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**Mobile Eyes.**

**Peripatetisches Sehen in den  
Bildkulturen der Vormoderne**

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## Remarks on the Visual Experience of Holy Sites in the Middle Ages

Michele Bacci

In the context of this collection of essays, I would like to formulate some insights on *mobile eyes* from an essentially comparative perspective. I am starting from the rather self-evident assumption that no kind of *peripatetic seeing* is more peripatetic than that of pilgrims. Pilgrimage is an activity that essentially occurs through motion: Pilgrims undertake a long and tiring journey from distant regions for the purpose of venerating places thought to be imbued with divine power. Pilgrimages exist in many world religions and normally serve as thresholds between the spheres of the mundane and the supernatural, even if the perception of these spheres may vary according to the different religious systems. Broadly speaking, a general distinction applies to the role of site-bound holiness in earlier traditions, dominated by the definition of pure and impure things, vis-à-vis newer religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism, whose key figures participate in the categories of both humanity and divinity. In such contexts, holy sites are essentially understood as »lieux de mémoire« associated with deeds of Christ or the Buddha, i. e., with historical events that are known to have taken place in specific places. In many cases, these are mere portions of ground thought of as sanctified by contact with the holy ones' bodies and as retaining some

traces of their physical presence. By gazing on and touching them, pilgrims obtain both spiritual and material benefits. The devotee's movement toward his or her goal is oriented by the spatial setting created by the architectural structures delimiting and framing the hallowed ground. In such places as Palestine or Northern India, pilgrimage assumes a distinctly kinetic dimension, inasmuch believers are supposed to walk not only within the major buildings marking the memorial sites, but also from site to site in order to literally follow in the footsteps of Christ and the Buddha. When travelling to such holy lands becomes impossible, both Christians and Buddhists assume that the topographic network may be reproduced elsewhere by means of »devotional strolls« that reproduce the distances separating the original holy sites, in combination with the performance of devotional and meditational exercises.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly enough, the kinetic, visual, and mental dimensions of pilgrimage are strongly intertwined. Even if worship can be such an elaborate experience as to satisfy all the five senses at the same time, there is no doubt that the mobile performance of sight lies at its core and constitutes not only a way of physically witnessing the religious prominence of a site-bound manifestation of the holy, but also a cognitive process by which worshippers are enabled to appropriate the spiritual power deemed to be associated with the object of their beholding. In this connection, I would like to lay further emphasis on the striking parallels between the Buddhist and the Christian traditions, in which the pilgrims' experience of site-bound holiness combines simultaneously kinetic, visual and mental acts.

#### **Travelling to, and Gazing on, the Buddha's Bodily Traces**

Let me try to exemplify this notion by looking first at the Buddhist, rather than the Christian, tradition. In the year 400 A. D. the Chinese monk Shih Fa-Hian left the land of Han to go on pilgrimage to North India, the Buddhist Holy Land. Upon arriving at Śrāvastī, the town in the district of Kosala where the Illuminated lived and preached for the longest amount of time, he was astonished at seeing the famous Jetavana *vihara* (monastery), marking the site of Śakyamuni's residence in town. Even though he came from far away, he had no difficulty in understanding the privileged status of the holy spot, since this was made clear to his eyes by a sumptuous architectural frame embellished with beautiful sculptures and even more by the peculiarities of its natural environment: »The clear

water of the tanks«—in Fa-Hian's words—»the luxuriant groves, and numberless flowers of variegated hues combine to produce the picture of what is called a Jetavana *vihara*.«<sup>2</sup>

The place was all the more worship-worthy because King Prasenajit of Kosala was said to have erected an image of the Buddha there during the Buddha's own lifetime. According to legend, when that Ocean of Compassion ascended to the Trayastriśas heavens to pray for the sake of his mother, he spent as many as ninety days far from the city, so that the King, desiring to see him again, ordered his sculptors to carve a sandalwood statue of him and placed it on the Buddha's seat. At last, when the Buddha came back, he decided to leave this »substitutive« body in his place, as he was well aware that it would enable his followers to see his face by serving as model for endless replicas.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this *Urbild* was just one of the holy portraits by which the physical appearance of the Illuminated was transmitted to future generations. Another statue, made by King Udayana of Kaushambi, is still said to be in the Seiryō-ji in Kyoto: It is usually covered with a veil and is solemnly shown to devotees only twice a century; at other times, one must be satisfied with seeing one of the numerous copies in and outside Kyoto that replicate it and in their turn are used as visual *foci* of public worship phenomena [Fig. 1].<sup>4</sup>

