

saw fit through the Passion on the Cross of your Only-begotten Son to grant salvation to the human race, and now in our own time you have inspired your handmaid to search everywhere for the blessed wood on which our Saviour hung; now give us a clear sign which of these crosses was made to glorify our Lord and which were made to execute slaves. Let this woman, now lying ill unto death, be recalled to life from death's door as soon as the wood of salvation touches her." His prayer finished, he first brought one of the three crosses near, but nothing happened; then he brought the second near-still no reaction. But when he brought the third cross near, the woman suddenly opened her eyes and got up, all her strength restored. She ran through the house more quickly than when she had been well, and began to praise the power of the Lord. When the queen saw that her wish had been answered by such a clear sign, she built a marvellous church of royal magnificence over the place where she had discovered the Cross. The nails, too, which had attached the Lord's body to the Cross, she sent to her son. From some of these he had a horse's bridle made, for use in battle, while he used the others to add strength to a helmet, equally with a view to using it in battle. Part of the redeeming wood she sent to her son, but she also left part of it there preserved in silver chests. This part is commemorated by regular veneration to this very day. The venerable queen also left this further proof of her deep piety: she invited to dinner the virgins whom she found there consecrated to God. She is said to have looked after them with such great devotion, that she considered it a disgrace if they used the services of maidservants. Instead, having herself donned the garb of a maidservant, she served them food and drink with her own hands and poured water over their hands. She who was both queen of all the known world and the mother of the emperor appointed herself the servant of the servants of Christ. This, then, is the true story of what happened in Jerusalem.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CROSS IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

The legend of the discovery of the Cross probably came into being in the second half of the fourth century, but the True Cross had already been venerated for some time, especially in Jerusalem. It was also an object of veneration in other parts of the empire, and relics of the Cross had become widely distributed. In the first three centuries of the Christian era the Cross had been a symbol of minor importance.¹ From Constantine's reign onwards, the Cross became increasingly prominent as a symbol until it eventually became the Christian symbol par excellence. Initially an object identified with disgrace, it later became a highly revered token of salvation.² From the fourth century on, the sign of the Cross appeared nearly everywhere: engraved on coins, houses, sarcophagi and weapons, sewn on clothes, and even used as a tattoo.³ Reverence for the Cross as a symbol was undoubtedly greatly stimulated by the 'discovery' of what was considered to be the True Cross.⁴

The attribution to Helena of the discovery of the Cross is late and not based on historical evidence. The name of Helena does not occur in any of the fourth-century sources in which the True Cross is mentioned. It is useful to present a chronological inventory of these sources, since it not only demonstrates the dissemination of relics of the Cross, but also provides evidence that Helena was not initially connected with the Cross and its discovery. It also sheds light on the question of the date of discovery.

At the end of the 340s Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, mentions in his *Catecheses* the presence of the *lignum crucis* in the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. He alludes in three places to the relics of the Cross. It appears from these passages that Christians already attached great value to the Cross and that fragments of it had

¹ See e.g. M. Sulzberger, 1925; P. Stockmeier, 1966.

² Joh. Chrys., *Contra Jud. et Gent.* = PG 48, 826; *Exp. in Ps.* 109, 6 = PG 55, 274.

³ P. Stockmeier, 1966, 212-217. The first known representation of Christ's crucifixion only dates from the first half of the fifth century and was depicted on an ivory relief of Italian workmanship; see *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*, s.v. Kreuz, 611-612.

⁴ P. Stockmeier, 1966, 201: "Die Auffindung des Kreuzes Christi löst eine starke kultische Bewegung aus; ..."

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