

## JERUSALEM PILGRIMS AND THE HOLY CROSS IN THE FOURTH CENTURY \*

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### Pilgrimage as a Phenomenon

Pilgrimage is a universal human phenomenon. It seems to be part of human nature to be able to feel reverence for particular places and to think of them as holy. In order to reach such places we need to travel. Pilgrimage thus appeals both to our sense of the holy and to our love of adventure – that innate desire of leaving ordinary life behind and setting out on a long journey with the hope of being somehow transformed inwardly at the same time.

In Christianity, the prominence of pilgrimage can be partly explained by these universal motives, and partly by others that are specific to the Jewish-Christian tradition. First, there is Biblical precedent. The Jews would travel to the temple in Jerusalem in order to participate in the three great festivals of Pesach (*Passover*), Shavuot (*Weeks*), and Sukkot (*Tabernacles or Booths*).<sup>1</sup> Jesus is said to have followed his parents on such a pilgrimage when he was twelve years old,<sup>2</sup> and most likely these trips were a regular part of his upbringing. The celebration of Shavuot or Pentecost, as it is called in the New

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<sup>1</sup> Exod. 23:14–19.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:41f.

Testament, moreover marked an important event in the history of the Church, described in Acts. When the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles, Peter preached to a large crowd of Jewish pilgrims from all over the world and some 3000 of them were baptized.<sup>3</sup> We may infer that those pilgrims then brought Christianity back to where they came from, initiating the worldwide dissemination of the Gospel.

On a more theological note, Christianity has a strong notion of history as a divinely led process, what we today call 'salvation history'. Important events in this salvation history are recorded in the Bible. For many Christians there are also events subsequent to the composition of the Bible that are part of salvation history. The places where those events occurred acquire a specific importance, which makes them desirable to visit. Indeed, salvation history extends also into the future, to the Second Coming of Christ. In the Early Church, it was firmly believed that Christ would return to the place from which he left earth, that is, to Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> The earthly Jerusalem therefore received a strong spiritual significance as being both the place where highly significant events in salvation history had occurred, and the place where history would reach its consummation.

Finally, the importance of the Incarnation is not to be overlooked in relation to Christian pilgrimage. On the one hand, according to Christian faith, God cannot be confined to a single place but is omnipresent. Or, in a succinct formulation from traditional theology, 'God is nowhere locally present but everywhere totally present'. But on the other hand, there is the belief that God became a human being at a specific moment in time and in a specific place. That belief confers on the very concept of place a new dignity. It suggests that when God so wishes, a particular place can become the vehicle of His presence. God can be sought not only in the heart but also in a holy place.

Obviously, there is a tension here between universality and particularity. And many spiritual masters in the Christian tradition have warned that places and travel can pose spiritual dangers. Therefore, while pilgrimage is ever-present in the Christian tradition, it is also a contested phenomenon among Christians. An Irish monk of

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:1-41.

<sup>4</sup> This belief was based on several Bible passages, such as Acts 1:11 and a comparison between the prophecies of Matth. 24 and Joel 3.

the ninth century composed the following short poem on pilgrimage to Rome:

Go to Rome – much trouble, little gain.  
The King you seek is not there, you bring him with you.<sup>5</sup>

As we shall see, the Church fathers St. Jerome and St. Gregory of Nyssa had widely differing views about the benefits of pilgrimage.<sup>6</sup>

### Early Christian Pilgrims to the Holy Land

The Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70, effectively destroying also the phenomenon of Jewish pilgrimage in its traditional form. But at the same time, there were increasing numbers of gentile Christians who read about holy places in various books of the Bible and became curious about them. At least from the second century, there is clear evidence of a kind of Biblical tourism among Christians.<sup>7</sup> In the middle of the second century, we hear that a cave in Bethlehem is pointed out as the place where Christ was born. In the same period, bishop Melito of Sardis travelled to the Holy Land in order to find out exactly which texts belonged to the Old Testament, but also to see "the place where these things were preached and done". In the early third century, Alexander, a future bishop of Jerusalem, travelled from Cappadocia to the holy city "for prayer and investigation of the sites" and about the same time, Origen travelled in Palestine to seek out places mentioned in the Scriptures; we also hear that Origen was visited by a Cappadocian bishop Firmilianus, who had come to Caesarea "for the sake of the holy places". And there were

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<sup>5</sup> Translated from the Norwegian in *Irsk lyrikk fra 500-tallet til vår tid. I utvalg og oversettelse ved Jan Erik Rekdal* ([Stabekk]: Bokklubbens lyrikvenner 1985), 16.

<sup>6</sup> More on the theology of pilgrimage will be found in Craig G. Bartholomew & Fred Hughes (eds.), *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate 2004).

<sup>7</sup> My position is that Christian pilgrimage did not undergo any radical changes during the first four Christian centuries. Others have argued that it did change radically at the beginning of the fourth century. For a balanced discussion of the problem, with ample references to literature, see Andreas Westergren, *Sketching the Invisible: Patterns of Church and City in Theodoret of Cyrrhus'* Philotheos Historia, diss. (Lund 2012), 215–219.

others, too.<sup>8</sup>

But in this period, Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land was essentially a private enterprise, undertaken by a few dedicated individuals who had the means to make such a journey. There were several difficulties, and the chief among them was that the travel routes and the holy sites themselves were still undeveloped. Indeed, many holy sites would have been extremely difficult to identify, while others were occupied by pagan temples and cults. Jerusalem itself had been converted into a pagan city by Emperor Hadrian, starting in the year 130. After the Bar Kochba revolt (A.D. 132–136), Jews were banned from entering the city. This ban may have affected Christians as well, at least for a time. But above all, there was now nothing to visit in Jerusalem. Where the Temple had been, there were statues of Jupiter and of the Emperor. And on the spot where Christ had been crucified and buried, there was a temple of Venus. In Bethlehem, too, a pagan cult is said to have been established at the cave where Christ was believed to have been born.<sup>9</sup> An almost continuous Christian presence at Jerusalem can be attested, in the form of a continuous line of bishops, but the place was for a long time unwelcoming to pilgrims.

