



Why Did People ‘Invent’ Relics in the Roman East Between the Fourth and Sixth Centuries?

Por que las personas ‘han creado’ reliquias en el Oriente romano entre los siglos IV y VI

Por que as pessoas ‘inventaram’ relíquias no Oriente romano entre os séculos IV e VI?

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Abstract: The cult of relics did not exist in the first centuries of the Christian era, but only came into being in the fourth century. After the Peace of the Church and the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, it became a constitutive element of the new religion. However, a very small number of holy graves known to exist and could be pinpointed. This could explain why a series of ‘inventions’ or miraculous discoveries happened in this time – first of all in the Eastern provinces of the Empire –, that is to meet the needs of worship. But relics were not found at just any time or place. A careful examination of the different cases in their historical context gives us a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Resumo: O culto das relíquias não existia no primeiro século da era crista, mas, no século IV, após a Paz da Igreja e a cristianização do Império Romano, tornou-se um elemento constitutivo da nova religião. Porém, apenas um pequeno número de túmulos santos era conhecido e poderia ser delimitado. Isto poderia explicar o por quê uma série de invenções ou descobertas miraculosas foram feitas nessa época – primeiramente nas províncias orientais do império – isto é, para atender às necessidades de adoração. Mas relíquias não eram encontradas em qualquer lugar ou a qualquer momento. Um exame cuidadoso dos diferentes casos em seu contexto histórico nos dá uma melhor compreensão do fenômeno.

Keywords: Roman East – Relics – Inventions – Church – Politics.

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We can read in the *Acts of the Apostles* (8: 2), that ‘devout men carried Stephen to his burial and made great lamentation over him’. This sentence summarises properly the fate reserved to the first martyrs. The faithful considered it a duty to collect the dead bodies and bury them with dignity. However, things changed over time and some form of community worship was organised among the Christians. In the middle of the third century, Churches such as Carthage or Rome started to develop comprehensive lists of martyrdom anniversaries to commemorate. At the beginning of the fourth century, in his book on the *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius of Caesarea first wrote that Pamphilius and his companions ‘received a convenient funeral, and, as was the custom, were put in the grave’. But, in a second edition of the text, we can read that ‘They were laid down in the magnificent dwellings of the temples and placed in the saintly houses of prayer, for an imperishable memory, in order to be honoured by the people of God’.²

Indeed, after the Peace of the Church in 313, and the birth of the Christian Empire, places of devotion started to emerge everywhere. It concerned not only the martyrs, but also the graves of the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, as well as the places of theophany or those sanctified by the presence of Christ. But very few were precisely located at this point; so it was necessary to search and find them, exploring, as we can imagine, places such as catacombs or cemeteries as well as oral and written traditions, in particular, the Holy Scriptures. In such cases, the expression ‘empirical inventions’ created by Pierre Maraval seems convenient.³ However, sometimes, the finding is reported to have occurred in a miraculous way, and, more important, ‘contrary to all expectations’, as Eusebius wrote about the discovery of the Tomb of Christ. This time, Pierre Maraval speaks of ‘inspired inventions’, since they usually happened after a divine revelation.

² EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA. *De Martyribus Palestinae*. XI. 28.

³ MARAVAL, P. *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d'Orient. Histoire et géographie des origines à la conquête arabe*. Paris: Cerf, 2004.



The first known discoveries of this kind occurred in the fourth century, chiefly in Jerusalem and the Holy Places. For example, the first mention is precisely the report of Eusebius about the Tomb of Christ, which says that soon after the council of Nicaea in 325, the emperor Constantine decided to give back that holy monument to the veneration of the faithful. But it had been lost for a long time, hidden beneath a pagan temple. By the miracle of the invention, God granted the imperial wish.⁴ For corporeal relics, Gregory of Nazianzus is our first source. The then bishop of Constantinople relates in 379 how a Christian woman had concealed the body of the martyr Cyprian in her house during the persecutions, and how another one had found it there, thanks to a divine revelation.⁵

The testimony of the pilgrim Egeria around 384, who relates the discovery of the grave of Job in the province of Arabia, shows that such stories were already in circulation by that time.⁶ At Carneas, they told her how, one day, an anchorite had seen the place in a revelation. The bishop or clerics he had informed made excavations there, found a cave and, within the cave, the tomb. On the lid, they could read Job's name. Then, a tribune built a church, the altar being located exactly above the tomb. This is the standard pattern for the invention of relics.