As far as we can learn from Fa-Hian's words, no such setting was used in the Jetavana and the image was apparently accessible to the pilgrims' sight. Yet the Chinese pilgrim admitted that this visual experience was unsatisfying, even pitiful, to him:

»When Fa-Hian and [his fellow traveller, M. B.] To-Ching arrived at this chapel of the Jetavana, they reflected that this was the spot in which the Lord of men had passed twenty-five years of his life; they themselves, at the risk of their lives, were now dwelling amongst foreigners; of those who had with like purpose travelled through a succession of countries with them, some had returned home, some were dead; and now, gazing on the place where Buddha once dwelt but was no longer to be seen, their hearts were affected with very lively regret.«<sup>5</sup>

Even if the Buddha's presence was effectively evoked by the statue erected at the very place where he was accustomed to sit among his monks, this seems to have caused Fa-Hian's negative response. To be sure, Fa-Hian was much more deeply upset by the sense of the Tathagatha's absence that was produced by gazing on





1 Zhāng Yánjiào, Zhāng Yánxí, copy of lost Buddha-Statue of King Udayana (986).

the empty sites where He had once lived and preached. Or, in other words, the holy portrait was itself instrumental to the general apprehension of the site, whose prestige and holiness was derived not so much from its holy contents, but rather from its memorial associations. By the time of the Chinese pilgrim's visit to India, the site-bound character of worship was frequently pointed out by a variety of Buddhist texts. According to the *Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya*, an ancient, probably early Mahayanic text that was brought to China by Fa-Hian himself, a specific distinction was to be made between *stūpas*, i.e. architectural reliquaries housing bodily remains and *śarira* of the Buddha and other holy figures, and other structures called *caityas*:

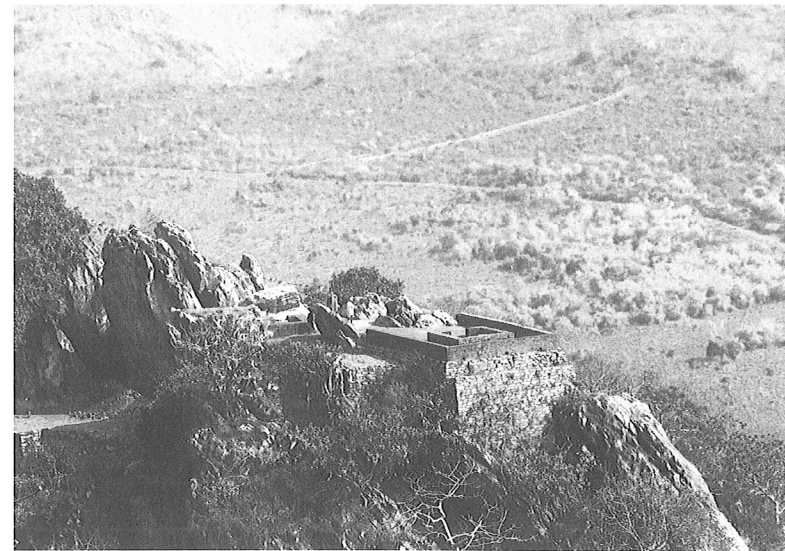
»Where there is a relic, one speaks of a *stūpa*; where there is none, of a *caitya*. The *caityas* that mark the places where the Buddha was born, where He attained Enlightenment, where He turned the Wheel of the Law, and where He entered Nirvāṇa, or where there is a Bodhisattva image, the caves

of Pratyeka Buddhas, or the footprints of the Buddha, may have Buddha-flower canopies and offering paraphernalia.«<sup>6</sup>

This categorisation restricted the possibilities of site-bound worship to those shrines which were associated with either objectified manifestations of the holy or memorial associations, while ruling out those sites which, in Indian spirituality, had been considered to be divine abodes or places sanctified by a divine epiphany. Buddhist religiousness, which relied on the commemoration of the exemplary life of the Illuminated, tended to lay emphasis on the memorial sites, which were much less familiar to the Hindus (for them, the only possible representatives of this category were the places associated with the divine descents of the gods, the so-called *avatāra*). Another Buddhist text, the *Kalingabodhi Jataka*, distinguished reliquary *stūpas* from both memorial sites and shrines associated with »relics of use,« i.e. garments and objects formerly owned by holy figures and constituting an extension by contact of the latter's physicality

