

and is used in a non-Pauline sense) do not distract from the overall high quality of these chapters.

Production or editorial slips are rare but do occasionally affect the sense: e.g., the first full sentence on p. 48 is missing one or more words; on 105 line 26, for “*1 Clement*” read instead “*Pol. Phil.*”; and on pp. 111–112, the introduction to the discussion of the use of Ephesians mentions Ignatius, Polycarp, and the *Shepherd*, as does the conclusion. In between, there is a two-paragraph discussion of Ignatius and a long paragraph on the *Shepherd*—but not a word about Polycarp’s possible use of Ephesians. It certainly appears that a paragraph (or more) discussing *Pol. Phil.* 12.1 is missing from this section.

Overall, this is an excellent addition to the “Cambridge Companions” series. The chapters on various documents comprising the AF offer reliable guides both to the document and current scholarship regarding it. The nine thematic chapters set this volume apart from similar volumes and add greatly to its worth and usefulness.

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***Helena Augusta: Mother of the Empire.* By Julia Hillner. Women in Antiquity. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. xxiv + 381 pp. \$99 cloth, \$29.95 paper.**

This is a chronological biography of Constantine’s mother, the Empress Helena. Ordinarily that would not sound like an original thesis but in fact it is. Most of the written evidence we have of Helena’s life covers very short periods, particularly late in her life when Constantine became emperor and gave her an imperial title. We also have legends written after her death. But what of all the years in between, when the records are silent about her life?

Trying to extrapolate the lives of people out of power in the ancient world (the modern world as well for that matter) is always difficult. Hillner’s approach reminds us of the truth of the adage “absence of evidence isn’t evidence of absence.” The women were always there—and always influential—even if the standard historical sources did not mention them. Hillner had to turn to unusual sources and creative interpretations to try to recreate the silent years of Helena’s life.

Hillner’s most creative and insightful analysis comes from her work on art and archaeology. She analyzes the clothing and hairstyles on sculptures, mosaics, and coinage to see how the views of imperial women changed over time as women became increasingly central to imperial propaganda. She even notes the significance of imperial women’s noses in art to show family connections. Hillner also studies little-known tombs of imperial women to consider their roles and portrayals. These sources, in addition to a careful analysis of geography and even women’s names, shed light on their experience.

Through this careful analysis, the author demonstrates and recreates the central importance of the imperial women of the late third and early fourth centuries. The family ties—whether of concubinage or formal marriage—were central to and shaped the political history of the age. Readers will also appreciate the chart of the complex family

tree that shows the family ties that the author describes. All these details make this work important for anyone who wants to understand the period between 248 and 329.

The work is organized chronologically, since it promises to be a biography. Part I, ca. 248–289, sets the stage of the frontier where we meet Helena. She was born in about 250, and by 270 she worked in a tavern that served the military. Hillner's analysis of tavern workers and prostitution offers a fine picture of this life. This section of the work offers a good portrait of Helena as she lives with Constantius, has her son Constantine, and then disappears from the sources when Constantine contracts a politically expedient marriage with Theodora.

The second section of the book covers ca. 289–317. During these some 28 years, Helena disappears from the sources. During this section, Hillner does the fine analysis of other imperial women, but Helena stays absent. I would have liked some speculation on where she lived and how she was supported, but I suppose a careful scholar, like Hillner, avoided such speculation.

The third section, called “Center Stage,” covers the period 317–329, when the sixty-seven-year-old Helena was brought to court, named empress, and became a public figure. It is in this section where Hillner's deep knowledge of all the sources really shines and Helena comes alive. We follow the Empress's life in Rome—where she lived, her impact on the political life, and even on the spaces of the city. I am particularly impressed with the author's careful study of art and coinage to show how the images themselves trace the political history of Constantine's family and Helena's changing role as she rises in status until she is the *genetrix* (creator) of the house of Constantine. She achieved this height of respect in 326, the year Constantine celebrated his twenty-year reign, and the same year he killed his wife Fausta and his eldest son Crispus. No wonder he elevated the grandmotherly Helena as a virtuous female head of his household.