This pattern belonged to the ancient and non-Christian cultural background. For example, as reported by Plutarch, an oracle ordered the Athenians to bring back in the city the bones of its founder-king, Theseus, murdered 400 years before at Skyros.⁷ In 475 BC, the *strategos* Cimon, having conquered the island, discovered 'a coffin of a great corpse with a bronze spear-head by its side and a sword'. The remains were reburied in Athens and duly honoured by the inhabitants. In memory of the event, an annual competition of tragedies was instituted. We could also find such stories in the Late Judaism. But beyond the similarities, in particular the belief in the protection and benefits

⁴ EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA. *Life of Constantine*. In: WINKELMANN, F. (ed.), *Eusebius Werke*, I. 1: *Über das Leben des Kaisers Konstantin*. Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991, III. 26. 1, p. 95.

⁵ GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *Discourse 24*. In: MOSSAY, J. (ed.), *Discours 24-26*. Sources Chrétiennes, 284. Paris: Cerf, 1981.

⁶ EGERIA. *Itinerarium*. In: MARAVAL, P. (ed.), *Journal de voyage (itinéraire)*. Sources Chrétiennes, 296. Paris: Cerf, 1982, pp. 182-83.

⁷ PLUTARCHUS. *Life of Cimon*, 8. 5-7. In: FLACELIÈRE, R. and CHAMBRY, E. (eds.), *Vies*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972, VII, pp. 24-25.



that relics would give to individuals or the community, the inventions in Christian context are not reducible to pure legacy – on the contrary.⁸ It is interesting to attempt to understand, with the help of a few examples, why the followers of the new religion invented relics. For that, the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire are a perfect place to investigate; since it was there where the more famous and significant cases before the sixth century occurred.⁹

However, while not occurring in the *pars orientalis* of the Empire (although a strict separation between East and West is not quite relevant at this time and we know the influence of the Cappadocian on Ambrose) it is first worth recalling the famous story, when, in 386, the bishop built a church in a burial area outside the walls of Milan, and the faithful wanted him to consecrate this church with a deposit of relics, as he had done earlier in the *Basilica romana*.¹⁰ The bishop had suddenly a kind of inspiration and ordered the ground dug up in a neighbouring *martyrium*. The remains of two martyrs, Gervasius and Protasius, were exhumed and soon translated in the new church. In spite of the common desire, Ambrose refused to leave the relics exposed too long. He then placed them under the altar, and proceeded to the consecration of the new basilica. It is interesting to note that, as with the tomb of Christ at Jerusalem, this discovery, though miraculous, was a consequence of an explicit need and search. Ambrose wanted to fulfil the wishes of his followers, but he himself provoked such a claim when, sometime earlier, he had put relics in another basilica situated also outside the walls of Milan, on the day of its consecration. His aim could have been to bring a growing popular devotion to the relics of the saints under the control of the Church.

More than twenty years earlier, the emperor Julian (361-3) had blamed the Christians, saying that they were filling all places with graves, and Christians themselves were sometimes reluctant regarding certain practices, particularly the divination at the graves of martyrs. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria

⁸ CRONNIER, E. 'Eastern Christianity and Relics of Saints: from Refusal to Quest'. In: SALAMON, M. et al (eds.), *Rome, Constantinople and Newly-Converted Europe. Archaeological and Historical Evidence*. Krakow: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012, II, pp. 25-32.

⁹ CRONNIER, E. *Les inventions de reliques dans l'Empire romain d'Orient (4^e – 6^e s.)* Forthcoming.

¹⁰ AMBROSIUS OF MILAN. *Ep.* 22. In: ZELZER, M. (ed.), *Sancti Ambrosii Opera, pars X. Epistulae et acta, III*. Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, 82. 3. Vienna: OAW, 1982.



blamed Meletian schismatics who corrupted and attracted the people that way.¹¹ For its part, Abba Shenoute condemned the discoveries of relics on the basis of alleged revelations and their subsequent installation in churches.¹² According to him, they were not true martyrs and the miracles attributed to them were due to God alone. In 401, the Council of Carthage required the destruction of altars erected on the graves of martyrs after some revelations, when an authentic tradition could not be produced.¹³ But things changed and even some reluctant people, such as Augustine, became powerful supporters and orchestrators of the cult of relics. The invention of Gervasius and Protasius, and, later, that of the martyr Stephen, fully ‘managed’ by the episcopal hierarchy, played here a very important role.

