

CROSS IMAGERY AND THE SETTING OF THE GOLGOTHA CHAPEL IN THE PRE-CRUSADER PERIOD

LA IMAGINERÍA DE LA CRUZ Y LA ESCENOGRAFÍA DE LA CAPILLA DEL GÓLGOTA ANTES DEL PERIODO CRUZADO

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ABSTRACT

The present paper focuses on the impact that the rock of Golgotha, one of the most distinctive holy sites in Jerusalem, exerted on the visual imagery of the Middle Ages. Relying on the most recent research on the history of Jerusalem's Holy Sepulchre, it lays emphasis on the ways in which the distinctive sanctity attributed to the place was staged, expressed, and displayed in architectural, spatial, and ornamental terms. In particular, new evidence is provided as to the *mise-en-scène* effects developed to enhance and manifest the site-bound holiness the site was invested with, through the display of a monumental cross within a baldachin. The latter structure came to be not infrequently evoked in a number of images found from Ireland through the Caucasus.

KEYWORDS: Jerusalem, rock of Golgotha, cross imagery, Medieval pilgrimage, Georgia, Irish high crosses.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio se centra en el impacto que la roca del Gólgota, uno de los lugares sagrados más característicos de Jerusalén, ejerció sobre la imagería visual de la Edad Media. Basándose en las investigaciones más recientes sobre la historia del Santo Sepulcro de Jerusalén, se hace hincapié en las formas en que la santidad distintiva atribuida a aquel lugar se escenificó, expresó y mostró en términos arquitectónicos, espaciales y ornamentales. En particular, se aportan

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nuevas pruebas sobre los efectos de puesta en escena desarrollados para realzar y manifestar la santidad del lugar, a través de la exhibición de una cruz monumental bajo de un baldaquino. Esta última estructura fue evocada de modo frecuente en una serie de imágenes encontradas desde Irlanda hasta el Cáucaso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Jerusalén, roca del Gólgota, imágenes de la cruz, peregrinación medieval, Georgia, cruces altas irlandesas.

AN ODD CROSS CAP IN A PISAN *CROCE DIPINTA*

Of the many, majestic *croci dipinte* preserved in the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo in Pisa, the painted cross once preserved in the town church of San Paolo all'Orto is probably one of the least investigated (Fig. 1). The wide-shut eyes of Christ and the strongly linear rendering of the figures with marked contours and a limited chromatic palette, combined with a restricted selection of side-scenes, were always read as indicators of an early date, probably in the late 11th or early 12th century. In this sense, it can be considered as the earliest known Tuscan painted cross and one of the earliest in Italy.¹

The work stands out for many interesting details that are worthy of closer analysis. First, it can be remarked that, as is often the case in early Tuscan painted crosses, the image oscillates between a narrative and an iconic function. Christ's face and body are certainly the most eye-catching elements of the composition: emphasis is laid on his severe, almost hypnotic look, enhanced by the slight lean of his head which is further accentuated by the thick, protruding halo. Technically, the head is painted on a separate, medallion-like panel fixed to the main body of the cross. In this sense, it is self-contained, delimited by its roundish edge, and can even be perceived as a kind of autonomous image. Christ's face attracts the viewer's sight with its geometrically rendered facial features: the eyebrows consist of two semi-circles, the nose is outlined by two parallel lines, the shadows are reduced to a few green brushstrokes, and the thin lines giving shape to moustache and beard contrast with the homogeneous mass of the hair. The cross inscribed in the halo, with its golden surface embellished with precious stones, emphatically adds to the majestic, triumphal appearance of the Crucified Son of God.

The body is naked, but it bears almost no trace of suffering: no wound can be detected on his side, and, if the signs left by the nails are still visible on his hands, they do not exhibit any effusion of blood. The Lord's hips and thighs are covered with a bluish perizoma, fastened to the body with a golden belt tied in a complicated knot which might bring to the mind of the learned viewer "the girdle of gold" worn by Jesus in his second coming, as announced in the *Book of Revelation* (1:13). On either side Christ's body is flanked by two vertically aligned

¹ On the work and its dating, cf. E. SANDBERG VAVALA, *La croce dipinta italiana e l'iconografia della Passione*, Verona, 1929, pp. 589-90; E. B. GARRISON, *Italian Romanesque Panel Painting: An Illustrated Index*, Florence, 1949, p. 196 no. 507; M. BOSKOVITS, *The Origins of Florentine Painting 1100-1270*, Florence, 1993, pp. 15-17; M. BURRESI and A. CALECA, *Le croci dipinte*, Pisa, 1993, pp. 8-12; A. CALECA, "La pittura medievale in Toscana", in *La pittura in Italia. L'Altomedioevo*, C. BERTELLI (ed.), Milan, 1994, pp. 163-179, here 168; C. BAY, L. CARLETTI and F. PALIAGA, *Storia illustrata della pittura a Pisa dalle origini al Cinquecento*, Pisa, 2015, pp. 22-25.



Fig. 1. *Painted cross from the church of San Paolo all'Orto, Pisa, ca. 1100-1120. Pisa, Museo Nazionale di San Matteo* (photo: courtesy of the Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, direzione regionale dei Musei della Toscana)

figured scenes. The upper one reshapes the Crucifixion scene by displaying two of the pious women to the right and the Virgin with John the Evangelist to the left. In keeping with formulae widespread in contemporary Tuscan painting, the disciple loved by Christ is shown grasping Mary's wrist, thus giving shape to a *dextrarum iunctio*.² In the lower register, the *Anastasis* and the *Dinner at Emmaus* hint at the Lord's resurrection underscoring his victory over death. Finally, Christ Pantokrator, rendered half-length holding a book, is displayed on the top, flanked by two adoring angels.

