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The Marvelous History of the Holy Cross



Kings removing their diadems take up the cross, the symbol of their Saviour's death; on the purple, the cross; in their prayers, the cross, on their armour, the cross; on the holy table, the cross; throughout the universe, the cross. The cross shines brighter than the sun.

St. John Chrysostom

Near midnight a lone rider, the last in a relay of imperial messengers from the borders of Asia Minor, pauses exhausted at the military gate in the Theodosian walls. Waved on by the guards, he gallops the last mile through the Arcadian forum, past the Church of the Resurrection and the Miliareum Aureum. At the Great Palace he's already been seen and announced. He dismounts at a run – a royal chamberlain hurries him up the marble stairs, down frescoed and curtained halls to a great double door that opens at their approach. A burning brazier lights the center of the royal chamber and Emperor Heraclius advances from the shadows, his hand outstretched. The breathless messenger prostrates to the floor, "Your Imperial Highness, Jerusalem has fallen to the Persians. The population is massacred, the Holy Sepulchre burnt to the ground, and the Patriarch and the Holy Cross carried away into captivity..." Moments later the church bells of Constantinople summon the city to mourning. The year is 614 and Shahr-Baraz, the brilliant and ruthless Persian general, has just carried off the holiest relic in Christendom...

The Cross is the one symbol that has been accepted at all times, in all places, through Orthodoxy, heresy, and distortion by every people who have called themselves Christian. To the Orthodox, however, it is more than a symbol: for two thousand years the Church has held fast to its belief in the healing and saving power of Christ that moves through the Holy Wood and all its representations.

According to early tradition, after the Lord was crucified, the Jews hid His Cross and those of the two thieves in an old cistern near Golgotha, filling it with stones and earth to prevent the Christians from recovering it for veneration. Like the Christians in their catacombs, it lay hidden for nearly three hundred years until Christianity was legalized by Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century.

The cross was a sign of shame and torture to the Greeks and Romans, and in

early centuries Romans taunted Christians as “*cross-worshippers*,” adding ironically, “*they worship that which they deserve*.” Both the sarcasm of the pagans and the intermittent danger of persecution kept Christians from openly displaying the cross and they resorted to using other – sometimes elaborate – cross-like symbols on their public sepulchres. In the catacombs of St. Callistus in Rome, for example, an anchor with a lamb kneeling underneath symbolizes the crucifixion, and a ship, the ark of salvation, displays a trident-cross as a mast.

Nevertheless, the love for the cross flourished in the secret home lives of Christians. By the second century, Tertullian (156-222) was writing, “We Christians wear out our foreheads with the sign of the cross.” These “devotees of the cross,” he went on to note, “make the sign of the cross before every undertaking.”

Although the cross was used privately and liturgically from the beginning, two major events resurrected it in public liturgical life and monumental art: the apparition of the cross in the sky to Constantine, and the finding of the Holy Wood in Jerusalem.

In 312, on the eve of a battle against his brother-in-law, Maxentius, Constantine encamped with his army before the walls of Rome, where he had a vision of a fiery cross superimposed against the sun and the Saviour Himself

commanding him to bear into battle banners depicting the Holy Cross, with the words, “*By this sign thou shalt conquer*.” The next morning Maxentius’ troops met Constantine’s near the Malvern Bridge and were defeated. Constantine became the sole emperor and within the year proclaimed Christianity a lawful religion, bringing the long years of Roman persecution to a close.

The second event was of even greater importance. From the time of Jerusalem’s destruction by the Romans in AD 70, the physical history of the Hebrew people had been wiped from the earth. Solomon’s temple had been leveled by Hadrian’s troops and the Roman town of Aelia Capitolina erected over



Holy Week pilgrims

the ruins of Jerusalem. Over Christian Golgotha stood a temple dedicated to

Venus. With the accession of her son as sole emperor, the seventy-eight-year-old Empress Helen departed for Palestine to rededicate the holy places to Christ.

When she arrived in the Holy Land in 326, Bishop Macarius had already begun razing the temple of Venus, but the Christians did not know where to begin searching for the Cross and the Cave of the Resurrection under the immense pile of earth, stone and rubble covering the site. After Bishop Macarius led a supplicatory prayer service on the hill, the laborers began to smell a fragrant odor coming from under the earth. In this way the Lord’s Tomb was found. The Cross of Christ, along with those of the two thieves, was found with the help of a Jew named Judas who knew the ancient tradition concerning its location in the rock cistern. According to Church tradition, Judas was subsequently baptized with the name Cyriacus and became Patriarch of Jerusalem, suffering a martyr’s death in 363 under Julian the Apostate. He is commemorated on October 28.