In the three centuries before Constantine the Great, Christian pilgrimage more often took the form of pilgrimage to the resting-places of famous saints. In this period, martyrs were venerated as heroes who had confessed Christ despite tortures and the threat of death, and they tended to be regarded as patrons and protectors of the local Christian community. Some of them, such as Polycarp of Smyrna, attracted visitors also from adjacent regions when the annual festival of their heroic death was celebrated. This custom continually grew in

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<sup>8</sup> The examples mentioned here have been taken from Edward David Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, A.D. 312–460* (Oxford: Clarendon 1982), 3f.

<sup>9</sup> The introduction of pagan sanctuaries in Jerusalem and Bethlehem is attested by Eusebius and Jerome, who both interpret this as persecution: Eusebius, *De Vita Constantini* [hereafter quoted as *VC*] 3.26, ed. F. Winkelmann (*Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller [GCS]* 7/1; Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1975); Jerome, *Ep. ad Paulinum* 58.3, ed. I. Hillberg (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum [CSEL]* 54; Wien & Leipzig: Tempsky 1910), 529. For discussion and further literature, see Stephan Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross Was Found: From Event to Medieval Legend*, diss. (Uppsala 1991), 97f and 107f.

importance and stands at the origin of medieval and modern pilgrimages to places like Canterbury, Santiago de Compostela and Trondheim in Norway – the resting-places of bishop St. Thomas of Canterbury, the apostle St. James the son of Zebedee, and the Norwegian king St. Olaf.<sup>10</sup>

### Constantine and the Holy Places

When Emperor Constantine defeated his rival Emperor Licinius at the battle of Chrysopolis on 18 September 324, it meant liberation for the Christians in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. Not only liberation: Constantine began a veritable campaign of restoring confiscated property to the churches and of supporting the erection of new church buildings.<sup>11</sup>

Constantine turned his attention especially to the Holy Land. We know that he wished to be baptized in the Jordan. This never happened, because he was continually occupied with business elsewhere. But soon after his victory over Licinius, his mother Helena and his mother-in-law Eutropia travelled to the Holy Land in order to visit the holy places and to make arrangements for the building of churches there. Eusebius tells us that Helena personally funded churches at the sacred caves of Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives, while Eutropia founded a church at Mamre, the place where Abraham had received a visit by God in the shape of three angels. Constantine himself ordered the erection of a church at the place of Christ's death and resurrection, which was in the centre of the city of Jerusalem at this time.<sup>12</sup>

A great deal of money was spent on these building projects in the Holy Land, but that is perhaps not the most notable thing about them. Constantine also spent enormous sums on the building of churches in

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<sup>10</sup> On the development of the cult of saints, see Hansjörg Auf der Maur, "2. Feste und Gedenktage der Heiligen", *Gottesdienst der Kirche. Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft*, Teil 6.1: *Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit*, II/1: *Der Kalender* (Regensburg: Pustet 1994), 65–401. A convenient source of information about individual saints is David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 5th rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

<sup>11</sup> For information on Constantine, see one of the standard biographies, e.g. Hans A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius, *VC* 3.25–45 and 51–53.

Rome and, a few years later, in his new city of Constantinople. And those churches were much larger than the churches in Palestine. The remarkable thing about the churches in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Mamre is that they involved the complete destruction of important pagan shrines. We must recall that Jerusalem had been named Aelia Capitolina by Hadrian. This means it had a capitol, i.e. a shrine that imitated the Capitol of Rome. Not only was this shrine, in the central forum of Aelia Capitolina, obliterated on direct orders of Constantine; when the church of Calvary and the Holy Sepulchre was inaugurated in the same place some ten years later, in 335, the date chosen was 13 September – the same date as the inauguration day of the Capitol in Rome.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Constantine in Jerusalem symbolically destroyed the pagan Roman Empire and erected a new Christian empire centred on the memory of the death and resurrection of Christ.

It would be interesting to know exactly when and why Constantine ordered a church to be built at the site of Calvary and the Holy Sepulchre, and precisely when Helena made her journey.<sup>14</sup> We don't have any recorded dates. The Church historian Eusebius gives the impression that both Constantine's command and Helena's journey came soon after the Council of Nicaea, but he is not very clear about the chronology. Most scholars think that Constantine gave his command after having been informed about the situation by bishop Macarius of Jerusalem at the Council of Nicaea, in the summer of 325, and that Helena's journey occurred a year or two later, in 326 or 327.<sup>15</sup> My own opinion is that these matters had been on Constantine's mind for some time, and that he arranged for his mother's journey as soon as possible after his victory at Chrysopolis, i.e. already in the winter of 324/325. Further, I believe that Helena's investigations led to the famous discovery of the Holy Cross already before the council of Nicaea, which took place in the summer of 325. A piece of evidence

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<sup>13</sup> Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 96–103.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed consideration of these questions, see Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 123–142.