The triumphal character of the composition is subtly suggested also by some minor details. All efforts were made to point out that the instrument of Jesus' death was not the simple combination of two wooden beams. Its surface is red and is embellished with sequences of vegetal scrolls and heart-shaped motifs. Furthermore, the upper arm of the cross is topped with a kind of conical covering, culminating in a sphere, and delimited on its lower edges by a three-dimensional, golden revetment embellished with lozenge-shaped gems and pearls (Fig. 2). Since this detail is completely unparalleled in Italian painted or even metal crosses, it can be regarded as a kind of visual *hapax*, at least in the peninsular context, or as the isolated witness to motifs that disappeared in later images.

In a recent article, it has been suggested that this odd motif may have referred to the Jerusalem Holy Sepulchre, and more particularly to the *Anastasis rotunda* and the *Aedicula* of Christ's tomb.³ Indeed, the symbolic prominence played by the church of the Resurrection in 12th- and 13th-century Pisa is made particularly evident by its architectural evocations in the Baptistery, the church of San Sepolcro, and the small chapel of Saint Agatha.⁴ *Anastasis*-like buildings were deemed to provide a particularly attractive setting for the performance of baptismal rites, and could be regarded as evocative of Outremer associations (in the case of buildings associated with the military orders), or could be understood as particularly suitable for churches associated with the commemoration of the dead.⁵ And, in general, the Church of

² S. BAGNAROL, "Dall'intercessione alla compassione: San Giovanni e la Vergine, la 'coniunctio dextrarum' e l'iconografia della Crocefissione nel passaggio tra secolo XII e XIII", in *La pittura su tavola del secolo XII. Riconsiderazioni e nuove acquisizioni a seguito del restauro della Croce di Rosano*, C. FROSININI, A. MONCIATTI and G. WOLF (eds.), Florence, 2012, pp. 215-222.

³ F. BIANCHI, "L'antica croce dipinta della chiesa di San Paolo all'Orto a Pisa: nuove indagini e scoperte", *Arte cristiana*, 105 (2017), pp. 161-172. I have myself hinted at the Jerusalem connection in M. BACCI, "Echoes of Golgotha. On the Iconization of Monumental Crosses in Medieval Svanet'i", in *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia*, I. FOLETTI and E. THUNØ (eds.), Brno, 2016, pp. 206-225, here 215 footnote 28.

⁴ See esp. R. KRAUTHEIMER, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture'", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 5 (1942), pp. 1-33, esp. 31-32; D. NERI, *Il S. Sepolcro riprodotto in Occidente*, Jerusalem, 1971, pp. 68-73; U. BOECK, "Das Baptisterium zu Pisa und die Jerusalemer Anastasis", *Bonner Jahrbücher des Rheinischen Landesmuseum*, 164 (1964), pp. 146-156; C. MORRIS, *The Sepulchre of Christ and the Medieval West. From the Beginning to 1600*, Oxford, 2005, pp. 66, 235-236; I. SABBATINI, "'Pisa nova Hierusalem'. Le 'imitationes' gerosolimitane e la sacralizzazione civica", in *Come a Gerusalemme. Evocazioni, riproduzioni, imitazioni dei Luoghi Santi tra Medioevo ed età moderna*, A. BENVENUTI and P. PIATTI (eds.), Florence, 2013, pp. 251-78; N. BODNER, "The Baptistery of Pisa and the Rotunda of the Holy Sepulchre: A Reconsideration", in *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, B. KÜHNEL, G. NOGA-BANAI and H. VORHOLT (eds.), Turnhout, 2014, pp. 95-105; K. BLAIR MOORE, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land*, Cambridge, 2017, pp. 98-100.

⁵ For a thoughtful, though rarely cited, introduction to the different functions played by "replicas" of the Holy Sepulchre in Western European architecture of the Middle Ages, cf. C. TOSCO, "Architetture del Santo Sepolcro nell'Eu-



Fig. 2. *The cap on the cross top*, detail of Fig. 1 (photo: courtesy of the Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, direzione regionale dei Musei della Toscana)

the Resurrection was viewed as the ultimate goal of Holy Land pilgrimage, the *locus sanctus* par excellence, and a synecdochical indicator of Palestine as a whole, even if it could also be understood *stricto sensu* as a monumental frame encircling the Tomb of Christ.

If it certainly makes sense to shape a baptistery – the ritual space where mankind is regenerated in Christ's death – as the Holy Sepulchre, it is much more doubtful whether and to what extent the tomb can be evoked as an attribute and ornament of the cross, which, in turn, evokes a distinct, if closely associated, *locus sanctus*, that of Mount Calvary, which certainly played a

ropa medievale", in *Le rotonde del Santo Sepolcro. Un itinerario europeo*, P. PIEROTTI, C. TOSCO and C. ZANNELLA (eds.), Bari, 2005, pp. 13-54.

no less crucial role in Pisan devotional life. As a witness to this, we can cite an episode in the 13th-century biography of saint Bona of Pisa (ca. 1156-1207): during a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Christ appeared to her, led her to the top of Golgotha, and there he sanctified her iron cilice by contact with the hole on the rock surface where the Cross had been erected.⁶ The site was clearly viewed as invested with a tremendous emotional power, and questions can be legitimately asked as to whether its specific setting may have exerted any impact on medieval cross iconography.

A ROCK AND ITS MISE-EN-SCÈNE

In these last years, new light on the early architectural history of the site of the Crucifixion was shed by the archaeological surveys made in 2009-2011, which could take advantage from the use of modern geomatic techniques.⁷ In around 325-330, the excavations promoted by Emperor Constantine in the area of Hadrian's forum led to the discovery of a compound that included ancient quarries, burial structures, and a spur of rock that was identified as Golgotha, or "place of the skull", mentioned in the Gospels. Unlike the Tomb, which was enshrined within the solemn mausoleum-like structure of the Anastasis, the rock was made fully accessible to sight in the south-eastern edge of the *triporticus*, an open-air courtyard delimited by vaulted arcades and galleries interposed between the Church of the Resurrection and the wide, five-aisled basilica known as the Martyrium.⁸ In the pilgrims' experience, the rock worked as a cultic focus in front of which prayers and meditational exercises were expected to take place. Its steady location, materiality, and elevation could be easily perceived as indicators of its role as a symbolic mountain, which viewers were prompted to understand, in terms of Biblical typology, as the real Moriah, the place that had replaced and superseded the Old Testament temple.⁹ It looked like a diminutive, miniaturized mountain – a *monticulus*, as the Bordeaux anonymous observed in 333¹⁰ – that worked as a simulacrum of orographic prominence, "the holy, dominating, prominent Golgotha" as praised by Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Catecheses*.¹¹

⁶ See the different versions in G. ZACCAGNINI, *La tradizione agiografica medievale di santa Bona da Pisa*, Pisa, 2004, pp. 122-3, 165-6.