Following the directions of Judas, three crosses were found to the east of the Cave of the Holy Sepulchre, along with some of the inscriptions and nails. The inscriptions [titles], however, had come apart from the crosses, and it was unknown which cross was the Lord’s. Bishop Macarius stopped a passing funeral procession and ordered that the three crosses be touched, one after another, to the corpse. As the Lord’s Cross was laid on him, the dead man resurrected. The empress was the first to prostrate herself before the Holy Cross and kiss it. The eager crowd pushed forward, and amid shouts of “Lord, have mercy,” Bishop Macarius raised the Cross on high. That day, September 14, 326, was the first “Exaltation of the Cross of the Lord,” and until now the feast is faithfully kept as one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church.¹

That the Cross was recognized as authentic from the beginning is indisputable. Although strangely left unmentioned by Eusebius, the early church historian, it is spoken of openly by Cyril, Patriarch of Jerusalem, who was a contemporary of Eusebius and lived in Jerusalem within a few years of its finding. In his catechetical lectures of 348 St. Cyril says, “...*He was truly crucified for our sins. For if thou wouldst deny it, the place refutes thee visibly, this blessed Golgotha, in which we are now assembled for the sake of Him who was here crucified, and the whole world has since been filled with pieces of the wood*



Finding the Cross

¹ From Lives of the Saints (The Great Synaxarion) (in Greek).

of the Cross.”²

Egeria, a fourth-century Spanish nun who authored one of the earliest surviving pilgrimage accounts of Christian holy places, describes in detail the Good Friday service of 380, and the veneration of the Holy Cross:

And when they arrive before the Cross the daylight is already growing bright. There the passage from the Gospel is read where the Lord is brought before Pilate, with everything that is written concerning that which Pilate spake to the Lord or to the Jews, the whole is read...

Then a chair is placed for the bishop in Golgotha behind the Cross, which is now standing. 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 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, 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...And when the sixth hour has come, they go before the Cross, whether it be in rain or in heat, the place being open to the air, as it were, a court of great size and of some beauty between the Cross and the Anastasis [the Chapel covering the Holy Sepulchre]; here all the people assemble in such great numbers that there is not

thoroughfare...and from the sixth to the ninth hour nothing else is done but the reading of lessons...the emotion shown and the mourning by all the people at every lesson and prayer is wonderful, for there is none, either great or small, who, on that day during those three hours, does not lament more than can be conceived that the Lord had suffered those things for us. Afterwards, at the beginning of the ninth hour, there is read that passage from the Gospel according to John where He gave up the ghost. This read, prayer and the dismissal follow.³

In the late fourth century, St. Jerome described the pilgrimage of St. Paula to the Holy Land, saying that, “...*prostrate before the Cross, she adored it as though she had seen the Saviour hanging upon it.*”⁴ A century later St. Mary of Egypt ended her infamous voyage from Alexandria on her knees before the Cross: “*having got as far as the doors which I could not reach before, as if the same force which had hindered me cleared the way for me – I now entered without difficulty and found myself within the holy place. And so it was I saw the life-giving Cross. I saw too the Mysteries of God and how the Lord accepts repentance. Throwing myself on the ground, I worshipped that holy earth and kissed it...*”

Within a few short years of its finding, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (September 14) was combined with the celebration of the September 13, 335 dedication of the churches built over the Holy Sepulchre and the site of the finding. The yearly celebration in Jerusalem was considered to be of immense importance and attracted monks and nuns, clergy and lay-people from Jerusalem, Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Italy, Asia Minor, as well as the newly converted regions of Europe. As many as fifty bishops journeyed from their dioceses each year to be present at the feast, which was considered a great obligation. “*He thinks himself guilty of a grave sin who during this period does not attend the great solemnity,*” remarks Egeria. The annual celebration lasted eight days, and it quickly passed from being a local feast to one celebrated throughout Christendom. From St. Mary of Egypt we glimpse the teeming Mediterranean crowds rushing to Jerusalem by ship and on foot, struggling to enter the crowded church to prostrate themselves before the Cross.

The honor owed the Holy Wood was defined in the Second Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 387. Declaring that veneration was due to the form “*of the precious and vivifying Cross,*” as well as to icons (images) of the Lord, the Mother of God and the saints, the Council clarified that they were not to be

³ Egeria’s “Peregrinatio,” trans. Louis Duchesme in *Christian Worship*, London, 1923.

⁴ St. Jerome, *Epistle cviii*.

² St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, iv, 10.



Relic of Cross in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Rome

worshipped, for worship “belongs to the Divine nature alone... The honor paid to the image passes to the prototype, and he who adores the image, adores the person whom it represents.” This was reaffirmed by many Church Fathers and at later councils. Even later iconoclast emperors who ordered the widespread destruction of icons, made an exception for the Cross, all of them having its image printed on their coins.