<sup>15</sup> Thus, e.g., E. D. Hunt, "Constantine and Jerusalem", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 48 (1997), 405–424. Although Hunt refers to my work quoted in the previous footnote, where a different chronology is presented, he only signals disagreement without entering into any close argument.

that supports this is the letter of Constantine to bishop Macarius of Jerusalem, where he orders a church at Calvary to be built. There he says:

Such is our Saviour's grace, that no power of language seems adequate to describe the wondrous circumstance to which I am about to refer. For, that the monument of his most holy Passion, so long ago buried beneath the ground, should have remained unknown for so long a series of years, until its reappearance to his servants now set free through the removal of him who was the common enemy of all, is a fact which truly surpasses all admiration. For if all who are accounted wise throughout the world were to unite in their endeavors to say somewhat worthy of this event, they would be unable to attain their object in the smallest degree.<sup>16</sup>

Eusebius pretends that Constantine, when speaking of "the monument of [the Saviour's] most holy Passion", refers to the Holy Sepulchre, but the expression is more likely to refer to the rock of Calvary or the wood of the Cross.<sup>17</sup> The reference to Christ's servants being "set free through the removal of him who was the common enemy of all" must be a reference to the recent defeat of Licinius. And finally, the phrase "if all who are accounted wise throughout the world were to unite", seems to me to be an oblique reference to the gathering of the council of Nicaea as something being prepared but not yet having occurred. We will return to the significance of these observations presently.

### Increase in Pilgrimage

With the Eastern half of the Roman Empire now being liberated – at least in the view of Christians – and the emperor favouring Christian

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<sup>16</sup> VC 3.30; the translation is from the electronic text of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [NPNF], Ser. II, vol. 1: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iv.vi.iii.xxx.html>.

<sup>17</sup> The learned Jesuit Daniel Papebroch, writing in 1680, takes for granted that Constantine refers to the Cross: "De Inventione S. Crucis per SS. Helenam et Macarium Hierosolymis", *Acta Sanctorum Maii*, T. I, Ch. I 5, 2nd ed. (Venetiis 1737), 361–450. Several modern scholars have come to the same conclusion, see Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 94, n. 3, and 106, n. 62.

holy places and Christian worship, pilgrimage suddenly surges ahead and becomes a major practice. We hear very soon about pilgrims who come from far-away places in order to visit the Holy Land. An early pilgrim who has left an extensive account of his journey is an anonymous pilgrim from Bordeaux in France. He was in Jerusalem in the year 333 and has described not only his arrival but also his travels. It has been estimated that his journey took more than a year.<sup>18</sup>

Some fifty years later the Spanish lady Egeria made the trip that has become famous through her lively diary. She spent some three years, from 381 to 384, visiting holy places from Mount Sinai in the south to Edessa in the north. She provides invaluable information about worship in many places, and particularly in Jerusalem. From her account it is clear that large crowds of people at this time visited Jerusalem in order to take part in the great festivals of the church.

In the ceremony of Good Friday, as described by Egeria, the wood of the cross plays a part:

Then a chair is placed for the bishop in Golgotha behind the Cross, which is now standing there; the bishop duly takes his seat in the chair, and a table covered with a linen cloth is placed before him; the deacons stand round the table, and a silver-gilt casket is brought, in which is the holy wood of the Cross. The casket is opened and (the wood) is taken out, and both the wood of the Cross and the title are placed upon the table. Now, when it has been put upon the table, the bishop, as he sits, holds the extremities of the sacred wood firmly in his hands, while the deacons who stand around guard it. It is guarded thus because the custom is that the people, both faithful and catechumens, come one by one and, bowing down at the table, kiss the sacred wood and pass through. And because, I know not when, some one is said to have bitten off and stolen a portion of the sacred wood, it is thus guarded by the deacons who stand around, lest

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<sup>18</sup> *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, ed. Geyer & Kuntz in *Itineraria et alia geographica* (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 175). For online Latin and English texts, see: <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/pilgr/bord/10Bord01MapEur.html>. For the route taken by the Bourdeaux pilgrim and the duration of his journey, see Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*.



any one approaching should venture to do so again. And as all the people pass by one by one, all bowing themselves, they touch the Cross and the title, first with their foreheads and then with their eyes; then they kiss the Cross and pass through, but none lays his hand upon it to touch it. When they have kissed the Cross and have passed through, a deacon stands holding the ring of Solomon and the horn from which the kings were anointed; they kiss the horn also and gaze at the ring [...] all the people are passing through up to the sixth hour, entering by one door and going out by another.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of someone taking a bite from the cross is not at all farfetched. Pilgrims naturally wanted a souvenir to bring back home with them, the holier the better. Inscriptions in North Africa from the second half of the fourth century show that pieces of the cross had already been brought there; Gregory of Nyssa attests the presence of such a fragment in Cappadocia in the 370s; and John Chrysostom says in a homily towards the end of the century that everyone is fighting over fragments of the wood.<sup>20</sup> But pieces of the holy cross were of course rare and hard to come by. In subsequent centuries, small containers of lead filled with holy oil or holy water and inscribed with images from the holy places were a more common souvenir.<sup>21</sup>

It seems clear that the authorities in the Holy Land and the architects of the new churches calculated with a large influx of pilgrims right from the start. As mentioned earlier, the churches themselves were rather smaller than the new churches being built in Rome and Constantinople. They were not, in other words, designed for large crowds of regular worshippers as in the big cities. However,

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<sup>19</sup> *Itinerarium Egeriae* 37, ed. Franceschini & Weber in *Itineraria et alia geographica* (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 175; Turnhout: Brepols 1965), 81. The English translation is by McClure & Feltoe 1919, as reproduced here: <http://www.ccel.org/m/mcclure/etheria/etheria.htm>. For a Swedish translation, see *Egeria. Resebrev från Det heliga landet*, transl. by Christina Sandquist Öberg, introduction and commentary by Per Beskow, 2nd ed. (Skellefteå: Artos 2007).