⁷ As documented in G. TUCCI (ed.), *Jerusalem, the Holy Sepulchre. Research and Investigations (2007-2011)*, Florence, 2019. Earlier studies include L.-H. VINCENT and F.-M. ABEL, *Jerusalem Nouvelle*, Paris, 1914; CH. COÜASNON, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem*, London, 1974; B. BAGATTI and E. TESTA, *Il Golgotha e la Croce*, Jerusalem, 1984; V. C. CORBO, *Il Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme*, Jerusalem 1981; J. E. TAYLOR and S. GIBSON, *Beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem*, London, 1994; J. KRÜGER, *Die Grabeskirche zu Jerusalem. Geschichte-Gestalt-Bedeutung*, Regensburg, 2000; F. DÍAZ FERNÁNDEZ, *El Calvario y la Cueva de Adán*, Estella, 2004.

⁸ O. GARBARINO, "The Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. Historical Background and Documentary Sources (IV-XII century)", in TUCCI, *Jerusalem*, pp. 71-91, esp. 75 and fig. 10.

⁹ B. KÜHNEL, "Jewish Symbolism of the Temple and the Tabernacle and Christian Symbolism of the Holy Sepulchre and the Heavenly Tabernacle. A Study of Their Relationship in Late Antique and Early Medieval Art and Thought", *Jewish Art*, 12-13 (1986-1987), pp. 147-168, esp. 150-152; R. OUSTERHOUT, "The Temple, the Sepulchre, and the Martyrion of the Savior", *Gesta*, 29 (1990), pp. 44-53.

¹⁰ *Itinerarium Burdigalense*, ed. P. GEYER et alii, *Itineraria et alia geographica*, Turnhout, 1965, p. 17.

¹¹ CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catecheses*, X, 19, and XIII, 39, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca*, Paris, 1844-1866, vol. XXXIII, cols 688 and 820. On the iconicity of the Rock of Golgotha cf. M. BACCI, "Il Golgotha come simulacro", in M. DE GIORGI, A. HOFFMANN and N. SUTHOR (eds.), *Synergies in Visual Culture/Bildkulturen im Dialog. Festschrift für Gerhard Wolf*, Munich, 2013, pp. 111-122.

The earliest sources say nothing about the presence of ornaments on the rock. Nevertheless, since Egeria in the late 4th century repeatedly makes use of the word *crux* as a prominent topographical marker in the ecclesiastical complex, it is most likely that its top was already embellished with a monumental cross by her times.¹² Even if some scholars have manifested their doubts as to the reliability and accuracy of early pilgrims' travelogues,¹³ it is hard to imagine that the expression "the Cross" would have been used as a metonymy of the Golgotha if this one had been left thoroughly undecorated, or if a cross was displayed there only on the occasion of some liturgical rites. If it is true that cross-worship centred around the cross-relic found by Helena, the expression used to describe the latter was usually *lignum crucis* or *crux Domini*, rather than the plain word *crux*, and hinted at a movable object rather than a permanent display.¹⁴ When looking at Golgotha believers were encouraged to meditate on the mystery of the cross, and the presence of a material version could be helpful in enhancing their experience: how should we otherwise interpret Jerome's words, who says of Paula that she prostrated herself before the cross and adored Christ, as if she were able to see him hanging from it?¹⁵

Extant evidence seems to suggest that the setting and ornaments of the rock were altered and embellished over the course of time. According to the 9th-century Byzantine historian Theophanes, a new, golden, and jewelled cross was displayed on its top on the initiative of Emperor Theodosius II in 427-428.¹⁶ The silence on its presence in contemporary sources, such as Eucherius' mid-5th century *De situ Hierosolymae*, does not by itself authorize suspicion on the chronicler's reliability, since pilgrims' travelogues were often more content with emphasizing the devotional meaning of the *loca sancta* than with providing a detailed description of their outward appearance. In the case of Golgotha, the hillock itself and its rocky matter were described as the most eye-catching sight in that corner of the *triporticus*: "there is the site of the Lord's passion", writes Eucherius of Lyons in the mid-5th century, "where even the rock appears (*apparet*), that once supported the cross to which the Lord was nailed".¹⁷

Pilgrims were eager to notice that the material nature of Golgotha, bearing witness to the truth of the Crucifixion, could still be easily acknowledged. Emphasis was laid on its stony appearance, on its surface imbued with Christ's blood, on the fissure that had been produced by the earthquake which had occurred in the very moment of his death, even on

¹² E. BERMEJO CABRERA, *La proclamación de la escritura en la liturgia de Jerusalén. Estudio terminológico del "Itinerarium Egeriae"*, Jerusalem, 1993, pp. 354-361, 386-388; B. REUDENBACH, "Golgotha – Etablierung, Transfer und Transformation. Der Kreuzigungsort im frühen Christentum und im Mittelalter", in H. AURENHAMMER and D. BOHDE (eds.), *Räume der Passion. Raumvisionen, Erinnerungsorte und Topographien des Leidens Christi in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, Bern, 2015, p. 19.

¹³ CHR. MILNER, "'Lignum Vitae' or 'Crux Gemmata'? The Cross of Golgotha in the Early Byzantine Period", *Byzantine and Medieval Greek Studies*, 20 (1996), pp. 77-99.

