

THE CROSS IN LONDON, BRITISH LIBRARY MS HARLEY 2253*

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London, British Library MS Harley 2253 needs little introduction. Copied probably in the West of England in the early fourteenth century (ca. 1330–40),¹ it contains, among many other items in Latin and Anglo-Norman verse and prose, the foremost collection of early Middle English lyrics now known, most of which are found nowhere else.² Apart from an ornate puzzle initial in red and blue on fol. 1r, and red capitals throughout, it lacks illustration—with one exception. A large red Templar cross measuring 13 x 14 mm appears at the centre of fol. 132r, separating two entries in Latin prose: 'Scriptum quod peregrini deferent ab Ecclesia Sancti in Asturiis' ('A text that pilgrims bring from the Church of the Holy Savior in Asturias') and 'Legenda de sancto Etrido, presbitero de Leoministria' ('The Legend of St. Etrid, Priest of Leominster') that in MS Harley 2253 immediately follows the 'Scriptum'.³ The exceptional nature of the cross, its uniqueness in the manuscript, has prompted several attempts over time to account for its placement, but to date no agreement exists preferring any. No explanation, moreover, has been offered for the red cross's purpose. On these and other related questions the following may shed light.

Prior to the publication of the manuscript in facsimile by N. R. Ker in 1965, those few scholars who had offered an opinion connected the cross with the 'Legenda de Sancto Etrido', a priest (Eadfrith) who, directed by a vision commemorated by the subsequent foundation of Leominster Abbey, successfully converted a Mercian king to Christianity. Ker, however, without going into detail, attached the cross to the 'Scriptum quod peregrini'.⁴ His account has been accepted by the manuscript's most recent editor as well, apparently on the strength of Ker's opinion.⁵ While Ker's view is undoubtedly correct, it can be better substantiated by several factors which a closer

consideration of the contents of ‘Scriptum’ and its context make clear.

The ‘Scriptum’ seems derived from the *Liber testamentorum*, one of several documents collected in the *Corpus Pelagianum*, a compendium which it is now agreed was fabricated by Bishop Pelayo (Pelagius) of Oviedo (d. 1153) in an attempt to establish Oviedo as a pilgrimage site comparable to nearby Santiago de Compostella.⁶ The ‘Scriptum’ as it appears in the *Liber testamentorum* and in MS Harley 2253 purports to be a list of the contents of the Arca Santa, a box of sacred relics the most revered of which is a ‘sudarium,’ a cloth believed to be drenched in Christ’s blood shed during his removal from the cross.⁷ As its full title indicates, pilgrims visiting Oviedo to venerate the sudarium were given copies of the ‘Scriptum’ to take away with them.

The sudarium, however, is not the only relic claimed for the Arca in the ‘Scriptum.’ According to an inventory made (reputedly) in 1075—which the text of the ‘Scriptum’ replicates in detail—the Arca contains many other things as well.⁸ Saliently presented in the ‘Scriptum’ text are parts of the true cross, of the crown of thorns, milk of the Virgin Mary, bits of the loaves and fishes with which Jesus fed the multitudes, Christ’s bread from the Last supper, and ‘earth from Mount of Olives where the Lord set his feet as he was about to ascend to heaven’ (‘de terra Montis Oliveti ubi Dominus ascensus in celum pedes tenuit’, ll. 22–23). Alongside, the ‘Scriptum’ lists part of Moses’ rod, portions of “the manna that the Lord rained down for the sons of Israel” (‘de pane pluit Dominus filiis Israel’, l.22), ‘some of the rock of Mount Sinai upon which Moses fasted’ (‘de petra Montis Synay supra quam Moyses ieiunavit’, ll.32–33), as well as corporeal relics: the hand of St. Stephen ‘prothomartiris’ (‘the first martyr’, l.26), the forehead of John the Baptist retaining some hair, ‘bones and finger joints of the Innocents’ (‘de ossibus Innocencium et de articulis digitorum’, ll.27–8), the bodies of ‘saints, martyrs, confessors, and virgins’, (‘sanctorum, martyrium, confessorum, et virginum’, ll.33–4), and ‘the bodies of the sainted martyrs Eulogius and Lucretia and blessed Eulalia’ (‘corpora sanctorum martirum Eulogii et Lucricie et beate Eulalie’, ll.36–7).⁹

In addition to the Arca, there are two other highly revered objects at the Cathedral de San Salvador, both crosses: the Cruz de los Ángeles (Cross of the Angels) and the Cruz de la Victoria (Cross of Victory). The first, reputedly the work of two angels, was given to the cathedral in A.D. 808 by the Visigothic descendant Alfonso II ‘the Chaste’, king

of Asturias (d. 842), who built the Cámara Santa (Holy Chamber) to house the Arca Santa. In the Middle Ages the Cruz de los Ángeles rested prominently in the Cámara Santa along with the Arca.¹⁰ A century later, in 908, the Cross of Victory was deposited in the Cámara Santa by Alfonso III. Beneath its gold sheathing and encrusted gems is an oak cross said to have been carried by Pelayo, founder of the kingdom of Asturias, in the battle of Covadonga (ca. 718), the Christian victory that began the Reconquista—the retaking of the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors.

