a pre-existing
730 collection of English saints.
Helena also features in post-Reformation English Catholic hagiographical collections,
such as the Stowe 53 and Folger V.b. 334 manuscripts discussed by Jenny Bledsoe
elsewhere in this volume, which illustrates the adaptability of her story. However,
the British Helena Legend predominantly thrived in secular contexts with nationalist
735 agendas, which were served by proving Constantine's British birth, from around 1500
CE onward, until Edward Gibbon dispelled the myth in the late eighteenth century.
That the British Helena mostly remained the stuff of historiographical rather than
hagiographical legend is corroborated by the striking insular disinterest in Helena
(or Helena-associated) relics.
740 Despite important differences, the Rhineland cult and the British tradition have one
thing in common: they value Helena for the potential of her legendary character to
create links with Rome, imperial and/or ecclesiastical. This commonality helps
explain why in twelfth-century Rome, it was all right to reuse Helena's sarcophagus
for the burial of a pope and disperse her remains to (initially) unknown locations,
745 while this would have been unthinkable in the Rhineland or Britain during the same
period. Rome already was Rome, the former imperial capital, with plenty of obvious
claims to being the centre of Christian empire. The papacy could invoke the donatio
Constantini; there was no need to stake any claims based on Helena's legendary
character.
750 It seems that this had not changed by the 1260s, if we refer to the Golden Legend as
a touchstone of widely accepted traditions about Helena's legendary deeds on the
Italian peninsula. Jacopo da Varazze briefly observes that Helena may have been born

in either Britain or Trier, but does not seem to care which is true.
He also does not reflect on where her relics might be, and does not connect her with
755 Rome, except by observing that she had one crucifixion nail incorporated into a
statue of Constantine in Rome.
In the legend on the birth of Christ it is suggested as an aside that Helena brought
nativity hay to Rome, but that is where her links with Rome end.
Helena thus appears in the role of supplier of Holy Land relics, but there are no
760 indications that Rome claimed to be a prime destination of such relics at this point
in time.
This would change over the next few centuries. Several allegedly Helena-supplied Holy
Land relics can be venerated in Rome still today: cross relics, the titulus crucis,
earth from the Holy Land, the scala sancta, etc. The Rhineland paradigm for Helena's
765 sainthood clearly caught on in Rome. These Roman traditions claim to be ancient, yet
they are surprisingly late, as are traditions about Helena's own relics within Rome.
Only from the late fifteenth century onward did Holy Land relics supposedly brought
by Helena and relics of herself start to be a factor of note in the sacred cityscape
of the eternal city and only in the course of the seventeenth century did her cult
770 become fully established.
Eventually it was this Roman Helena legend that would go on to become so ubiquitous
that the impression that Helena had always been a saint in Rome and in Catholicism
has become difficult to avoid. In reality, her sainthood was made by medieval
narratives about sacred mobility, which clearly enjoyed renewed/continued cultural
775 relevance in Renaissance Rome.
Helena's long trajectory to universal sainthood exemplifies several larger trends in
the cult of the saints as it evolved within the contexts of both medieval and post-
Tridentine Catholicism. It is, for example, illustrative of the general (although
never altogether hegemonic) shift from the early medieval abundance of geographically
780 localized cults to the handful of universal star-saints which dominated early
modernity.
Moreover, it participates in the broader medieval preoccupation with holy objects
(including relics) which are at once similar and dissimilar to the heavenly (Christ)
and earthly (Holy Land) originals which they represent.
785 The growing number of such nuggets of portable sanctity associated with Helena's cult
eventually ensured its success. The aim of this essay has been to bring into focus
the highly dynamic and multifaceted processes of medieval hagiographic construction
and to make a case for studying medieval sainthood as a dynamic conversation between
various texts and objects in perpetual geographic transition.
790 As a result, it has become clear that hagiographical narratives about relic mobility
were not just a Carolingian or a high medieval phenomenon, but remained important
well into the late medieval and early modern period.

1 Brown, The Cult of the Saints; Angenendt, Heilige und Reliquien; Freeman, Holy Bones, Holy
Dust
795 2 Geary, Furta Sacra, pp. 6-7
3 Compare, for example, Geary, Furta Sacra, p. 82, and Oosten, `The Mausoleum of Helena`,
p.138
Brown, The Cult of the Saints; Angenendt, Heilige und Reliquien; Freeman, Holy Bones, Holy
Dust
800 4 Lavin, Bernini and the Crossing of Saint Peter`s.
5 Compare, for example, Harbus, Helena of Britain, p. 20 ; Pohlsander, Helena, pp. 186-95
6 The most rigorous and complete contribution (thus structured) to date is Drijvers's Helena
Augusta, on which I base my discussion of the historical Helena. Other examples include
Couzard, Sainte Helene; Hunt's Holy Land Pilgrimage, pp. 28-49; and Lauer, Kaiserin Helena.
805 For a recent addition to the bibliography on the historical Helena, see Hillner, Helena
Augusta.
7 Drijvers, Helena Augusta, pp. 9-12; Drepanum is typically accepted as likely option, compare
for example Pohlsander, Helena, pp. 3-5; Kajava, 'Some Remarks'; Vatchkova, '(Saint) Helena of
Sofia'.
810 8 Drijvers, Helena Augusta, pp. 12-15.
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