¹⁴ BERMEJO, *La proclamación*, p. 354.

¹⁵ JEROME, *Epistola CVIII*, ed. I. HILBERG, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae. Pars II: Epistulae LXXI-CXX*, Vienna-Leipzig, 1912, p. 315.

¹⁶ THEOPHANES, *Chronographia*, ed. C. DE BOOR, Leipzig, 1883-1886, vol. I, p. 86: "στανρὸν χρυσοῦν διάλιθον".

¹⁷ EUCHERIUS OF LYONS, *De situ Hierosolymae*, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, p. 238. Eucherius' authorship has been reasserted recently by TH. O'LAUGHLIN, *Adomnán and the Holy Places. The Perceptions of an Insular Monk on the Locations of the Biblical Drama*, London, 2007, pp. 214-222.

its connection with subterranean waters: according to a legend recorded in the 6th century, if any objects were thrown through a hole in the rock, they could be found shortly later in the Pool of Siloam.¹⁸ But, at the same time, visitors remarked that the place had been embellished with furniture and décors. First, attention was given to the presence of two flights of steps, which enabled visitors to literally follow in Christ's ascensional path. Such elements gained such widespread symbolic currency that, in some early Byzantine images, the mountain itself often came to be stylized as a stepped support for the holy cross.¹⁹ Second, hints were made at an altar of Abraham and Melchizedek located on top of the rock, which clearly reinforced the redefinition of Golgotha as the New Moriah.²⁰

Third, the so-called *Breviarius de Hierosolyma* from 530 indicates that the area was delimited by silver chancels, whereas it is still debated whether its mention of a jewelled cross concerns a monumental object permanently displayed on the rock or rather the staurotheke housing the holy wood, which was exhibited on the top of Golgotha on the occasion of some specific rituals.²¹ The text has been transmitted in two different versions, and the wording is in both cases ambiguous, but it can be safely ruled out that it refers to the chapel, or *cubiculum*, where the relic was kept, since the text itself specifies that the latter was located in the Martyrium, as is also confirmed in 570 by the Piacenza anonymous.²² Therefore, if the mentioned *crux gemmata* is indeed the relic of the holy wood, it must be assumed that the travelogue is recording its frequent display on the holy rock, whose summit is reported to have been decorated with a sumptuous metal enclosure, including a silver door and a *caelum* – a word meaning “heaven” and used since Vitruvius as a metaphor of a vaulting structure. The expression used in Paul Geyer's standard edition of the text is *caelum desuper patente*, which is frequently translated as “with an open sky above it” but could be better interpreted as “with a vault extended above it”.²³ In the variant included in the oldest known manuscript, the text reads *celum desuper aureum*, which clearly hints at a precious golden baldachin or ciborium.²⁴

¹⁸ Y. RACHMAN-SCHIRE, “The Rock of Golgotha in Jerusalem and Western Imagination”, in AURENHAMMER and BOHDE, *Räume der Passion*, pp. 29-48.

¹⁹ BACCI, “Il Golgotha”, pp. 115-7.

²⁰ PIACENZA ANONYMOUS, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, pp. 163-164.

²¹ MILNER, “Lignum Vitae”, pp. 85-90.

²² GARBARINO, “The Holy Sepulchre”, p. 78.

²³ *Breviarius de Hierosolyma*, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, pp. 109-110: *In circuito in ipso monte sunt cancellae argenteae, et in ipso monte genus silicis admoratur. Habet ostia argentea, ubi fuit crux exposita, de auro et gemmis ornata tota, caelum desuper patente. Auro et argento multum ornatae cancellae.* Cf. the awkward English translation in J. L. KELLEY, *The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Text and Archaeology. A Survey and Analysis of Past Excavations and Recent Archaeological Research with a Collection of Principal Historical Sources*, Oxford, 2019, p. 187. The expression *fuit crux exposita* seems to prevent a translation in the present tense: probably the text is hinting at Christ's cross once standing there. Furthermore, “ornata tota” seems to refer to the door of the chancels, rather than to the cross.

²⁴ Sankt Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 732, col. 102: *In circuitu montis sunt cancellae de argento, et ibi est esca [= exedra?] ubi fuit persuscitatus, per quem fuit crux Christi declarata. Et ipsa crux est de auro et gemmas ornata et celum desuper aureum et de foras habet cancellum.* This version seems to imply that the place where the cross found by saint Helena was tested was located somewhere at the foot of Mount Golgotha; on the other hand, the wording hints more clearly at the presence of a cross on its top, framed within chancels and a baldachin.

It is difficult to imagine that a structure of this type may have been used as a frame only for the periodical display of the cross relic, that is, as a mostly empty frame. The presence of a *crux gemmata* in this open-air, elevated location is likely inasmuch as Christian viewers could easily perceive it as a landmark that created a visual *pendant* to the monumental cross, the so-called *tropaion*, erected on the summit of the Mount of Olives in the 4th century. This association transcribed the soteriological and eschatological meanings attributed to the symbol of the cross into Jerusalem's cityscape, which was thus marked with indicators of the Son of God's first and second coming, superseding the abandoned Temple Mount, now reduced to the abomination of desolation. This message had been made evident by the apparition of a "cross of light" in Jerusalem's sky on May 7th of the year 351, which moved from the site of Christ's crucifixion to that of his Ascension. The shining appearance of the monumental crosses erected on both sites could easily remind viewers of this episode, which came to be regularly commemorated in the liturgical calendar.²⁵

Furthermore, the display of a monumental and precious cross on the site of the Crucifixion was instrumental to convey the same message that many hymns, liturgical prayers, and images were repeating in the early Byzantine period, namely that the Son of God had triumphed over death and original sin. In a 6th-century Syriac hymn for the rededication of Edessa cathedral, the metal cross erected on a column in the bema – the elevated structure in the centre of the church building – was said to be a representation of Golgotha.²⁶ In Holy Land ampullae, *eulogiae*, glass vessels, and clay flasks the site is frequently evoked in the form of a metal or jewelled cross, standing on a column or a stepped base and located under a baldachin (Fig. 3).²⁷ If it is hard to decide whether such images were directly inspired by a material object, they certainly bear witness to the widespread perception of the venerated hillock as the *locus* of the triumphal cross. In any case, whatever was displayed on its top certainly did not

²⁵ S. HEID, *Kreuz, Jerusalem, Kosmos. Aspekte frühchristlicher Staurologie*, Münster, 2001, pp. 106-68. On this episode as interpreted by Cyril of Jerusalem cf. M. GASSMAN, "Eschatology and Politics in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Epistle to Constantius*", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 70 (2016), pp. 119-33.