<sup>20</sup> See Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 87f with footnotes.

<sup>21</sup> Images of these ampullae can be readily found on the internet. Search for "Monza ampulla".

in front of the entrance they had courtyards with fountains surrounded by buildings with galleries. In the galleries, pilgrims could take shelter from rain and perhaps buy something to eat. In the courtyard itself they could gather before services, perhaps listen to guides explaining the significance of the place, and wash themselves in the fountains before entering the holy place. Entrances and exits were organized so as to admit a constant flow of people.<sup>22</sup>

Some pilgrims came to stay. Next to the holy places, groups of ascetics soon settled and regular monasteries or nunneries were established. St. Jerome was one such pilgrim. After rather extensive travels in Palestine and Egypt he finally settled in Bethlehem in 388. A wealthy woman named Paula, whom he had got to know some years earlier in Rome, settled with her daughter Eustochium nearby and provided for Jerome's economic needs while herself leading an ascetic life in a community together with Eustochium and other women. Jerome lived for over thirty years in Bethlehem, and it was here that he did most of his translation of the Bible into Latin, assisted by Eustochium who could read Hebrew and was fluent in both Latin and Greek.<sup>23</sup>

### For and Against Pilgrimage

Jerome was a great defender of the importance of the holy places. In a letter to old friends of his, Desiderius and his sister Serenilla, he urges them to join him in the Holy Land with the following words:

Even supposing that you do not care for our society, it is still your duty as believers to worship on the spot where the Lord's

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<sup>22</sup> On the early churches of Palestine see, e.g., Denys Pringle, *Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. A Corpus*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993–2009).

<sup>23</sup> On Jerome and his companions see, e.g., Stefan Rebenich, *Hieronymus und sein Kreis: prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Historia: Einzelschriften 72; Stuttgart: Steiner 1992); Andrew Cain, *The Letters of Jerome: Asceticism, Biblical Exegesis, and the Construction of Christian Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009).

feet once stood and to see for yourselves the still fresh traces of His birth, His cross, and His passion.<sup>24</sup>

Another letter, sent by Paula and Eustochium to their friend Marcella but believed to have been penned by Jerome, develops a long and impassioned argument for the importance of the holy places to Christians. The reasoning is mainly based on Biblical texts, but we also find the following *a fortiori* argument:

Everywhere we venerate the tombs of the martyrs; we apply their holy ashes to our eyes; we even touch them, if we may, with our lips. And yet some think that we should neglect the tomb in which the Lord Himself is buried.<sup>25</sup>

Other church fathers viewed pilgrimage in a very different light. St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote a famous letter on the danger and uselessness of pilgrimage, in which, among other things, he says the following:

What advantage is reaped by one who reaches those celebrated spots? He cannot imagine that our Lord is living, in the body, there at the present day, but has gone away from us foreigners; or that the Holy Spirit is in abundance at Jerusalem, but unable to travel as far as us. Whereas, if it is really possible to infer God's presence from visible symbols, one might more justly consider that God dwelt in the Cappadocian nation than in any of the spots outside it. For there are so many Altars here, on which the name of our Lord is glorified, that one could hardly count as many in all the rest of the world. Again, if the Divine grace was more abundant about Jerusalem than elsewhere, sin would not be so much the fashion among those that live there;

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<sup>24</sup> *Ep.* 47.2, ed. Hillberg (CSEL 54; Wien & Leipzig 1910); the translation is from the electronic text of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Ser. II, vol. 6: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XLVII.html>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ep.* 46.8, ed. Hillberg (CSEL 54; Wien & Leipzig 1910); the translation, again, is from the electronic *NPNF*, Ser. II, vol. 6: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XLVI.html>. For a Swedish translation of the whole letter, see *Ur kyrkofädernas brev*, ed. S. Borgehammar (Svenskt patristiskt bibliotek 3; Skellefteå: Artos 2001), 169–182.

but as it is, there is no form of uncleanness that is not perpetrated among them; rascality, adultery, theft, idolatry, poisoning, quarrelling, murder, are rife; and the last kind of evil is so excessively prevalent, that nowhere in the world are people so ready to kill each other as in Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup>

### Stories of How the Holy Cross was Found

Let us now turn to the question of the Holy Cross. I have already mentioned it a couple of times in passing. The Holy Land and its many holy places are so much more than the relic of the Cross; but that relic did play an important role right at the beginning of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and it continues to fascinate us. Is it possible that they really found the Cross of Christ? And if so, how did they find it?