After its finding, Helen took a portion of the Cross to Byzantium as a gift for her son. Much of it, however, was encased in silver, as Egeria mentions above, and preserved upright in the church built over the site of its discovery, where it was brought out for veneration every Good Friday. As his mother labored in Jerusalem, Emperor Constantine wrote to Bishop Macarius, “I have nothing more at heart than to adorn with great splendour that sacred place.” According to Egeria, the Constantinian churches over the site of the Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection included the Anastasis which contained the Holy Sepulchre, a great basilica called the *Martyrium* that covered the space of the present-day cathicon and (dedicated after her repose) St. Helen’s chapel where the Holy Cross was found. East of the apse of the *Martyrium* was the hill of Cavalry. Open to the sky, it was surrounded by a silver balustrade and approached, as it is today, by a staircase. Portions of both the Lord’s Cross and the cross of the good thief were enshrined by the Emperor’s order, both in Jerusalem and in the altar of the Chapel of the Relics at *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme*, founded by Sts. Constantine and Helen in the old palace at Rome.

In 330, as part of the celebration to inaugurate Byzantium’s new capital, Emperor Constantine erected a towering hundred-and-fifteen-foot column of porphyry from Heliopolis, Egypt as the centerpiece of a great forum at Constantinople’s western gate. At the base of the column was a five-step pedestal and plinth, above which rose the ten porphyry drums of the shaft, decorated with bronze wreaths. The twenty-foot high pedestal enshrined relics including the hatchet with which Noah built the ark, portions of the crosses of the two thieves, the alabaster jar of St. Mary Magdalene and the baskets of the miraculous loaves. It also included a more secular object: the palladium

of classical Rome – a wooden statue of Athene brought by Aeneas from Troy, by which Constantine hoped to conciliate his non-Christian subjects. On the summit of the column stood a statue of Constantine himself, holding a scepter and an orb containing a piece of the Cross. According to one Socrates, an early Byzantine historian, the relic-filled column would make the city impregnable.

Around the column were statues, monuments and a number of small churches. The emperor’s statue and the three upper drums were blown down in a strong gale in 1105 and were replaced with an immense cross, which disappeared in turn after the Moslem conquest. The column was later damaged by fire and in 1701 Sultan Mustafa III renewed earlier protective metal rings to prevent its further decay, encasing the lower pedestal and plinth in a stone support. For centuries the monument was known as “Constantine’s Column”; its present Turkish name is *Cemberlitas*, meaning “The Hooped Column.” The column’s base is now sixteen feet below street level. Although outwardly ruined, it is satisfying to think that buried deep in the heart of Islamic Istanbul, awaiting a future resurrection, are some of the greatest relics of Christendom.

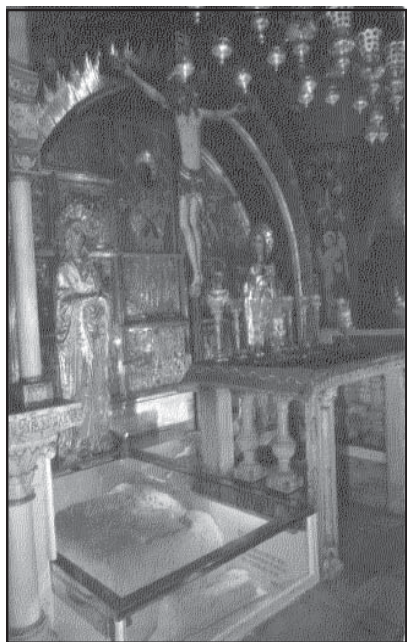
Also sent to Constantine were the nails of the Cross – one was fastened to the emperor’s helmet and, strange to our contemporary minds, one to his horse’s bridle. According to some of the Church Fathers, this brought to pass the prophecy of Zacharias: *In that day that which is upon the bridle of the horse shall be holy to the Lord.* (Zach. 14:20). A third nail was later placed in the Iron Crown of Lombardy preserved in the Cathedral of Monza.

Another of Constantine’s reliquaries was the *Miliareum Aureum*. A series of four triumphal arches, surmounted by a cupola that contained a portion of the Holy Wood, this was the “Golden Milestone,” the center of Byzantium from which distances to the far corners of the empire were measured. According to a sixteenth century writer, Petrus Gillias, the *Milion*, as it came to be called, was surmounted by statues of Sts. Constantine and Helena, together holding a large cross. A little to the east stood the first great Byzantine basilica, dedicated to St. Eirene, “the Holy Peace of God.” Now only a single pillar of one of the *Milion’s* arches remains.