²⁶ See the text edited in K. E. McVEY, "The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architectural Symbol", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 37 (1983), pp. 91-121, esp. 95.

²⁷ Relevant examples from the 6th or early 7th century are: a clay flask from Asia Minor in the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem (V. C. CORBO, "Il Santo Sepolcro di Gerusalemme: nova et vetera", *Liber Annuus*, 38 (1988), pp. 391-422, esp. 419-422; S. CIBIN, *Selected Works from the Collections of the Terra Sancta Museum*, Milan, 2019, p. 61); a glass chalice in the collection of the Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies in Washington, D.C. (V. H. ELBERN, "Ein christliches Kultgefäß aus Glas", *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 4 (1962), pp. 17-41; G. VIKAN, "545. Chalice with Crosses between Angels and Orants", in *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, K. WEITZMANN (ed.), New York, 1979, pp. 609-610); some Holy Land ampullae (A. GRABAR, *Les ampoules de Terre Sainte*, Paris, 1958, pls. X, XXIII, XXV, XLI; BAGATTI and TESTA, *Il Golgotha e la Croce*, p. 49); a number of glass vessels associated with Jerusalem pilgrimage (D. BARAG, "Glass Pilgrim Vessels from Jerusalem – Part I", *Journal of Glass Studies*, 12 (1970), pp. 35-63, esp. 41; J. RABY, "In Vitro Veritas. Glass Pilgrim Vessels from 7th-Century Jerusalem", in J. JOHNS (ed.), *Bayt al-Maqdis. Part 2: Jerusalem and Early Islam*, Oxford, 1999, pp. 113-183, esp. 137; D. WOODS, "The Crosses on the Glass Pilgrim Vessels from Jerusalem", *Journal of Glass Studies*, 46 (2004), pp. 191-5, esp. 193-194). In some cases, the baldachin is given a shape modelled on that of the Aedicula, as in a 6th century marble plaque in Dumbarton Oaks: cf. G. VIKAN, *Catalogue of the Sculpture in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection from the Ptolemaic Period to the Renaissance*, Washington, D.C., 1995, pp. 82-86. In general on the Golgotha cross and its associated imagery cf. G. KÜHNEL, "Kunstgeschichtliche Überlegungen zu einem neuen Kreuz für die Grabeskirche", *Das Münster*, 50 (1997), pp. 238-253.



Fig. 3. The Golgotha cross on 6th-7th century Holy Land eulogiae and glass vessels (sketch: Barbara Ciampi)

survive the Persian army's ravages in 614; and after that, probably as an outcome of the monk and future patriarch Modestos' restorations in ca. 625, a monumental silver cross was erected on the site, as unequivocally witnessed by Adomnán of Iona around 670.²⁸

Extant archaeological and textual evidence seems to indicate that, in this period, the rock came to be enshrined within a wider architectural structure, partly as an outcome of the general reshaping of the south area with the erection of a church dedicated to Saint Mary that encompassed the present-day south courtyard and the chapels located on both sides. The hillock was partly excavated and included within an elevated, quadrangular building supported by four thick pilasters and probably covered with a dome.²⁹ Two chapels were established, one dedicated to Adam at the floor level, and the *stricto sensu* Golgotha on the upper one: in this way, the association between the site of the Crucifixion and the progenitor's burial,

²⁸ ADOMNÁN, *De locis sanctis*, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, p. 190: *Alia vero pergrandis ecclesia orientem versus in illo fabricata est loco, qui hebraice Golgotha vocitatur, cuius in superioribus grandis quaedam aerea cum lampadibus rota in funibus pendet, infra quam magna argentea crux infixata est eodem in loco, ubi quondam lignea crux, in qua passus est humani generis Salvator, infixata stetit.*

²⁹ CORBO, *Il Santo Sepolcro*, pp. 98-9; GARBARINO, "The Holy Sepulchre", p. 78 and figs 14-16.

already witnessed in the 2nd century, was given a sort of official recognition and their vertical relationship came to visualize the role of Christ as Redeemer of mankind from original sin.³⁰ In the lower chapel, which was used for the performance of votive masses for the soul's sake of the dead,³¹ the rock was excavated in such a way as to make space for an apse. And there the 17th-century Franciscan scholar Francesco Quaresmi was still able to see and describe a mosaic image showing a *crux gemmata* flanked by two angels.³²

It is worth wondering whether this décor may have belonged to Modestos' setting of the chapel and may therefore have survived Caliph al-Hakim's destructions in 1009, which ruined the walls of the Golgotha church; even if most of the décors displayed in the site dated from the reconstruction of Constantine Monomachos from 1048, it is not unlikely that the cross mosaic may have been at least partially preserved and restored by the 11th century masters in its basic features, which corresponded to an image-type more common in the 7th century than in mid-Byzantine times.³³ Its presence in the lower room indicates, in any case, that the spur of rock was long associated with the powerful imagery of the triumphal cross.