From about the year 400 and onward, it was common knowledge that Constantine's mother Helena had found the cross. The story as told by church historians both east and west went something like this:

Helena was illustrious in faith, the pious mother of a pious son. She went to Jerusalem and diligently searched for the place where Christ was crucified. But the place was hard to find, the persecutors of old having placed a statue of Venus on it, so that, if any Christian should presume to worship Christ in that place, he would seem to worship Venus. Thus the place had fallen into oblivion. But as soon as she found out where it was, she went there and ordered the polluted structures to be overthrown and the ground to be dug up; and buried deep, three crosses were found. One was the Cross of Christ and the other two those of the robbers who were crucified with him.

Since they did not know which cross was the Lord's, they were seized with sorrow. Their doubt, however, was resolved by testimony from above. It happened that a noble woman of the town was gravely ill and near to death. Macarius, who was bishop of that church at the time, went in with the Empress and

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<sup>26</sup> Translation from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2913.htm>, lightly modified. For a Swedish translation, see *Ur kyrkofädernas brev*, 164–168.

many other people to the woman who lay prostrate, bent his knees and prayed to God. When he had finished praying, he brought the first cross, but to no profit; then he brought the second and it, too, showed itself impotent. But when he laid hold of the third, as soon as its shadow fell on her who was mortally ill, she opened her eyes; and when it touched her, at once she arose. Standing firm on her feet, even stronger now than before she came ill, she began to run about the whole house, praising the power of the True Cross.

In gratitude for the fulfilment of her wish, the Empress built a wonderful church in the place where the Cross was found and called it Martyrium. The nails that had fixed the Lord's body to the Cross she gave to her son. She put a couple of them into the Emperor's helmet, for protection in war, and the others she melted down and mixed with the bit of his war horse, for safety and in fulfilment of the ancient prophecy of the prophet Zechariah: 'And that which is on the bit will be sacred to the almighty Lord' (Zech. 14:20). Of the salvific wood itself, she took part with her back to her son, and put part in a silver casket that she left in the care of Macarius and which is still kept with care and veneration as a memorial.

Also this memorable sign of her piety did the venerable empress leave: summoning the holy virgins of Jerusalem to a banquet, she herself set about serving them at table, giving them food, handing the cup, pouring water over their hands, in short, doing those things that slave girls are usually commanded.<sup>27</sup>

I call this little story the Original Story of how the Holy Cross was found. Somewhat later, in the middle of the fifth century, a Revised Story appears, much more elaborate, with many fictional elements and with a strong polemical edge against Jews. Here, Helena enters

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<sup>27</sup> This is a slightly abbreviated version of my reconstruction of the story as it was recounted by Gelasius of Caesarea, who was the ultimate source of it for subsequent church historians, see Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 54f. For an English translation by E. Gordon Whatley of the story as given by Rufinus, who based his account closely on Gelasius, see Thomas Head (ed.), *Medieval Hagiography. An Anthology* (New York & London: Routledge 2001), 83–86 (with introduction 77–81).

Jerusalem with a large army. She gathers all the Jews that can be found in Jerusalem and the surrounding area, some 3,000 men. She accuses them of having rejected wisdom and having cursed their Redeemer, and sends them off to select among themselves those who are most expert in the Torah. They select 1,000 men who return to the Empress and get the same treatment as the first group. They now choose 500, who again get the same treatment. At this point, one among them named Judas tells the others that the Empress is probably looking for the Cross, and that he knows where it is hidden, thanks to family tradition. When they return to the Empress, she asks about the Cross, and when they claim not to know where it is, she orders them all to be burnt. They then hand over Judas to her. Judas is at first less than helpful, so Helena puts him at the bottom of a dried-up well for seven days without food. This makes him compliant, and he goes to Calvary and prays in Hebrew for the exact location of the Cross to be revealed. When sweet-smelling perfume rises from the place, Judas immediately converts to Christ and starts to dig. The story then continues more or less like the Original Story, with a couple of additions: the devil first makes an appearance threatening Judas, Judas defies him and is in return made bishop of Jerusalem by Helena and is renamed Cyriacus; then there is a separate search for the nails, which are revealed by a new miracle.<sup>28</sup>

This Revised Story is found in liturgical books both east and west throughout the western Middle Ages and the Byzantine era. It clearly had a strong popular appeal, and must have fuelled anti-Jewish sentiments in this period. It is not anti-Semitic in the modern sense of racial hatred – as soon as Judas converts he can become a bishop and, indeed, in a follow-up story he also becomes a martyr and a saint – but it sends a message that it is right to abuse and persecute Jews because of their lack of faith in Christ. The Revised Story was criticised by

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<sup>28</sup> For a full treatment including English translation and commentary, see Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 145–184. More recent English translations will be found in *Constantine and Christendom. The Oration to the Saints. The Greek and Latin Accounts of the Discovery of the Cross. The Edict of Constantine to Pope Sylvester*, transl. with an introduction and notes by Mark Edwards (Translated Texts for Historians 39; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2003); and in Thomas Head (ed.), *Medieval Hagiography*, 86–95 (transl. by E. Gordon Whatley, with introduction 77–81).

learned clergy in the Middle Ages, not because it was anti-Jewish but because it was unhistorical. With the advent of modern scholarship in the sixteenth century, it was removed from liturgical books. And with that we, too, can leave it aside.