Indeed, the example of Milan also shows very well the political nature of these miraculous discoveries. Here, the invention occurred immediately after a conflict had broken out between Ambrose and the court of Milan. In fact, a few months earlier, Justina, the mother of the emperor Valentinian II, being an Arian, had demanded a church for the Arians. Ambrose had refused and invested the required basilica with the faithful. Impressed by such resistance, the court had given up. So, Ambrose explained to his followers that God had revealed their heavenly protectors to the light, the Milanese martyrs Gervasius and Protasius, up till then fallen into oblivion.

The inventions of relics probably served to support and strengthen the Christianisation of the Empire. They sometimes occurred in or around natural elements, such as trees, springs, mountains or caves, some of which were clearly ancient sacred places of paganism. Cornelius the Centurion was discovered near a ruined temple of Zeus, under a thorny bush considered magical, while the church St. George of Ezra, erected after an apparition of

¹¹ For an edict forbidding the celebration of funerals during the day: JULIAN, *Ep.* 136. In: BIDEZ, J. (ed.), *L'empereur Julien. Œuvres complètes*, I. 2. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1924, pp. 129-32. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *Ep.* In: LEFORT, L. Th. (ed.), *Athanase d'Alexandrie, Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 150, Scriptorum copticorum, 20. Louvain: Peeters, 1955, II, pp. 46-47.

¹² LEFORT, L. Th. ‘La chasse aux reliques des martyrs en Egypte au 4^e s.’. In: *La nouvelle Clío*, 6, 1954, pp. 225-30.

¹³ MUNIER, C. (ed.), *Registri Ecclesiae Carthaginiensis excerpta, in Concilia Africae a. 345 – a. 525*. Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 149. Turnhout: Brepols, 1974, pp. 204-05.



the saint and probably the invention of his relic, replaced an ancient temple.¹⁴ Yet, we would hardly find an invention of relics explicitly brought against a pagan shrine still in activity. The only example, though well known, is generally regarded as apocryphal. Like Ambrose, Cyril of Alexandria would have found, after his prayer, the remains of the martyrs Cyrus and John in a *martyrium* of Alexandria.¹⁵ This time, the bishop wanted to put them in a village church, at Menouthis, to prevent the Christians of the place from erring and going astray. Apparently, due to the absence of a *martyrium*, they went to the shrine of the goddess Isis to get its benefits. On the other hand, if the tradition reports that many relics – like the Three Hebrews, the veil of the Theotokos or clothing of Christ – had been stolen from Jews, it is now accepted that there was no systematic confiscation of Jewish holy places.

The inventions of relics most certainly played a significant role in the doctrinal conflicts. We have seen the example of Milan. But it is necessary to be careful, because, in a number of cases, Arianism seems to be, like Judaism, no more than a hagiographical *topos* used to proclaim the triumph of the true faith over heresy. But, while the Arians are always the losers, deprived of relics (for example the head of John the Baptist) in favour of representatives of orthodoxy, the Monophysites were also able to use the inventions to their advantage, such as charismatic leaders like Peter the Iberian, who was associated with two of them.¹⁶ Similar adventures have been attributed to Severus of Antioch.¹⁷

However, the inventions were significant events that may have had a real impact on the life of the Churches and cities. So, it is not surprising to see them happen in large bishoprics, patriarchates, metropolitan or autocephalous Churches – like Jerusalem or Constantinople, Ephesus, Salamis or Emesa – which were also great cities, seats of civil authority or imperial residences

¹⁴ HALKIN, F. 'Un abrégé de la Vie disparue de Corneille le Centurion'. In: *Rivista di studi bizantini e neoell.*, 11, n.s. 1, 1964, pp. 31-39. BUTLER, H. C. *Early Churches in Syria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 122.

¹⁵ *Patrologia Graeca*, 77, c. 1100-1105. See more recently, GASCOU, J. 'Les origines du culte des saints Cyr et Jean'. In: *Analecta Bollandiana*, 125, 2007, pp. 241-81.