The images that may have been inspired by the Jerusalem *crux gemmata* are too multifarious and generic to allow us any firm hypothesis about its material appearance. Nevertheless, it is certainly noteworthy that, in a number of images associated with the Holy Land, the Golgotha cross is topped with a medallion housing the half-length image of Christ (Fig. 4).³⁴ The interpretations of this detail shift from an emphasis on the role of the site of Crucifixion as *omphalos* and an evocation of the cosmic-solar symbolism of Christ's crucified body, both meanings being strictly interrelated.³⁵ As remarked by Adomnán, Jerusalem's location at the very centre of the world was demonstrated by an astronomic phenomenon, witnessed by a column, located close to Saint Stephen's Gate (present-day Damascus Gate), that cast no shadow at midday on summer solstice.³⁶ Bede, writing around 720, was probably puzzled by this passage, since he omitted all reference to the gate and wrote that the column was "in the middle of the city" and observed that the miracle confirmed what previous authors had written, namely that Mount Golgotha was the centre of the world.³⁷ Accordingly, the miniature

³⁰ G. KÜHNEL, "Architectural *Mise-en-scène* and Pictorial Turns in Jerusalem", in A. HOFFMANN and G. WOLF (eds.), *Jerusalem as Narrative Space/Erzählraum Jerusalem*, Leiden, 2012, pp. 21-31.

³¹ TH. O'LAUGHLIN, "Treating the 'Private Mass' as Normal: Some Unnoticed Evidence from Adomnán's *De locis sanctis*", *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft*, 51 (2009), pp. 334-344.

³² F. QUARESMI, *Historica, theologica, et moralis Terrae Sanctae elucidatio*, Antwerp, 1639, vol. II, p. 481.

³³ CHR. BELTING-IMH, *Die Programme der christlichen Apsismalerei vom 4. Jahrhundert bis zur Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1992, pp. 90 and 194. For a useful survey on Byzantine staurological iconography cf. A. V. KARAGIAN-NI, *Ο σταυρός στη Βυζαντινή μνημειακή ζωγραφική. Η λειτουργία και το δογματικό του περιεχόμενο*, Thessaloniki, 2010.

³⁴ See esp. R. WARLAND, *Das Brustbild Christi. Studien zur spätantiken und frühbyzantinischen Bildgeschichte*, Rome, 1986, pp. 254-60. The *crux gemmata* with medallion in the apse mosaic of Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome (Fig. 4) was made on the initiative of Pope Theodore I (642-649), whose father had been a bishop from Jerusalem: cf. L. JAMES, *Mosaics in the Medieval World from Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge, 2017, pp. 285-287.

³⁵ B. KÜHNEL, *From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem: Representations of the Holy City in Christian Art of the First Millennium*, Rome, 1987, p. 93; HEID, *Kreuz*, pp. 206-217.

³⁶ ADOMNÁN, *De locis sanctis*, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, pp. 194-195.

³⁷ BEDE, *Liber de locis sanctis*, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, p. 258-259.



Fig. 4. *The crux gemmata with a medallion of Christ between Saints Primus and Felicianus*, mosaic, 642-649. Rome, Santo Stefano Rotondo (photo: author)

embellishing the version of Bede's text included in a 12th-century manuscript from the German abbey of Prüfening represents this same column in a way reminiscent of the Golgotha cross in Palestinian iconography and in a position evocative of the site of the Holy Sepulchre.³⁸

In this way, a rational explanation was given to an indication that sounded odd – that the centre of the world may not be located within the walls of the most important Christian church.. Yet, it is possible that Adomnán (or better his semi-legendary informer, Arculf) may have recorded a tradition that had been originally associated with Golgotha and had been recently moved to another location within Jerusalem. He pointed out that the place near Saint Stephen's Gate was worthy of worship, since it had been there that the miraculous efficacy of the holy wood had been tested on a dead boy. Such a location was rather illogical since there were no real grounds to believe that this may have taken place anywhere else than in the area where the crosses had been found by Helena. And indeed, as indicated by the version of the *Breviarium de Hierosolyma* preserved in the Sankt-Gallen manuscript, the same episode was earlier located on the hillock of Christ's crucifixion.³⁹ In the 6th century, the latter was also described as a *locus sanctus* whose exceptional status was confirmed by astronomic phe-

³⁸ PH. VERDIER, "La colonne de Colonia Aelia Capitolina et l'*imago clipeata* du Christ Hélios", *Cahiers archéologiques*, 23 (1974), pp. 17-40.

³⁹ See *supra*, footnote 24.

nomena: according to the Piacenza anonymous (570), when the relic of the Holy Cross was displayed in the church atrium, a star appeared over the holy rock and stayed there until the liturgical adoration came to an end.⁴⁰ It can be assumed that, until the rock was exhibited in an open-air space, viewers may have verified the absence of shadow on summer solstices by glancing at the Golgotha cross. When this became impossible with the integration of the site into a built structure, the solar phenomenon and the related tradition of the cross test were transferred to another, not excessively distant, isolated column.

In other words, it seems at least likely that a monumental cross was displayed on Mount Golgotha already prior to Modestos' reconstruction. The *caelum aureum* mentioned in the *Breviarium* epitomized the heavenly and solar symbolism that was so strictly associated with the Son of God's sacrifice, and it can be assumed that a Christological image painted on its vault may have inspired the medallions found in Holy Land imagery.⁴¹ This baldachin-like structure came to be regarded as a model for the ciborium that enshrined the altar in Byzantine churches, which Germanos of Constantinople, in the 8th century, said to stand for the site of Christ's crucifixion, and, at the same time, for the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle that housed it.⁴² It can be assumed that, in a similar way, the canopy around the cross was also meant to stress the meaning of Golgotha as the site of the new alliance, superseding, and completing, what the House of God on the Temple Mount could only foreshadow. Later, similar structures with pyramidal or domed vaulting came also to be widely regarded, in Byzantium and in its sphere, as material markers of especially worship-worthy relics and icons and were therefore used to give shape to distinctive places of devotion within the church space.⁴³

It has been assumed that an architectural canopy, integrated into the built structure of the new chapel, replaced the *caelum* in the 7th century.⁴⁴ The lighting formerly assured by the sunshine was substituted by a huge metal *rota*, or round chandelier, hanging from the dome, which was impressive enough to be mentioned by Adomnán: in both its shape and function it could be perceived as a metaphoric indicator of the same solar symbolism hinted at by the medallion in the images that evoked the Golgotha cross.⁴⁵ The transfer of the holy wood relic to Constantinople on the wake of the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem in 637-638 must have contributed to lay even more emphasis on its visual installation on the rock.⁴⁶ If it survived until the 11th century, it was certainly lost in al-Hakim's 1009 destruction. Then, in keeping with a new emerging sensibility toward the Passion drama, the upper chapel reconstructed by

⁴⁰ PIACENZA ANONYMOUS, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, p. 164.