### The Cross and the Scholars

The advent of modern scholarship coincided with the Reformation, however, which resulted in a strongly sceptical attitude towards relics and stories of miracles performed by means of relics. Early in the sixteenth century, the many relics of the Cross came under attack. John Calvin said,

Every little town has one, not only in the cathedral but also in parish churches. There isn't a monastery so humble that it isn't able to show one. In some places there are big pieces, as in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, and in Poitiers and in Rome, where quite a big crucifix is made from such wood, as they say. In short, if you were to collect all these pieces, they would fill the hold of a large ship.<sup>29</sup>

This criticism is repeated by Erasmus and has somehow become a European cultural heritage. Most people who hear that I have done research on the Cross say they know just one thing about it: that there are enough pieces around to build ten crosses, or a ship, or a whole fleet of ships. This is, in fact, false. Although there are indeed many fragments of the Cross around, most of them are very small. The art historian Anatole Frolov compiled a huge dossier of those relics in 1961 – in a book of almost 700 pages – and came to the following conclusions: (a) most of the relics can be traced to Jerusalem or Constantinople, where, according to the Original Story, the two main parts of the cross that Helena found were kept; and (b) if all the fragments that he records were put together, they would amount to no

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<sup>29</sup> Jean Calvin, *Advertissement tresutile du grand proffit qui reviendroit a la chrestienté s'il se faisoit inventoire de tous les corps saintz et reliques ...* (1543), in *Corpus Reformatorum*, vol. 34 = *Calvini opera*, vol. 6 (Brunsvigae 1867), 419f (my transl.).

more than about half of a whole cross.<sup>30</sup>

I mention this not just to set the record straight, but also to introduce the fact that the scepticism bred by a combination of critical scholarship and confessional polemic in the early modern period has tended to polarize opinions about the story of how the Cross was found and to confuse certain issues. The Original Story, as told by the church historians Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret, came under attack in the seventeenth century. The main argument against the story was that an earlier church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, did not mention any discovery of the Cross, even though he wrote in detail about Helena's journey to the Holy Land. A secondary argument was that the relic of the Cross was not mentioned by the pilgrim from Bordeaux in his description of what he saw in Jerusalem in the year 333. The eighteenth-century English historian and agnostic, Edward Gibbon, wrote with elegant sarcasm in his great work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: "The silence of Eusebius and the Bordeaux pilgrim satisfies those who think, but perplexes those who believe."<sup>31</sup>

The assumption, then, based on the silence of Eusebius, was that Helena never sought or found the Cross. But then, how did a cross come to be in Jerusalem, and how did the story of Helena's discovery arise? Looking closely at the various scraps of evidence from the fourth century, historians in the sceptical tradition seemed to discern a pattern: the pattern, in fact, of a growing legend.<sup>32</sup> These are the nine main pieces of evidence, in chronological order:

- 1) Eusebius knows nothing of a cross in the 330's.
- 2) St. Cyril of Jerusalem mentions a relic of the Cross in Jerusalem in his Catecheses, saying that "The sacred wood of the Cross bears witness: it is here to be seen in this very day, and through those who take pieces from it in faith, it has from here already filled almost the whole world."<sup>33</sup>
- 3) In a letter to the emperor Constantius II dated 351/3, Cyril of

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<sup>30</sup> Anatole Frolov, *La relique de la vraie croix* (Paris 1961), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* [many editions], ch. 23, n. 66.

<sup>32</sup> For references to works by scholars who have taken this view, see Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 8, n. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Cyril, *Cat.* 10.19 (PG 33, 685); transl. in Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 90.



Jerusalem says that the Cross was found in the days of his father Constantine, but he does not mention Helena.<sup>34</sup>

4) Egeria describes the relic in its silver casket in her diary and how it is venerated on Good Friday in the year 384 together with its inscription, the *titulus crucis*. She also says that the cathedral of Jerusalem, the Martyrium, was consecrated on 13 September because that was the day on which the Cross had been found. But she says nothing about Helena.<sup>35</sup>

5) In a homily on the Gospel of John delivered c. 390, St. John Chrysostom talks about three crosses having been discovered, and says that the Cross of Christ could be distinguished because it lay in the middle and because it had an inscription, the *titulus crucis*.<sup>36</sup>

6) St. Ambrose, in his funeral oration over Emperor Theodosius I, delivered on 25 February 395, introduces Helena for the first time. She opens the ground at Calvary, finds three crosses, and is able to distinguish the Cross of Christ by means of its inscription. Ambrose also tells the story of the nails, emphasizing that the Cross is now literally at the head of the Empire, through the nails in the Emperor's helmet, and he adds that the nail in the bit of the emperor's horse symbolizes that the emperors through Christ have now become restrained and moderate.<sup>37</sup>

7) Rufinus of Aquileia publishes his continuation of the Church History of Eusebius in c. 402. There he tells the complete Original Story.<sup>38</sup>

8) At about the same time, St. Paulinus of Nola tells the same story in a letter to his friend Sulpicius Severus. However, here the miracle of a woman being healed has been inflated: now it is a dead person being restored to life by means of the Holy Cross.<sup>39</sup>

9) In the Revised Story, it is also a dead person being restored to

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<sup>34</sup> Cyril, *Ep. ad Constantium*, ed. E. Bihain in *Byzantion* 43 (1973), 286–291.

<sup>35</sup> *Itinerarium Egeriae* 48.1.

<sup>36</sup> John Chrysostom, *Hom. 85 in Ioan.* (PG 59, 461).

<sup>37</sup> Ambrose, *De obitu Theodosii* chs. 40–51, ed. O. Faller (CSEL 73; Wien, 1955), 392–398.