During the following centuries many smaller pieces of the Cross were sent by Byzantine



Artist’s recreation of Constantine’s column in the forum



Golgotha

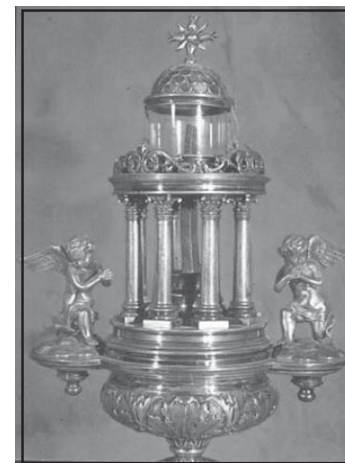
emperors and patriarchs to Christian rulers, churches, and monasteries throughout the empire where they were enclosed in altars, enshrined in precious caskets and venerated and guarded as incomparable treasures. A few years after Egeria's pilgrimage, St. Paulinus of Nola sent Emperor Suplicius Severus a fragment of the Cross, saying: "Receive a great gift in a little [compass]; and take, in [this] almost atomic segment of a short dart, an armament [against the perils] of the present and a pledge of everlasting safety."⁵ In another of his letters, St. Paulinus adds the intriguing note that no matter how many pieces were detached from it, the Cross never grew smaller in size. In 455, Juvenal, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, sent St. Leo the Great of Rome a fragment of the Holy Wood, while other portions went to the eastern

and western borders of the Empire as local rulers became Christian. One of these recipients was Radegunda, Queen of the Franks, who received the relic from Emperor Justin II in 569 and enshrined it in her newly founded Monastery of the Holy Cross at Poitiers. Later, St. Gregory the Dialogist, Pope of Rome, would send a portion to Theodolinda, Queen of the Lombards, and another to Recared, the first Christian king of Spain.

At the end of the eleventh century a supposed letter from Emperor Alexius I Comnenus to the Count of Flanders lists the relics residing in Constantinople: "In that city are the most precious relics of the Lord, to wit: the pillar to which He was bound⁶; the lash with which He was scourged; the scarlet robe in which He was arrayed; the crown of thorns with which He was crowned; the reed He held in His hands in place of a scepter; the garments of which He was despoiled before the cross; the larger part of the wood of the cross on which He was crucified; the nails with which He was affixed; the linen cloths found in the sepulcher after His resurrection..."⁷

5 St. Paulinus of Nola, Epistle xxxi, n.1 (from the Catholic Encyclopedia, 1904).

The French knight, Robert de Clari, corroborates Alexius I in his enumeration of the relics he saw taken in the 1204 sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders. "...two pieces of the True Cross as large as the leg of a man and as long as half a toise, and one found there also the iron of the lance with which Our Lord had His side pierced and two of the nails which were driven through His hands and feet, and one found there in a crystal phial quite a little of His blood, and one found there the tunic which He wore and which was taken from Him when they led Him to the Mount of Calvary, and one found there the blessed crown with which He was crowned, which was made of reeds with thorns as sharp as the points of daggers..."⁸



Nail of the Cross, Santa Croce, Rome

The largest portion of the Cross remained in Jerusalem until 614, when the army of the Persian king, Chosroes, crossed the Jordan and conquered Palestine. In Jerusalem the Persians began massacring the Christian population and burnt the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the ground. Taking advantage of the attack and wanting to settle old scores, many of Palestine's Jews rushed to Jerusalem in the wake of the battle and burnt every church left standing by the Persians, killed most of the surviving Christians and tortured to death many priests, monks and nuns. According to Theophanes, a later monk-historian, ninety thousand Christians died in the attack.

In old Greek texts of collected stories of the desert fathers (*Apophthegmata Patrum*) it is told that a mile and a half to the north of St. Sabbas Monastery, in the Lavra of Heptastomus, a certain Abba John had a dream in which he saw that God would allow Jerusalem to fall to the Persians because of the iniquities of the clergy, and heard the words, "What is here will not be cleansed

6 "The pillar to which He was bound" is mentioned by Egeria in her narrative of the Good Friday service of 380: "...After this, when the dismissal at the Cross has been made, that is, before the sun rises, they all go at once with fervour to Sion, to pray at the column at which the Lord was scourged."

7 Letter from Emperor Alexius to Count of Flanders, trans. E. Joranson, *American Historical Review* 55: 815, 1950.

8 From Robert of Clari, trans. by E.H. McNeal, *The Conquest of Constantinople*, New York, 1936.

save by fire.”