⁴¹ As suggested by P. THOBY, *Le crucifix des origines au Concile de Trente*. Étude iconographique, Nantes, 1959, p. 26.

⁴² HEID, *Kreuz*, p. 220; J. BOGDANOVIĆ, *The Framing of Sacred Space. The Canopy and the Byzantine Church*, Oxford, 2017, pp. 21-28 and 284.

⁴³ BOGDANOVIĆ, *The Framing*, pp. 165-75.

⁴⁴ See the reconstruction in GARBARINO, "The Holy Sepulchre", fig. 16.

⁴⁵ ADOMNÁN, *De locis sanctis*, ed. GEYER, *Itineraria*, p. 190.

⁴⁶ On the translation of the relic to Constantinople cf. H. A. KLEIN, *Byzanz, der Westen und das wahre Kreuz. Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer künstlerischen Fassung in Byzanz und im Abendland*, Wiesbaden, 2004, pp. 41-43.

Monomachos' artists was decorated with a narrative image of the Crucifixion of quite imposing dimensions, and there is no further indication of any monumental cross in subsequent sources.⁴⁷

THE SETTING OF MOUNT GOLGOTHA AND ITS VISUAL EVOCATIONS

If it is self-evident that the specific shape of the *caelum* cannot be exactly reconstructed, the very frequent representation of the *crux gemmata* within a canopy indicates that this specific display was considered as particularly honourable and suggestive of a Jerusalem connection, in the full complexity of its multi-layered, symbolic meanings. A trans-medial intention can be clearly seen in the earliest Irish high crosses, usually deemed to date from the late 8th or 9th century, which ostensibly imitate the appearance of metalworks. Like their archetype on Golgotha, such monumental objects stood in open-air spaces, were used to mark liminal locations (such as boundaries and monastic complexes) and were involved in liturgical rituals.

A well-known representative of the so-called Ossory group of early monuments is the north cross at Ahenny, which stands out for its preciously carved interlace, geometric patterns, and strongly projecting bosses (Fig. 5).⁴⁸ It is elevated on a trapezoidal stepped base, on whose two larger sides two scenes are displayed (*Adam naming the animals* and a *Burial rite*), which may have been reminiscent of the progenitor's chapel and its association with the commemoration of the dead. Undoubtedly, its most impressive feature is its capstone of conical shape, resting on a circular base. Sometimes described as a "beehive" cap, it decorates the upper arm of the cross. Analogous capstones are encountered also in other early high crosses, such as the three preserved at Kilkieran, Co. Kilkenny,⁴⁹ whereas later examples are often shaped as small buildings, being evocative of a temple-like architecture that could be interpreted simultaneously as the *ecclesia*, the Heavenly Jerusalem, and its terrestrial double.⁵⁰

It has often been remarked that the closest parallels to the Irish high crosses are encountered in the early Christian arts of the South Caucasian region and the occurrence of similar patterns in distant areas has likely been explained with reference to shared models from the Holy Land.⁵¹ In Armenia and Georgia, monumental crosses were frequently erected as monumental markers in open-space settings between the 6th and 8th centuries: they were usually supported by long four-sided stelae and pillars placed on stepped bases and topped with an element shaped like an arcaded building – maybe allusive of the Golgotha canopy, or of the Holy

⁴⁷ G. KÜHNEL, "Das restaurierte Christusmosaik der Calvarienberg-Kapelle und das Bildprogramm der Kreuzfahrer", *Römische Quartalschrift* 92 (1997), pp. 45-71, esp. 51 and footnote 7.

⁴⁸ For a detailed description cf. E. D. U. POWELL, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, Dublin, 2007, pp. 60-67.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 70-75.

⁵⁰ H. RICHARDSON and J. SCARRY, *An Introduction to Irish High Crosses*, Cork 1990, p. 13.

⁵¹ H. RICHARDSON, "The Concept of the High Cross", in P. NÍ CHATHÁIN and M. RICHTER (eds.), *Ireland und Europa. Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, Stuttgart, 1984, pp. 127-134; RICHARDSON and SCARRY, *An Introduction*, pp. 21-6; H. RICHARDSON, "The Jewelled Cross and Its Canopy", in C. BOURKE (ed.), *From the Isles of the North: Early Medieval Art in Ireland and Britain*, Belfast, 1995, pp. 177-86; H. PETROSYAN, "Similarities between the Early Christian Armenian Monuments and Irish High Crosses in the Light of New Discoveries", in M. FOMIN, A. JIVANYAN, S. MAC MATHÚNA (eds.), *Ireland and Armenia: Studies in Language, History and Narrative*, Washington, D.C., 2012, pp. 169-179.