<sup>38</sup> Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. Th. Mommsen (GCS 9:1–2 = Eusebius Werke 2:1–2; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1903–09), 969–971.

<sup>39</sup> Paulinus, *Ep.* 31, ed. W. de Hartel (CSEL 29; Wien, 1894), 267–275. For a Swedish translation, see *Ur kyrkofädernas brev*, 149–158.

life. In addition, there are many new fanciful details, such as the story of a Jew who helps Helena find the Cross. Echoes of these developments may be heard c. 450 in the church historian Sozomen.<sup>40</sup>

The image created, then, is that someone in Jerusalem (presumably the bishop) starts claiming that he has the True Cross of Christ; then a story gradually grows up to explain where it came from and how one can know that the Cross is authentic.

### The Cross and the Sources

But is this good scholarship? Two basic principles of historical criticism are being ignored here: (1) An argument from silence cannot prove anything – if your source fails to mention an event, this by itself does not prove that the event did not occur. (2) It is not enough to place evidence in chronological order, you must also investigate the source of each piece of evidence in order to be able to judge its credentials. If two witnesses are dependent on the same source, they have no independent value but must count as a single witness. Further, the youngest witness in a series may reproduce a very early and reliable source, whereas an older witness may be based on an unreliable source. Let us begin with the second point.

A close investigation of the aforementioned sources reveals that Rufinus, writing in c. 402, is actually reproducing the text of a lost church history by a certain Gelasius, who was the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine for over 25 years, from c. 367 to after 394. Gelasius was not only well placed to know the traditions of Jerusalem, he was also a nephew of bishop Cyril of Jerusalem and in fact wrote his church history because Cyril requested him to do so. When describing how the Cross was found, Gelasius is in other words more or less acting as the mouthpiece of Cyril of Jerusalem, and so his version has by far the earliest and best credentials. And here we already have those details about Helena's involvement and the miracle of healing which the sceptical tradition thought were additions from the late fourth and

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<sup>40</sup> Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.1, ed. J. Bidez (GCS 50; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1960), 47–50.

early fifth century, the product of a growing rumour.<sup>41</sup>

This is *not* to say that we can take everything in Gelasius' account to be Gospel truth. His version has, for instance, a very clear bias in favour of the Jerusalem Church, making Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem responsible for the identification of the True Cross. If we only had Gelasius, we could not be sure which parts of his account were part of a standard account, and which were personal additions of his. Fortunately, we also have the accounts of St. Ambrose and St. Paulinus of Nola, whose versions of the Original Story seem to be independent of one another and of Gelasius of Caesarea.

Thus, to put it briefly: we have three witnesses that are clearly independent and that tell the same basic story – the one I call the Original Story – with variations due to their different situations and purposes: Gelasius of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan and Paulinus of Nola. Gelasius had information from Cyril of Jerusalem. The source of St. Ambrose is not known, but must be ultimately Jerusalemite. Note that he, in this funeral oration on Theodosius, talks to members of the imperial court about two objects that belonged to the emperor: the helmet and the bit, both containing iron from the nails of the Cross. He could not make that up; people in his audience must have known those objects well. Paulinus of Nola, finally, says he got his information from the pilgrim Melania the Elder, who had been in Jerusalem in the 380s and who brought Paulinus a relic of the Cross as a gift from bishop John of Jerusalem. Again we are referred to local Jerusalem tradition. Ultimately, all three accounts derive from a story told in Jerusalem at the time of St. Cyril (c. 313–386, bishop from c. 350).<sup>42</sup>

In other words, we are not faced with a growing legend. Instead, we are faced with a story that is stable in its basic content, was familiar to the imperial court in the 390s, and was backed by the bishops of Jerusalem, starting with St. Cyril.

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<sup>41</sup> Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 7–30, with a reconstruction of the text of Gelasius on pp. 31–55.

<sup>42</sup> For a full discussion of the independent witnesses to the finding of the Cross, their sources and tendency, see Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 57–76.

## The Cross and Eusebius

It is of course still possible to doubt the truth of the story, as does the well-known historian Timothy Barnes, who in a footnote in one of his books says bluntly: "Presumably it was invented by Gelasius, or by his uncle, Cyril of Jerusalem."<sup>43</sup>

But let us look at our options: on the one hand, we have the explicit witness of Gelasius of Caesarea and indirectly of his uncle, bishop Cyril of Jerusalem. On the other hand, we have the silence of Eusebius of Caesarea and the scepticism of a long line of scholars. Where should we place our trust?

Close readings of relevant passages in the works of Eusebius of Caesarea have led several scholars to the conclusion that he is manipulating his readers concerning events in Jerusalem in Helena's time. Most obviously, when in his *Life of Constantine* he talks about the discovery of the Holy Sepulchre and the magnificent church that Constantine ordered to be built on the spot, he never once mentions the rock of Calvary. But from other accounts we know that the rock of Calvary was a major feature of the site. As regards the Cross, Eusebius says in a different work, a panegyric in praise of Constantine, that, "on the very site of the evidence for salvation, [Constantine] outfitted with many and abundant distinctions an enormous house of prayer and temple sacred to the Saving Sign."<sup>44</sup> In other words, Eusebius in this work admits that the cathedral of Jerusalem, the great Martyrium basilica, was dedicated to the Holy Cross – just as Egeria says half a century later.<sup>45</sup>

So why does Eusebius not mention Calvary and the Cross in his *Life of Constantine*, even though this is where he gives an overview of the many gifts lavished upon the Holy Land by Constantine and his

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<sup>43</sup> Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press 1981), 382, n. 130.