The Persian army carried away both the sacred church vessels and the even more precious Cross. Zacharias, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, was taken captive along with a great number of his people. In *The Desert A City*, Derwas Chitty describes the pitiful scene:

The aged Patriarch Zacharias, after being tortured together with the Cross-Warden to reveal where the Cross was hidden, was brought in chains to Sion to join the company for transportation. Out from the gates of Jerusalem he went like Adam out of Eden – over the Cedron, and up to Olivet. Awaiting their escort there, the company looked back to see the flames pouring heavenwards from the Church of the Resurrection, from Holy Sion, the Mother of all Churches, and from the other shrines – three centuries of the best that man’s wealth and skill could offer, three centuries of the aspiration of a Christian Empire, going up in smoke... The captive Cross was in their company as they went down through the wilderness, past the spot which commands the first view of St. Euthymius’ Monastery... past Choziba, hanging at the foot of its cliff in the gorge deep down to the left of the road, then out onto the Plain at Jericho, across Jordan, and away to Damascus. In Jericho, one of the monks of Choziba had a vision of the Mother of God calling to the saints to hasten with her to escort the Cross upon its way.”⁹

The Zoroastrian Chroses believed that in possessing the Cross he also possessed the power of the Son of God, and according to one source, enthroned it at his right hand until his queen, a Nestorian Christian, used her influence to obtain “an honourable captivity” for the Cross and the patriarch in her own palace, from where Patriarch Zacharias wrote an epistle to the Christian survivors in Jerusalem.

Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610-641) made many proposals of peace to recover the relic and free the hostages, but could not obtain terms without consenting to renounce Christianity and adore the sun. His refusal turned the conflict into a religious war that spread northwards to the very gates of the Byzantine capital. In 626, Constantinople was besieged by a combined force of Persians, Huns, Avars and Slavs, whose plans inexplicably went awry at every turn. After two disastrous attempts to take the city, the besiegers left in panic, believing it to be divinely guarded. The Persians themselves claimed

that the Mother of God had been seen walking back and forth on the battlements. Finally, in 627, Chosroes was defeated by Heraclius in two separate campaigns. At a crucial moment in the final campaign north of Adana, the vanguard of the Byzantine army was utterly destroyed in an ambush. J. J. Norwich describes the aftermath:

The Persians meanwhile, overjoyed by the success of their plan and now busily engaged in pursuing and finishing off the survivors, had allowed their attention to become momentarily distracted from the bridge and Heraclius saw his chance. Spurring his horse forward, he charged across, his rearguard close behind him. A Persian giant blocked his path, but the Emperor cut him down with a stroke of his sword and sent him plunging into the river. Shahr-Baraz, suddenly aware of what was happening, ordered his archers to defend the bank; but Heraclius pressed on, oblivious of the hail of arrows around him – several of which had found their mark on his own body. The Persians watched him in amazement. Not even their general could conceal his admiration. “Look at your Emperor,” he is said to have exclaimed to a renegade Greek nearby. “He fears those arrows and spears no more than would an anvil.”¹⁰

After Heraclius’ victory, Chosroes was deposed and murdered by his eldest son, Siroes. In February 628, Siroes made peace with the Byzantines, set the imprisoned patriarch free and restored the Holy Cross.

On the morning of September 14, 628, Heraclius entered Constantinople in triumph, the entire population lining the streets. Processing through the gold-plated “Golden Gate” erected by Theodosius three centuries before, he followed behind the Cross with his victorious troops and four elephants that had made the long trip from Persia – the first ever to be seen in Constantinople. Norwich recounts, “*The procession threaded its way slowly through the streets to St. Sophia, where Patriarch Sergius was waiting; and, at the solemn mass of thanksgiving that followed, the True Cross on which the Redeemer had died was slowly raised up until it stood, vertical, before the high altar. It was, perhaps, the most moving moment in the history of the Great Church, and it could well have been seen as a sign that God’s enemies had been scattered, and that a new golden age of Empire was about to dawn...*”¹¹

In the spring of 629, Emperor Heraclius took the Cross to Jerusalem to return it to the newly rebuilt Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Traveling with

9 Chitty, Derwas, *The Desert A City*, St. Vladimir’s Press, NY.

10 Norwich, J.J., *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*, Penguin, 1990, pg. 301.

his family from the imperial capital, the emperor decided that he would not enter Jerusalem at the head of the procession, but that he himself would carry the Cross through the gates of the city. Accompanied by Patriarch Modestus (Zacharias had died in captivity), he approached the city walls with the Cross in his arms. Suddenly the Emperor came to a standstill, unable to advance. As with St. Mary of Egypt, an unseen force resisted his entry. When Patriarch Modestus suggested that his royal apparel and fine state were not in keeping with the humble entrance of the Lord, the emperor immediately laid aside his imperial garments and entered Jerusalem barefoot and simply clad. The Cross itself had been left untouched by the Persians thanks to the intercession of Chroses' queen, and was still enclosed in its original case. The unbroken seals were rec-



Courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre

ognized by the clergy, who opened them and showed it to the people. From that time the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross was kept with even greater devotion, commemorating both the finding of the Cross and its recovery from the Persians.

