

Once Upon a **SAINT**

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Empress Helena, Equal to the Apostles



You've probably heard of the St. Helena who was the mother of St. Constantine. She is known especially for her journey to the Holy Land, where she sought and found the cross upon which Christ died. St. Helena is honored as a holy woman and a great empress.

There is one story about St. Helena that you may not have heard of. In the year 327, St. Helena came across a beautiful island in Cyprus while traveling. There was a problem with this island, however. There had been a lot of rain, and in the moist, warm weather, poisonous snakes had multiplied. There were so many snakes that the people left the island. Helena decided she must build a monastery there and encourage the people to return. She appointed a duke to oversee everything and provided money for the building.

However, the builders told Saint Helena with sorrowful hearts that they could not build there, the snakes being too numerous. Saint Helena was used to working out problems, however, just as she figured out the puzzle as to where the Cross of Christ lay hidden.

"I know!" Empress Helena cried, "we shall have Egypt send us cats! They love cats, and the cats will be able to get rid of the snakes."

"Cats?" Exclaimed the messenger, "are you sure they're fierce enough for these brutal serpents?"

"I'm sure of it!" replied Helena, "please order 1000 cats from Egypt and Persia!"

No one could say no to the Empress, and so 1000 cats were sent to Cyprus.

The cats were fierce indeed. The monks rang the bell in the morning, and off the cats would go, killing, eating, and chasing away the snakes. The monks rang the bell again, and the cats ran back, treated to delicious meat and milk to give them strength. Many cats were killed in their noble endeavors, and the cats that were wounded in their battles with the snakes were cared for by the monks, who tenderly nursed them to health.

When the snakes were gone, the Monastery of St. Nicholas was completed. Saint Helena was afraid that the cats would be forced to leave since their job as snake-killers was finished, so she told the monks that she would give them the land surrounding the monastery as long as they continued to feed and care for at least 100 cats. They agreed since they'd grown very fond of their mighty feline warriors.

After many hundreds of years, there was a Turkish invasion, and the monks were taken away from the monastery. Many were killed, and no one came back. The cats ran wild about the island as the monastery fell to ruins.

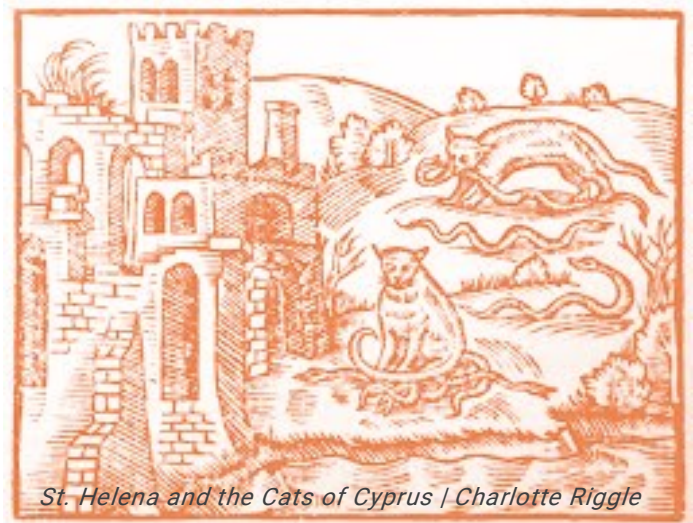
In 1983, religious sisters took over the monastery and fixed it up again. Since the cats were gone, some snakes had returned. The sisters decided that what made the most sense was to follow in the steps of St Helena, and they brought in some



Drawing by Anne O'Loughlin

new cats. Some of the wild cats decided they would come back, too. To this day there are around 100 cats at the Monastery of St. Nicholas of the Cats, and the Cyprus Cats are well-known as ferocious hunters.

We celebrate the feast of St. Helena the Empress of Constantinople on the 21st of May. She helps with lots of matters, but people especially like to ask her intercession for their cats!



St. Helena and the Cats of Cyprus | Charlotte Riggle