<sup>44</sup> Eusebius, *De Laudibus Constantini* 9.16, ed. I. A. Heikel (GCS 7 = Eusebius Werke 1; Leipzig: Hinrichs 1902); transl. in H. A. Drake, *In Praise of Constantine. A Historical Study and New Translation of Eusebius' Tricennial Orations* (Univ. of California Publications. Classical Studies 15; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1976) (my emphasis).

<sup>45</sup> A detailed discussion of the evidence for manipulation by Eusebius with full references to previous scholarship on the question will be found in Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 93–115.

mother Helena? Different explanations have been offered by different scholars. Some say there was a power struggle going on between Eusebius as bishop of Caesarea and Macarius as bishop of Jerusalem: at this time Caesarea was the metropolitan see and Jerusalem was subordinated, but Jerusalem was struggling for primacy and did manage to achieve a special status of honour at the Council of Nicaea. If Macarius in this situation tried to exploit the discovery of the Cross, it is argued, then that could have given Eusebius a reason to play it down.<sup>46</sup>

In a more recent contribution, Stefan Heid argues that there was a good intention behind the silence of Eusebius. In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius was writing a panegyric. He could not introduce events that drew attention away from his main theme of honouring the Emperor. Thus, Helena's journey is depicted as if it merely set the stage for a great achievement by Constantine. First, she honours two "mystic caves", the one in Bethlehem and the one on the Mount of Olives, with fine church buildings. Then, thanks to Constantine's inspired vision, a third and even greater cave is brought to light, namely the tomb of Christ. This is adorned by Constantine himself as his crowning gift to Jerusalem.<sup>47</sup> Heid has certainly seen something important here. It would not have been in the interest of Eusebius when praising Constantine to draw attention away from the Emperor's role in the discovery and decoration of the sacred tomb by talking about a previous event in which only his mother was involved. And he clearly could not have mentioned the finding of the Cross without upsetting his narrative scheme.

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<sup>46</sup> The theory was first put forward by Ze'ev Rubin, "The Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Conflict between the Sees of Caesarea and Jerusalem", in L. I. Levine (ed.), *The Jerusalem Cathedra*, vol. II (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Institute 1982), 79–105. It has been favourably received and further developed by Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of her Finding of the True Cross* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 27; Leiden: Brill 1992), and Peter W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places?* (Oxford: Clarendon 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Stefan Heid, "Die gute Absicht im Schweigen Eusebs über die Kreuzauffindung", *Römische Quartalschrift* 96 (2001), 37–56. Heid distances himself here from the point of view taken in his previous article, "Eusebius von Cäsarea über die Jerusalemer Grabeskirche", *Römische Quartalschrift* 87 (1992), 1–28, where he proceeded from the assumption that the finding of the Cross was not a real event.

Nevertheless, this is hardly the whole truth. Reading Eusebius, one finds that he has a tendency to spiritualize. Material things are of value only insofar as they elevate the mind. The main function of the Incarnation, according to Eusebius, was not to transform the physical realm but to elevate the human spirit by revealing the divine Logos to it. The Logos, he says, used his human body as a musician uses the lyre, taming people by means of the body the way Orpheus tamed the beasts by playing on his lyre.<sup>48</sup> And the Logos suffered absolutely no detriment by assuming a human body. Even death did not affect him, it merely paved the way for his resurrection as a public demonstration that the Logos has power over death. In line with this, Eusebius studiously avoids talking about the suffering of Christ. As for the Cross, he can speak freely of it as a symbol, a sign of victory over death and all evil, but he absolutely avoids talking about the actual gibbet made of wood.<sup>49</sup>

It would be too simple to make this merely a matter of theological opinion. Eusebius was also an apologist, defending Christianity among wealthy and highly educated people in the Eastern Roman Empire. In this context, he found it essential to represent Christianity as a sophisticated religion, a lofty philosophy far superior to the superstitious practices of popular paganism. Unfortunately, Christianity was not only sophisticated. There were also dirty ascetics, ignorant bishops, superstitious pilgrims and barbaric ideas about the redemptive power of suffering and blood. I think that the relic of the Cross was too much associated with such unwelcome phenomena for Eusebius to wish to talk about it.<sup>50</sup>

### The Cross and Pilgrimage

These deliberations have shown, I hope, that a serious consideration of the silence of Eusebius concerning the finding of the Cross is not just a prolongation of old confessional polemics, nor a matter of scholarly pedantry. It helps us to understand better the world in which Christian

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<sup>48</sup> *De Laudibus Constantini* 14.5.

<sup>49</sup> This interpretation of Eusebius is set out in greater detail in Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross*, 115–120.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

pilgrimage took root and began to expand. Everyone was *not* enthusiastic about it. Had all Christians belonged to the educated class of Eusebius, there would have been no pilgrimage. For that matter – had all Christians been mystics and patriots like Gregory of Nyssa, there would have been no pilgrimage either. But most Christian leaders saw that pilgrimage answered to a basic need of the human heart, to seek out that which is important in order to see it with one's own eyes and to touch it with one's own hands. And furthermore, even though the practice of pilgrimage did invite many superstitious practices, those leaders realized that it also reached to the centre of Christian faith in the Incarnation: the physical realm had been sanctified by Christ, and from then on, things and places could truly become vehicles of communion with God.