Taken collectively, these details underscore the accuracy of Ker’s suggestion, that the red cross on fol. 132r of MS Harley 2253 should be seen as a proper part of the ‘Scriptum,’ not the ‘Legenda de sancta Etrido’. Undoubtedly the Harley scribe in copying the ‘Scriptum’ into his book replicated a cross found at the bottom of his exemplar—in this case, very likely an actual ‘Scriptum’ carried home from Oviedo. The cross at the end of the ‘Scriptum’ thus provides a visual recollective not merely of the physical visit to the holy site, but of its particular spiritual validity as well, precisely as do cast metal images forming pilgrims’ badges. In effect a badge in parchment, the “Scriptum” would have been an integral feature of Bishop Pelayo’s plan to advertise, and draw pilgrims to, the Catedral de San Salvador.¹¹

In choosing to end the souvenir ‘Scriptum’ with the cross, however, Pelayo—or whomever—quite probably had more in mind than mere design. The salient relics of the Oviedo cathedral, the Arca Santa and the cathedral’s two revered crosses, transmit interlocking messages vital to the mentality of twelfth-century militant Christianity in Spain, and abroad as well. Thoughtfully considered, the list of relics of the Arca itemized in the ‘Scriptum’ clearly emphasizes two main elements: martyrdom, through the lives and body parts of Christ and the various lesser martyrs; and liberation, through those relics pertaining to Moses (who typologically points to Christ too). Moses’ release of the Jews from Egyptian captivity would have had special resonance in twelfth-century Spain, during the Reconquista. The ‘Scriptum’ cross also seems intended to help pilgrims recall—and hence advertise to those who might follow—the Cruz de los Ángeles and the Cruz de la Victoria, the two other primary reasons to visit Oviedo. Apropos, it is worth asking whether the cross on a pilgrim-borne ‘Scriptum’ looked the way the scribe of Harley 2253 rendered it in his manuscript: red, and shaped in the manner of the Knights Templars. Did the Harley scribe copy, or modify, the model before him? Neither question can be answered definitively of course but that he copied what he saw seems quite possible. The red

colour in the Church traditionally signals the blood of martyrdom, and indeed, it seems to have been selected along with white by the Templars to define the goals of the order—to live chastely, and to martyr themselves in battle for the cross.¹² On both those grounds, perhaps, the red would have recommended itself to Pelayo. That the bishop in fact had a Templar cross added to the first ‘Scriptum’, however, is more problematic. It would matter when the first ‘Scriptum’ was composed, whether news of the Templars (officially formed in 1120) had by then reached Oviedo, and the order’s consequent significance for Pelayo. More plausibly, if the original intent was to call specific attention to the miraculous relics of San Salvador, then a Visigothic cross, one the shape of the Cruz de los Ángeles, is more likely.¹³ Notably in any case, Visigothic and Templar crosses are similar, in that the arms and upright of both widen at their ends. An English scribe copying the ‘Scriptum’ in the early fourteenth century could easily have made the substitution—but so, of course, a Spanish scribe producing ‘Scriptum’ copies might have done much earlier, and passed his version on to cathedral visitors to carry home.

On balance, then, there are good reasons to support Ker’s intuition that the cross on fol. 132r of MS Harley 2253 should be counted a part of the ‘Scriptum quod peregrini deferent ab Ecclesia Sancti in Asturiis’. By comparison, the claim of the ‘Legenda de sancto Etrido, presbitero de Leoministria’—a peaceful conversion of a Mercian king and the founding of an abbey—has little to recommend it.

