

CHAPTER ONE
THE HELENA LEGEND

Three versions of the legend of the discovery of the Cross came into being between the end of the fourth century and the mid-fifth century: the Helena legend, the Protonike legend and the Judas Gyriacus legend. The Helena legend is definitely the oldest. From the time of its origin seven texts of the Helena legend were transmitted until c.450. They can be divided into two groups: a. the texts of the legend in the *Church Histories* of Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret; b. the texts of the legend by Ambrose, Paulinus of Nola and Sulpicius Severus. Of these seven texts, that of Rufinus' comes closest to the original version of the Helena legend:

At about the same time, Helena, the mother of Constantine, a woman of outstanding faith and deep piety, and also of exceptional munificence, whose offspring indeed one would expect to be such a man as Constantine, was advised by divinely-sent visions to go to Jerusalem. There she was to make an enquiry among the inhabitants to find out the place where the sacred body of Christ had hung on the Cross. This spot was difficult to find, because the persecutors of old had set up a statue of Venus over it, so that if any Christian wanted to worship Christ in that place, he seemed to be worshipping Venus. For this reason, the place was not much frequented and had all but been forgotten. But when, as we related above, the pious lady hastened to the spot pointed out to her by a heavenly sign, she tore down all that was profane and polluted there. Deep beneath the rubble she found three crosses lying in disorder. But the joy of finding this treasure was marred by the difficulty of distinguishing to whom each cross belonged. The board was there, it is true, on which Pilate had placed an inscription written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew characters.² But not even this provided sufficient evidence to identify the Lord's Cross. In such an ambiguous case uncertainty requires divine proof. It happened that in that same city, a certain prominent lady of that place lay mortally ill with a serious disease. Macarius was at that time bishop of the Church there. When he saw the doubts of the queen and all present, he said: "Bring all three crosses which have been found and God will now reveal to us which is the cross which bore Christ." Then, together with the queen and the others, he approached the sick woman, went down on his knees and poured out the following prayer: "Oh Lord, you

¹ Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* X 7-8.

² John 19:19.