

**CYNEWULF'S 'ELENE': A
METRICAL TRANSLATION
FROM ZUPITZA'S EDITION**

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Cynewulf's 'Elene': A Metrical Translation from Zupitza's Edition by Jane Menzies

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JANE MENZIES

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ST HELENA, THE MOTHER OF CONSTANTINE.

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*A METRICAL TRANSLATION FROM
ZUPITZA'S EDITION*

BY

JANE MENZIES

WITH A FRONTISPIECE

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
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Lucy Osgood fund.

INTRODUCTION.

THE poem of 'Elene,' or 'The Invention of the Cross,' dates in all probability from the eighth century. Its source is by some critics supposed to be the Latin Life of Saint Cyriacus, the Judas of the poem. Others are of opinion that it came to England in Greek form. The story is briefly as follows :—

In the year 233, the sixth of the reign of Constantine, the Roman empire was overrun by Huns, Hredgoths, and Franks. The Romans, though well prepared, are inferior in numbers. The Emperor, in a dream, sees in the clouds a shining cross with the inscription, "In hoc signo vinces." The next morning he orders a standard with a similar cross to be prepared, and borne in front of his army.

After gaining the victory, he is baptised by Sylvester, and having in vain made inquiries as to whence the vision came, he requests Helena, his mother, to sail to Palestine, and there find the true cross buried in the earth. Helena at once departs thither by sea, and arrives in Jerusalem.

She there questions the wisest Jews, without result. Judas, one of the most sagacious of them, tells his friends in private that his father and grandfather had declared that, as soon as the cross of the Lord should be sought for, the Jewish kingdom would perish.

Helena questions Judas in vain; and not until he has been starved in a dungeon for seven days will he reveal what he knows. Brought out of his prison, he engages in prayer, and the three crosses are found. Still it is uncertain which of the three is the true cross of the Lord; and this is only determined by the restoration to life of a dead youth on whose body the true cross is laid. The devil appears, and complains of being defrauded of his rights; but Judas silences him. A joyful message is sent to Rome; and by order of Constantine, a church is erected on the spot where the cross was found. Judas is baptised, and, under the new name of Cyriacus, becomes Bishop of Jerusalem. Afterwards, by the wish of Helena, the nails which had pierced the hands and feet of the Crucified One are also found, and worked into a bit for the bridle of Constantine's war-horse. Lastly, Helena assembles the Jewish people, and exhorts them every year to celebrate the glorious day on which the Holy Cross was found. In six days summer would begin;¹ the cross was found on the 3d of May.²

¹ See note on p. 14.

² Though in such a tale some may expect to find symbolic truth rather

With regard to the authorship of the poem, it was discovered by Grimm that the name of "Cynewulf" is embedded in runes in the last canto. Kemble, Wright, Thorpe, and other critics, agree with Grimm in supposing him to have been the Abbot of Peterborough of that name, who lived in the eleventh century.

The critics Dietrich and Leo, however, conclude—the one from textual, the other from linguistic evidence—that Cynewulf was a poet of the eighth century. Dietrich supposes Cynewulf, in line 1277 of 'Elene,' to regret the composition of his 'Riddles,' and adds: "From the 'Riddles' it is evident that Cynewulf in his earlier years led a worldly life, taking pleasure in battle and in arms, in music and various amusements."

Dietrich ascribes to Cynewulf the "Dream of the Holy Rood," a verse of which is carved in runes on the cross at Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire. Since that cross must have been erected about the year 764, he thinks it probable that it was placed there at the command of some noble lord of that region, as a memorial to the poet Cynewulf, then and fact, yet the following facts are important in connection with it. Grimm tells us that it was not the Huns, but Maxentius, who crossed the Danube to attack Rome, and the battle was at Pons Albinus (Tiber). At the place where the cross lay under the earth, the heathens had erected a temple of Venus, in order to prevent the Christians from digging there,—a circumstance which the Anglo-Saxon poet conceals. After Cyriacus has found the nails and given them to Helena, she gives them to Constantine. (See Grimm's Introduction to 'Andreas and Elené.')

old man. In this supposition Grein and Ten Brink agree, and their theories together would furnish as good materials for a memoir as many modern biographers have had.

Cynewulf, by their account, was born of a noble family in the beginning of the eighth century. According to the custom of the time, though not destined for monastic orders, he was sent to a monastery school. His happy youth and early manhood are described in the Rhyme-song, and during this cheerful period the 'Riddles' were probably composed. But the days of joy and youth passed by. Cynewulf took holy orders, and began to write sacred poetry. Raised to a bishopric in 740, this promotion, in unquiet times, brought him only care and trouble. Having, without any fault of his own, provoked the anger of the Northumbrian king, he spent some time in prison, comforted and refreshed only by the writing of his poems, till, bent with age and weary of life, he resigned his office in 780, and died three or four years later in retirement.

And whither did he retire? To Ruthwell. One of his predecessors had during his own life caused a sculptured cross to be erected as a memorial of himself, and it appears not improbable that Cynewulf, on his resignation, retired to the place of his birth, where his noble ancestors had owned the land, and having chosen his tomb, caused a cross to be erected there, with verses from one of his own poems; the more likely, since in the Rhyme-song he says that fate had ordained that he should dig his own grave.