¹⁶ RAABE, R. *Petrus der Iberer, ein Charakterbild zur Kirchen- und Sittengeschichte des 5. Jahrhunderts*. Leipzig: Leipzig Hinrichs, 1905, pp. 85 and 101-06. See now, HORN, C. B. and PHENIX, R. R., Jr. *The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem and the Monk Romannus*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World, 24. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

¹⁷ *Textes coptes relatifs à saint Claude d'Antioche*, GODRON, G. (ed.). In: *Patrologia Orientalis*, 35, 1970, pp. 486 [64]-507 [85].



(such as Milan and Constantinople). Usually, a bishop took a leading part in the invention. Beyond his pastoral concerns, the event could be of personal benefit, strengthening his position and ensuring his legitimacy. Thus, in 415, the discovery of the first martyr Stephen occurred during the provincial council of Diospolis, in the First Palestine.¹⁸ John, Bishop of Jerusalem, supported Pelagius, a man convicted in the West for his heretical faith. The invention was probably no stranger to the sentence, which declared the orthodoxy of Pelagius, and, at the same time, strengthened the authority of his protector.

The examples could be multiplied. Thus, the miracle of the resurrection of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus probably occurred in 448, that is, shortly after the accession to the episcopal see of Stephen, who had illegally deposed his predecessor.¹⁹ Similarly, it is certainly not merely a coincidence that the invention of the head of the Baptist occurred at Emesa, in 453, during the episcopate of Ouranios, a bishop very unpopular shortly before, since he had had to flee immediately after his accession, and had been accused of Nestorianism in 449, at the Council of Ephesus, which was also called the 'Robbery'.²⁰

But of foremost importance for the bishops was to defend their see, increase their prestige, and ensure their power. Because of its status as Holy City, Jerusalem had been constantly keen to claim privileges and shake off the supervision of Caesarea, the metropolitan bishopric of the First Palestine. The triumph of John II at the Council of Diospolis chaired by the bishop of Caesarea must also be read in this context. Besides, Zebennos of Eleutheropolis, a bishopric neighbour and enemy of Jerusalem, and for a long time ally of Caesarea, was present at Diospolis. The rivalry between the two seats could be related to inventions of relics. Indeed, under the episcopate of the same Zebennos and in the area of Eleutheropolis, the relics of three minor prophets were discovered: Habakkuk and Micah between 384 and 401, then Zechariah, perhaps in 415, a few weeks before the discovery of Stephen.²¹

¹⁸ VANDERLINDEN, A. *Revelatio S. Stephani* (BHL 7850-7856). In: *Revue des Etudes Byzantines*, 4, 1946, pp. 178-217.

¹⁹ *Patrologia Graeca*, 115, c. 428-448.

²⁰ *Patrologia Latina*, 67, c. 424-430.

²¹ SOZOMENOS. *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII. 29 and IX. 17.



The latter, which occurred in Caphargamala (named from the Gamaliel of the Scripture), a village near Diospolis, within the jurisdiction of Jerusalem, could have been a direct answer to the invention of the prophet Zechariah at Capharzacharia. But already before, the invention of Habakkuk might have occurred in the monastery of Epiphanius, in the years when the famous Bishop of Salamis came back from Cyprus to attack Origenism and denounce John of Jerusalem as an Origenist.

The efforts of Cyril of Jerusalem and his successors to gain independence from Caesarea did not succeed before the episcopate of Juvenal, when Jerusalem was promoted to a patriarchate. This promotion is part of a broader movement of claims and alterations in the hierarchy of bishoprics, in which the issue of relics took place. For instance, at the beginning of the reign of Theodosius I, the province of Lebanese Phoenicia was divided for administrative purposes, having Emesa as civil metropolis and Damascus as ecclesiastical metropolis. Later, when they discovered the head of John the Baptist (453), Emesa received the title and status of an autocephalous Church. We can consider also the case of some border-towns, outposts of the Empire as Dara or Sergiupolis. At the start of the sixth century, the Emperor Anastasius (491-518) made them metropolitan sees having transferred the relics of Bartholomew to the former and, conversely, receiving a finger of the martyr Sergius from the latter.