In 326, the seventy-six-year-old Helena embarked on her most famous journey: a two-year voyage from Rome through the eastern provinces to Palestine and Jerusalem. Once again, Hillner's details of the Empress's travels are impressive and bring the journey to life. The author also separates out the reality of a journey that was as much political as religious, offering a good counter to later stories that praised Helena's religious impact. Shortly after her return, Helena died and was buried in Rome.

In a typical biography, the story would end with the death of the protagonist. However, Hillner adds another section that extends from Helena's death in about 329 to about 600. This section covers the memory and shifting reputation of Helena. The deceased empress was first ignored as political winds shifted, then she became a model for the influential Theodosian empresses, and finally venerated as a saint in the western portion of the empire.

This last section, with its detailed account of the years of the Theodosian dynasty and beyond, appropriately demonstrates that what we know about Helena is mostly about how those around her used her as a symbol. That is true of this biography of the empress; we seldom get a sense of Empress Helena. She was public when useful and absent when she was not. Readers looking for the empress herself might be disappointed. However, readers who want to know the history of the third and fourth centuries will find this book essential. It shows how the wives and mothers of the period were central to the story of the complex and violent dynastic politics of the era. Too many books have left that part of the story out, but this skillfully

researched work has given the full story of the women and men who guided the late empire.

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***Earthquakes and Gardens: Saint Hilarion's Cyprus.* By Virginia Burrus. Class 200: New Studies in Religion. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2023. x + 202 pp. \$99.00 cloth; \$27.50 paper.**

This book was a delight to read. Virginia Burrus takes what might seem to be a fairly typical hagiography, Jerome's *Life of Saint Hilarion*, and offers a deeply thoughtful series of interpretive readings infused with personal reflections, sentimentality, and ruminations on memory, ecopoetics, and art. The volume is full of tensions, as alluded to in the subtitle, *Earthquakes and Gardens*, between living and dying, love and loss, building and destroying, familiarity and remoteness, and it is a meditation on the meaning, imagined and lived, of place. Burrus shares about her initial plans to spend time physically on Cyprus, to "think about how direct, embodied experiences of landscapes interact with literary experiences" (7), and to converse with locals, guardians of the island's secrets. But her good intentions were waylaid by the pandemic, and so her study becomes an exemplum of how one might come to know a place so intimately from so far away.

After the introduction, the book is structured as six "experiments," arranged in two parts. The absence of chapter numbers renders this learned book into an almost travelogue, an exercise in storytelling. Jerome the raconteur tells us about Hilarion, who spent his last five years on the island, settling in a spot some twelve miles from the sea, a remote but almost Edenic site with trees and a small garden. Burrus works with mere fragments; the *Vita* does not have *that* much to say about Hilarion in Cyprus. But this is also the point. So often we work with literary or material fragments, trying to piece together a coherent narrative, but Burrus challenges us to free them to interact and converse with other media in a kind of mediating dialogue that can serve to amplify and vivify the remains, each time in a different way.

In the first essay of Part II: Paphos, Burrus brings poetry into the conversation, providing insights into ancient poems to show how in some, few words can evoke powerful and sensorial memories of a place, while in others, such as a poem of Claudian, epiphastic flourishes seem to overfill a canvas, yet can also feel unfinished, full of potential. She then pivots to contemporary poets, Fikret Demirag, whose writings reveal the many layers of Cyprus, so many of them imposed by colonial powers, and Stephanos Stephanides, who in collaboration with photographer Anandana Kapur, produced a series of postcards whose images evoke sundry manifestations of Aphrodite. One of these, Burrus suggests, is Hilarion himself. She next shifts deftly into a discussion of seismology and what can be said and done about historical earthquakes. Many premodern sources mention earthquakes, but it is a challenge to chart, or as she describes, curate them: when, where, how often, how intense. Burrus delves into the excavation