Sadly, the Byzantine victory in the Holy Land was not to last. Seven years earlier, Mohammed had fled from Mecca to Medina, where he had al-

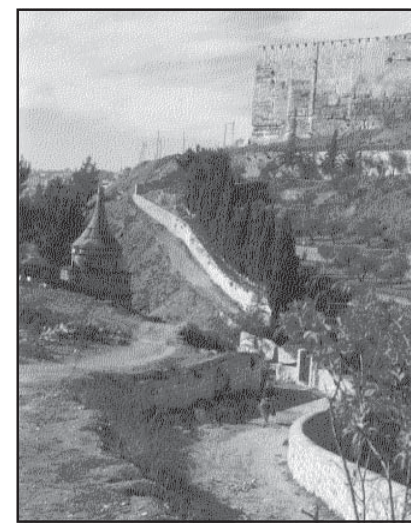
ready begun gathering followers into a great army that would only be stopped a century later at the gates of Constantinople and one hundred fifty miles short of Paris. In 635, Heraclius retreated before the conquering army of Moslem invaders commanded by Abu-Ubaidah, one of Mohammed's "companions" who had fled with him to Medina. Foreseeing that Jerusalem would shortly be taken, the emperor carried the Cross with him to Constantinople where it was divided into nineteen parts as a safeguard against its future total loss and apportioned among the great centers of Christendom: Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, Edessa, Cyprus, Georgia, Crete, Ascalon, and Damascus.

When further resistance to the Arabs was hopeless, Patriarch Sophronius, who had acted as the head of Jerusalem's Christian defenders, showed himself

on the walls asking for a sortie. He offered Abu-Ubaidah the capitulation of the city if, in return, the Christians would be allowed to keep their holy places and not forced to convert to Islam. He also requested that the treaty be recognized and witnessed by Caliph Omar, Mohammed's religious and political successor. The caliph agreed, and mounting a camel rode unattended to the Jerusalem walls. According to a contemporary account, he entered the city with Sophronius and "*courteously discoursed with the Patriarch concerning its religious antiquities.*" As they walked through the Holy Sepulchre, the Moslem call to prayer sounded and the caliph quickly removed himself to a nearby mosque, refusing to spread his prayer rug in the Christian holy place "*lest in future times the Moslems should make that an excuse for breaking the treaty and confiscating the church.*" The terms were held to, and although Jerusalem was afterwards administered by Islamic caliphs, Christian pilgrimages to the holy places continued.

Over the next three centuries, shifting Moslem groups dominated Jerusalem. According to contemporary pilgrim accounts, Palestinian Christians were left undisturbed by the early Baghdad and Damascus Caliphates until internecine Islamic struggles cut off Mecca and Medina as pilgrimage destinations, and attention turned to Jerusalem as the only accessible Islamic holy site. In 800, after much arbitration between Jerusalem and the Franks, Caliph Haroun-al-Raschid delivered the keys of the Holy Sepulchre to Charlemagne, but Frankish guardianship was quickly undermined by the rising Fatamide Caliphate. In 1009, Hakim, Caliph of Egypt, destroyed the Holy Sepulchre and all of the Christian churches in Jerusalem in a fit of mad fury, purportedly brought on by his disbelief in the appearance of the Holy Fire. The Christian population was persecuted and, according to some accounts, the portion of the Holy Cross was hidden away and only brought out again a century later during the First Crusade.

Fifty years after the destruction of Christian Jerusalem, the Holy Sepulchre and other churches were rebuilt by Byzantine emperors with the permission of the city's Moslem rulers, and later reinforced and expanded by the Crusaders who took



Jerusalem walls

Jerusalem in 1099.

In 1187, Saladin, the Islamic Emir of Egypt, brought the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem to an end with his victory over the Frankish knights at the battle of the Horns of Hattin, where the Jerusalem portion of the Holy Cross that had been carried into battle by the Crusaders was lost. Henry Treece says, “*after the Horns of Hattin, Saladin was master of the Moslem world, and rode through the streets of Damascus with the captured True Cross tied to his horse’s tail and dragging it in the dust.*”¹² However, this account doesn’t accord with what we know of Saladin, and may be based on histories embellished by Arab writers.

Although by some English accounts the Cross and the captive Crusaders were offered in ransom to Richard I (the Lionheart) of England for 200,000 gold bezants, the money could not be raised and a three-year truce was agreed upon instead. The Cross never reappeared and, if it was in Damascus at all, it most likely disappeared under a subsequent invasion by the Khwarismians.