It is true that at the same time, Ephesus, which had the graves of John the Evangelist and Timothy, saw its ancient rights gradually disappear in favour of Constantinople, the imperial city. However, more and more churches would claim special honours on account of their apostolicity, and, for this, the possession of relics was essential. The most famous case is Cyprus, where the body of Barnabas was rediscovered.²² It happened at Salamis-Constantia, metropolitan see of the island, probably in 488. In fact, to determine the status of Cyprus in relation to the Patriarchal see, pending since the Council of Ephesus (431), the emperor Zeno, at the request of Peter the Fuller, Patriarch of Antioch, convened Anthemios of Salamis, the metropolitan bishopric of Cyprus, before the standing Synod of Constantinople. The formulation of an apostolic origin of this church was an answer to the

²² ALEXANDER THE MONK. *Laudatio Barnabae*. In: VAN DEUN, P. (ed.), *Hagiographica Cypria. Sancti Barnabae laudatio auctore Alexandro monacho et sanctorum Bartholomaei et Barnabae vita e menologio imperiali deprompta*. Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca, 26. Turnhout: Brepols, 1993.



offensive of the patriarchate. It is likely that Antioch had opened hostilities by highlighting the apostolic origin of its see and the Cypriot Church must have sought an argument of the same weight against it. The discovery of the body of the apostle became the sign, the unquestionable guarantee of the apostolic origin of Cyprus.

In Constantinople, the miraculous rediscovery of the relics of Andrew, Luke and Timothy in the church of the Holy Apostles in 549, during the reign of Justinian, illustrates once more the importance that the question of apostolicity had acquired in the East.²³ The rise of the see of Constantinople, the imperial capital, had disturbed the normal course of things. The establishment and recognition of its patriarchal status were gradually accomplished during the great conciliar meetings of the fourth and fifth centuries.

However, the 28th canon of Chalcedon (451) aroused fierce opposition in the West. Rome claimed the primacy of its see, the stone on which the whole Church was built (Mt. 16: 18), followed by Alexandria, the seat of Mark, disciple of Peter and Antioch, founded by Peter. Constantinople had no place in such a scheme, and was keenly aware of its disadvantage during the break between East and West, known as the Acacian schism (484-519). At the time of the reconciliation, a letter of Justinian to Pope Hormisdas, dated June 29 of the year 519, referring to the relics of the Apostles in Constantinople (which shows that they had not been completely forgotten) may indicate that it was time for the imperial city to claim some apostolic origins. In fact, the legend of the apostolate of Andrew in Thrace, who had ordered the first bishop of Byzantium Stachys, came to light at this time. Constantinople, the New Rome, became an apostolic foundation, and its apostle was the first called, the brother of Peter, the founder of the Roman see.

To understand why people invented relics in the Roman East from the fourth to the sixth century, we depend on sources of various kinds, dissimilar in their functions and points of view. While hagiography usually underlines the authority of a bishop, with Constantinople and historiography, the figure of the emperor is highlighted. An invention sanctioned the episcopate as well as the reign under which it occurred. God rewarded the piety of both of them, validated their politics, and emphasised their legitimacy. But our sources, the

²³ PROCOPIUS OF CAESAREA. *De aedificis*, I. 4. 9-24.



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result of an ‘official’ discourse, are likely to conceal the extent of this phenomenon, the roles of other actors, and, consequently, their motivations. Speaking of the invention of Cyprian, Gregory of Nazianzus disapproved of the private ownership of a saintly body. As we have seen, some take-over by the authorities must have occurred on that point, and this is the context in which we can understand the distrust of the clergy towards the visionary gift of the monks, as well as the emphasis on the heresy of the first owners of the relics, monks or laymen, and their recovery by the faction of the Orthodox. In fact, a closer reading allows us to discern a strong involvement of the ‘Powerful’, civic or military officers, whose spiritual motivations probably competed or were associated with temporal or economic purposes. Anyway, these first inventions are, in all their aspects, the model of a phenomenon which has lasted until nowadays.²⁴

²⁴ For an invention which occurred in the island of Lesbos, Greece, in 1959, see REY, S. *Des saints nés des rêves: fabrication de la sainteté et commémoration des néomartyrs à Lesbos (Grèce)*. Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes, 2008.