Fig. 5. Ahenny, Co. Tipperary (Ireland), North Cross (photo: Maureen Maher, Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ahenny_High_Cross-1794.jpg)

Sepulchre in general, itself working in any case as an indicator of the multi-layered metaphoric associations Jerusalem buildings were invested with.⁵²

In Georgia, the most famous free-standing cross was the monumental one erected by King Mirian, in the mid-4th century, on a hill dominating his capital, Mtskheta. Its history is known from various narratives included in the *Moktsevey Kartlisay* (*Conversion of K'art'li*) and written in different moments between the 7th and the early 10th century. The various versions agree that the cross was made of the wood of a majestic tree that stood on a very steep rock and whose location was revealed to Mirian by an angel. The sanctity of the place was later confirmed by a staurophanic appearance that clearly echoed both the “cross of light” seen in Jerusalem’s sky in the year 351 and the astronomic phenomena associated with the cross of Golgotha. First, a shining cross was seen over the wooden one, and the latter’s top was crowned by twelve angels and twelve stars. Later, a fragrant cloud of incense permeated the place. Finally, the cross was wrapped in fire thrice, angels were seen descending and mounting over it, the hill was struck by an earthquake and the rocks broke apart. In this way, the hill was invested with all the attributes of holiness that Biblical typology associated with Mount Calvary and its biblical prefigurations in Bethel and Sinai.⁵³

It was not before ca. 630-640 that the central-planned building of the Jvari church was finally erected around the cross, raised over a high podium, on the initiative of the court, and, as the *Conversion* itself seems to suggest, it was not by chance that this happened exactly in the same moment as the Jerusalem holy sites, including the Golgotha chapel, were being reshaped by Modestos.⁵⁴ Previously, the monument was worshipped in an open-air space, but already King Mirian’s son, Rev, had decided to honour it, in exchange for the recovery of his sick son, by enshrining it within a canopy, in much the same way as the Jerusalem *crux gemmata*.⁵⁵ The Jvari cross was certainly an authoritative model for the so-called “pre-altar” crosses which, in imitation of Golgotha and its role as *omphalos*, were erected on pedestals in the middle of church naves in Georgian medieval tradition and were involved in rituals inspired from the Jerusalemite liturgy.⁵⁶ Their glittering silver revetments served to emphasize

⁵² S. TCHAKERIAN, “Toward a Detailed Typology: Four Sided Stelae in Early Christian South Caucasus”, in FOLETTI and THUNO, *The Medieval South Caucasus*, pp. 124-143; K. MACHABELI, *Early Medieval Georgian Stone Crosses*, Tbilisi, 2008; T. DADIANI, “High Crosses”, in T. DADIANI, T. KHUNDADZE and E. KVATCHATADZE (eds.), *Medieval Georgian Sculpture*, Tbilisi, 2017, pp. 44-89.

⁵³ *Conversion of K'art'li*, transl. C. B. LERNER, *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography. The Early Medieval Historical Chronicle The Conversion of K'art'li and The Life of St. Nino*, London, 2004, pp. 142-3, 184, 185-9, 190. Cf. A. HOFFMANN and G. WOLF, “Licht und Landschaft: Zur Sakraltopographie Mzchetas in Georgien”, in *Inszenierungen von Sichtbarkeit in mittelalterlichen Bildkulturen*, H. HOFMANN, C. SCHÄRLI and S. SCHWEINFURTH (eds.), Berlin, 2018, pp. 21-47.

⁵⁴ *Conversion*, transl. LERNER, *The Wellspring*, pp. 149-50. For a detailed discussion of extant evidence cf. A. PLONTKE-LÜNING, *Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien: Die Entwicklung des christlichen Sakralbaus in Lazika, Iberien, Armenien, Albanien und den Grenzregionen vom 4. bis zum 7. Jhs.*, Vienna, 2007, pp. 203-12, and A. KAZARYAN, *Церковная архитектура стран Закавказья VII века. Формирование и развитие традиции*, Moscow 2012, vol. II, pp. 311-335.

⁵⁵ *Conversion*, transl. LERNER, *The Wellspring*, p. 188.

⁵⁶ M. BACCI, “Echoes of Golgotha. On the Iconization of Monumental Crosses in Medieval Svanet’i”, in FOLETTI and THUNO, *The Medieval South Caucasus*, pp. 206-225.

the ambiguous materiality of the cross, simultaneously manifesting its presence in sacred space and evoking its spiritual, eternal, and triumphal nature, revealed in Jerusalem and Mtskheta through epiphanies of light.⁵⁷

Among the very few crosses still preserved in their original setting, the one in the Lagurka church near Khe (Fig. 6), in the mountainous region of Svanet'i, provides a good example: it stands on a stepped pedestal, whose upper part is decorated with blind arcades; it is embellished with a golden silver revetment displaying stars, crosses and images of saints, and is topped with a "cap". The latter is of conical shape, with its surface embellished with protruding semi-spherical bosses, and a thin layer of metal, decorated with the images of the twelve apostles in its inner face, is used as a brim. This element is known also from other examples and sometimes takes on a pyramidal shape.⁵⁸ In its general appearance, it can be understood as the stylized rendering of a ciborium or canopy, like those that framed the monumental crosses of Golgotha and Mtskheta, which were in their turn evocative of heaven as God's dwelling and final goal for all believers.



Fig. 6. Pre-altar cross, 11th century. Khe (Georgia), Lagurka church (photo: Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz-Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, photographer Dror Maayan)

⁵⁷ HOFFMANN and WOLF, "Licht und Landschaft", p. 31.

⁵⁸ The basic study is now B. SCHRADER, "Byzantine Ideology in Georgian Iconography: Iconographic Programmes of Georgian Pre-Altar Crosses in Their Historical Context", in *Cultural Interactions in Medieval Georgia*, M. BACCI, TH. KAFFENBERGER and M. STUDER-KARLEN (eds.), Wiesbaden, 2018, pp. 115-142, esp. 129-130.

The occurrence of very similar “caps” in Georgia and Ireland indicates their indebtedness to patterns that, originating from Jerusalem, became gradually obsolete in the course of time. The solution employed in the painted cross from the Pisan church of San Paolo all’Orto seems to be in keeping with this same tradition. It displays a conical canopy with a lower, quadrangular rim made of gold and precious stones (Fig. 2), whose glittering appearance, combined with foliated ornaments on the body of the cross itself, could easily remind viewers that the visual object they were looking at was not to be considered only as the material instrument of Christ’s sacrifice, but also, and more importantly, as the most evident sign of his victory on death and sin.