One minor point, in closing. The ‘Scriptum’ printed in Fein’s magnificent *Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript* constitutes the only rendering of the text available other than in facsimile; along with its meticulously researched notes, it must become the first source for future readers. Worth resolving, then, is a conundrum Fein identified but left without solution. At line 40, the ‘Scriptum’ reads: ‘. . . et corpus regis Costi, qui Ecclesiam Sancti Salvatoris fundavit fabricate spectabili modo’ (‘and the body of King Costus who founded the Church of the Holy Savior’). The explanatory note offered for that line is: ‘*regis Costi*. “King Costus”. This name is unexplained. The Church of the Holy Savior was founded by King Fruela I of Asturias in 761; he was assassinated in 768. He and his wife are interred there’. The mysterious ‘regis Costi’ is Alfonso II, nicknamed ‘el Casto’—‘the Chaste’. ‘regis Costi’ is clearly a scribal error, rendered perhaps by the Harley scribe but equally likely present in his exemplar. Although Fruela did found the Catedral de San Salvador, it was on a modest scale

much enlarged by his son Alfonso II in 802 to make it commensurate with the importance of Oviedo, his newly-established capital. Like Fruela, Alfonso—who had the Cámara Santa constructed to hold the Arca Santa, perhaps the source of the confusion of the two kings in the ‘Scriptum’—is also buried alongside his wife in the Catedral de San Salvador.

NOTES

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- ¹ On the date and production of the manuscript, see Carter Revard, ‘Scribe and Provenance’, in Susanna Fein (ed.), *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: The Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2000), 21–109.
- ² See G.L. Brook (ed.), *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of MS Harley 2253*, 4th edn. (Manchester, 1968).
- ³ For texts and translations, see *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, ed. Susanna Fein and trans. Fein, David Raybin and Jan Ziolkowski, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI, 2015), III.259-67. All ‘Scriptum’ quotations and line numbers are taken from this edition.
- ⁴ N. R. Ker (ed.), *Facsimile of British Museum MS Harley 2253*, EETS o.s. 255 (London, 1965), xiv. His note for the ‘Scriptum’ (Item 97) reads in full: ‘A letter authenticating the *arca* still preserved in the Cámara Santa at Oviedo and listing the relics it contained and other relics at Oviedo and the privileges granted to pilgrims by the bishop and clergy of the see. The position of the cross on f. 132 suggests that it belongs to art. 97 and not to art. 98.’
- ⁵ Fein, *Complete Harley Manuscript*, III, 343. Daniel Birkholz, *Harley Manuscript Geographies: Literary History and the Medieval Miscellany* (Manchester, 2020), 119, follows Ker and Fein.
- ⁶ For the texts of the *Corpus Pelagianum*, see especially the edition of B. S. Alonso, *Crónica del Obispo Don Pelayo* (Madrid, 1924); on the *Libro Testamentorum*, see the critical study of F. J. Fernández Conde, *El Libro de los Testamentos de las catedral de Oviedo* (Rome, 1971). On Pelayo as an ‘historian-fabulator’ (‘historiador-fabulador’) see Peter Linehan, *History and the Historians of Medieval Spain* (Oxford, 1993), esp. 78.
- ⁷ On the sudarium, see in general Janice Bennett, *Sacred Blood, Sacred Image: The Sudarium of Oviedo* (Littleton, CO, 2001), esp. 20–37. A. del Campo y Francés has argued that the cloth covered Christ’s face; see ‘El Sudario de Oviedo y su verificación tridimensional’, *Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando* LXXX (1995), 133–51.
- ⁸ The inventory, according to Document 72 in the *Libro Testamentorum*, was compiled on 13 March 1075, when the Arca was opened in the presence of King Alfonso VI and his sister Urraca. S. A. García Larragueta (ed.), *Colección de documentos de la catedral de Oviedo* (Oviedo, 1962), 214, prints Document 72 in full. Both the date and the event itself have been questioned, however: see, e.g. B. F. Reilly, *The Kingdom of León-Castilla Under King Alfonso VI (1065–1109)* (Princeton, NJ: 1988), 85.
- ⁹ The Arca, it should perhaps be said, measures 72 x 119 x 93 cm ($28^3=4\ 46\ \frac{1}{8} \times 36\ \frac{5}{8}$ inches).
- ¹⁰ See Justo Pérez de Urbel and A. González Ruiz Zorrilla, *Historia Silense: Edición crítica y introducción* (Madrid, 1959), 138–40; and further J. Manzanares Rodríguez, *Las joyas de la Cámara Santa de Oviedo* (Oviedo, 1972), 6–11.
- ¹¹ As Julie A. Harris puts it, ‘... growing devotion to the Arca Santa cult is central to the financial and ideological empowerment of Pelayo’s diocese’. See ‘Redating the Arca Santa of Oviedo’, *Art Bulletin* LXXVII (1995), 82–93; at 83.
- ¹² On the Templars generally, see Helen Nicholson, *The Knights Templar: A New History* (Stroud, Gloucs., 2001).
- ¹³ The ‘Scriptum’ would seem to corroborate this, noting (ll. 41-2) that: ‘also on display there is a cross handcrafted by the work of angels in remarkable fashion’ (‘*crux etiam ibi monstratur opere angelico fabricata spectabili modo*’).