Saladin

Another variant of the Horns of Hattin mystery is that the True Cross was taken by the Arabs to Acre (here the history is vague, and there is no known connection with the Damascus story) and later promised to King Richard I and King Philip of France as part of the settlement when the Crusaders retook the town in 1191. When they entered Acre, however, the Cross was not found. Around 1219, the Ayyubid Sultan Al-Kamil once again promised to return the Cross as part of his proposal for surrendering Damietta. The terms were rejected, however; his offer was known to be a bluff.

A history of the battle of the Horns of Hattin, written by a Frank named Ermoul only a decade after the defeat, offers a third strange, alternative fate for the Cross, “*Later, in the time of Count Henry of Champagne, ‘Lord of the Kingdom of Jerusalem’ (1192-7) a brother of the Temple [i.e. a Templar Knight] came to him and said that he had been at the great defeat and had buried the Holy Cross and knew well where it was; if he had an escort he would go and look for it. Count Henry gave him his leave and an escort. They went secretly and dug for three nights but could not find anything; then they returned to the city of Acre.*”¹³

Any of these stories are possible and each one may have a particle of truth.

What Saladin took to Damascus or Acre may have been only the gold cross that enshrined the relic, the Holy Wood itself having been removed when the Crusaders realized the battle was lost – and surely some attempt would have been made, even in those last moments, to safeguard the most sacred relic of Christendom. In any case, whether it was taken by Saladin, tossed aside as a bit of old wood when looting Arabs (or invaders) broke the reliquary down for its gold and gems, secreted by a retreating Crusader knight, or still lies unfound amidst the ruins of the Crusader Kingdom, the Jerusalem portion carried at the Horns of Hattin passed from history.

Nevertheless, the power of the Cross, that is, the power of God, is unconquerable. As for its physical remnants, we have the consolation of knowing that, as St. Cyril said, “*the whole world has since been filled with pieces of the Holy Cross.*” Today in Jerusalem, pilgrims can venerate other portions of the Holy Cross, both a small remnant on Golgotha, and a larger piece that is enshrined in the treasury near the doors of the Holy Sepulchre. Encased in a wooden cross, the treasury relic is brought out for special occasions and feasts by the Greek monks who guard the Holy Sepulchre, particularly during Holy Week.

In 1870, an ambitious French historian, Rohault de Fleury, refuted the often repeated allegation of both the iconoclasts and later Protestant and non-Christian writers that, “*if the ‘relics’ of the Cross were all brought together they would be comparable in bulk to a battleship.*” Cataloging all of the known fragments of the Cross, de Fleury found that they would not reach one-third “of that of a cross which has been supposed to have been three or four meters in height, with a transverse branch of two meters.” Supposing that the Cross was made of pine wood as traditional sources relate, and giving it a weight of about seventy-five kilograms (178 million cubic millimeters) the entire



Inscription over Lord’s Cross,
Santa Croce, Rome

weight of the known fragments only came to 4 million cubic millimeters. Even if one multiplies this by ten to include portions de Fleury may have overlooked in obscure monasteries and churches of the Orthodox East, as well as those known to have been lost or destroyed, the combined weight still comes to less than one-quarter that of the entire Cross.

¹² Treece, Henry, *The Crusades*, 1962

¹³ trans. Paul Halsall, Internet Medieval Sourcebook.

There remain hundreds, perhaps thousands, of fragments of the True Cross kept in personal reliquaries, monasteries, and churches throughout the world. From the monastic enclave of Mount Athos to the Middle East, from Russia to Africa, Europe and the Americas, fragments of the Holy Cross rest enshrined and treasured: of all relics the most precious.

There are six Orthodox feasts dedicated to the Holy Cross: Good Friday, the Uncovering of the Holy Cross and the Nails by St. Helen on March 6, the Adoration of the Holy Cross (Third Sunday of Great Lent), the Apparition of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem 351 (May 7), the Procession of the Holy Cross (August 1), and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (celebrating its finding, Constantine's original vision, and its recovery from the Persians on September 14.)

Miracles of the True Cross

From its finding, the Cross and even its smallest fragments have been known to be miracle working; the sick have been healed, demons cast out, and protection afforded to those who wear and venerate it. Below are three accounts from among the thousands recorded in Church history and the lives of saints.

THE APPARITION OF THE HOLY CROSS IN JERUSALEM, 351

After Emperor Constantine died, his son Constantius II became an adherent of the Arian heresy, denying the real divinity of Christ. The Orthodox belief was upheld, however, by heaven itself in a miraculous apparition that appeared over Jerusalem in 351. On the 7th of May, the holy day of Pentecost at the third hour of the morning, the image of the Lord's Cross, shining in unspeakable light and brighter than the sun, appeared in the sky. The apparition began above the Holy Mount of Golgotha and reached the Mount of Olives, which stands about fifteen stadia [two miles] from Golgotha. According to eyewitnesses, the width of the cross was the same as its length, and its beauty was like that of a multicolored rainbow. The city's entire population left their homes and shops to stand in the street as long as the apparition lasted. Many of Jerusalem's inhabitants hurried to the holy church over the Lord's Tomb. Old and young, babes in their mother's arms, even virgins who lived in reclusion left their homes; strangers, pilgrims, and those of other beliefs joined in glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord's Cross, which from early Roman times had been a universal sign of shame and derision was now honored by God Himself, showing the co-eternal divinity of His Son.

Patriarch Cyril of Jerusalem, who had previously spoken of the Cross in his catechetical lectures, wrote to Emperor Constantius to tell him of the vision and urge him to return to Orthodoxy, while Sozomen, an early Greek church historian, records that after seeing the apparition many Greeks and Jews were

baptized as Christians.

THE POWER OF THE TRUE CROSS AGAINST THE PERSIANS

"In Apamea there exists a piece of wood the length of an arm, a portion of the Cross upon which, it is agreed, Christ not unwillingly endured punishment in Jerusalem and which in ancient times had been brought there secretly by a Syrian. The ancient inhabitants, believing that this would be a great source of protection for themselves and their city, made a kind of wooden box in which they placed the Cross. They decorated the box with much gold and precious stones and entrusted it to three priests, who were to guard it with the utmost care. On a certain day of every year they remove the Cross from its box and the entire population worships it. Now the people of Apamea, upon learning of the approach of the Persian army against them, became very fearful. And when they heard that Chroses [the Persian ruler] was not at all to be trusted, they came to Thomas, the bishop of their city, and beseeched him to show the Cross to them, so that they might die, having worshiped it for the last time. And he did as they wished.

Then indeed a wondrous sight appeared which surpassed both description and belief. For as the priest who was bearing the Cross displayed it to the people, a flame of fire followed and it illuminated a portion of the roof above him with a great and unaccustomed light. While the priest walked around in all parts of the church, the blaze followed upon him, constantly retaining its position above his head in the roof. The people of Apamea, joyously marveling over the miracle rejoiced and wept, and at once everyone gained confidence concerning their safety. And Thomas, after traversing the entire church, replaced the wood of the Cross in the box and covered it. And suddenly the flame had ceased."

From the 5th c. *History of the Wars* by Procopius¹⁴

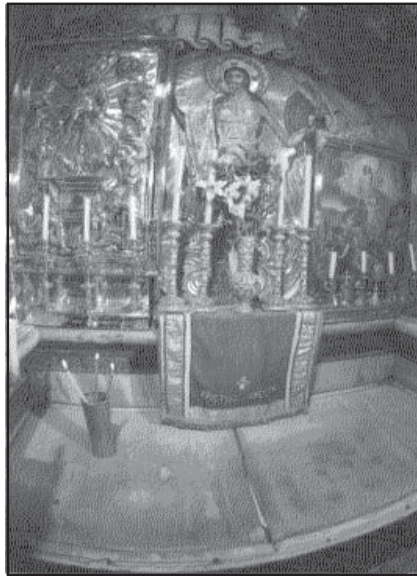
THE CROSS OF THE YOUTHFUL ST. NECTARIOS OF AEGINA

St. Nectarios (baptized Anastasios) was born in 1846 in Thrace. When the boy was thirteen, his family's extreme poverty and his own desire to study led him to board a frigate bound for Constantinople, where he could find work.

As the boat sailed towards Constantinople a violent storm blew up off the Thracian coast. The crew worked frantically to keep the ship afloat and the captain, as he hurried past Anastasios, huddled in a corner of the deck, shouted at him to pray harder if he wanted to stay alive. Inside Anastasios' cross was a

¹⁴ Loeb Classical Library, London, 1914, vol. 1, 354-56.

small piece of the Cross of the Lord, given him by his grandmother who had told him that if he was ever in danger of drowning at sea, to tie the cross on a string, lower it into the water, and he would be saved. The child remembered her advice and lowered his cross into the water. In a short time the waves became calm, but when he pulled up the string, the cross was gone. The captain and crew, seeing the storm abate, gave thanks to God, but Anastasios was inconsolable over his loss. As they entered the harbor at Constantinople, the sailors repeatedly heard loud knocking at the end of the ship's hold. One of the crew climbed overboard to investigate the mysterious sound and found Anastasios' little cross wedged between two outer beams of the hull. ✠



Holy Sepulchre