(an analogous distinction existed also in the medieval West, where the 12th century monk Thiophridus of Epternach most aptly spoke of »appendicia exteriora« as distinguished from bodily relics).<sup>7</sup> The text stresses the shifting connection with the Buddha's body, whose worship was considered to be valid inasmuch it managed to hint at his *dharma*, i. e. the metaphorical body of his doctrine. In this sense, when questioned on this point, the Illuminated answered that only objects of use, such as his bo tree at Śrāvastī, could be worshipped as substitutes for his body before the *nirvana*: Relics did not yet exist and »memorial sites« would have been inappropriate, in that they implied a relationship depending on imagination only.<sup>8</sup>

Such *Erinnerungsorte* were associated with the Śākyamuni Buddha's life and with accounts of his previous reincarnations, as well as of countless *bodhisattvas*, *arhats*, and Buddhas of the past eras. Pilgrimage to such sites was described in old Buddhist sources as a physical and at the same time mental experience, surrogating the sight of the Buddha's face and arousing a deep emotion in the faithful. The Pāli word to designate them was *uddesika*, »indicative,« because they were supposed to act as (partial) signs enabling the mental reconstruction of the real and dharmic body of the Illuminated; according to the Pāli versions of the *Mahāparanirvāṇa Sūtra*, visitors to them were invited to »see and be moved by« them, whereas the Sanskrit version described this experience as the act of remembering the events associated with the sites themselves. This shift seems



to indicate that site-seeing was strictly connected to the notion of memory, intended as a technique of mental visualisation.<sup>9</sup>

The pilgrims' approach to the holy sites could be conditioned by their more or less elaborate *mise-en-scène*, architectural framings, and ornaments. The towers and *stūpas* marking the worship-worthy spots could be decorated with both narrative and iconic images, which strongly contributed to orienting the pilgrims' cognitive and emotional experience of the sites: In the deserted town of Kapilavastu, where the future Illuminated was born, a representation of the prince Siddharta's conception enabled the viewer to recognise that this had been the house of his birth.<sup>10</sup> Yet a great number of sites could consist of ruined buildings and open-air, apparently anonymous or unappealing places: A simple portion of ground, for example, could look worship-worthy if it was the only area not covered with grass, which could indicate that it had been sanctified by the body of a *pratyekabuddha* who happened to die right there,<sup>11</sup> whereas a luxuriant bushy grove located in the neighbourhood of a cavern visited by the Illuminated could be thought to have sprung from a piece of willow branch that he had used as a toothbrush.<sup>12</sup> Single elements of the landscape could easily be invested with religious meaning: This is especially evident with springs, trees, and mountain tops, which could correspond to ancient locations thought of as sanctified or enabling a more direct access to the supernatural dimension, re-interpreted at a later time as Buddhist memorial sites [Fig. 2].

**2 Vulture Peak, Rajgir, India.** The small structure designates the place where Buddha used to stay when living on Vulture Peak.

When Fa-Hian recruited two holy men to guide him to the top of Mount Gridhrakuta, better known as the Vulture's Peak, near present-day Bajgir, he was probably following in the steps of many previous devotees, both Hindu and Buddhist. With the exception of some ruined walls, no kind of monument commemorating an event of Buddha's life was to be seen *in situ*; no kind of *mise-en-scène* of the holiness and memorial associations of the place was available here. The Chinese pilgrim was impressed by the beauty and imposing dimensions of the mountain, yet this was not sufficient to manifest the privileged status of the site. The exercise of sight proved, in such contexts, to play a much more active role than in the more articulated and architecturally developed *loca sancta*. If one knew that in that place the Illuminated had prevented Mara, disguised as a vulture, from attacking and terrifying his pupil Ananda, an intensive look at the site, its ground, its stones, could reveal the extant traces of the commemorated events. Fa-Hian was sufficiently able to recognise the imprint of the bird and the hole produced by Buddha himself when he reached out his arm to pat Ananda's shoulder. This cognitive act of site-seeing was later followed by the ritual offering of flowers and incense; the whole experience was especially moving, to such an extent that the pilgrim could not restrain his tears, as he stated: »Here it was in bygone days Buddha dwelt and delivered the *Śurangama Sutra*. Fa-Hian, not privileged to be born when Buddha lived, can but gaze on the traces of his presence and the place which he occupied.«<sup>13</sup>

Gazing on the sacred traces was by no means perceived as a passive experience. In accordance with the Indian notion of *darśan*, looking at objects and sites imbued with holiness corresponds with appropriating and interiorising (in both practical and metaphorical terms) their supernatural power; it is a way of establishing a relationship with the deity, of feeling involved in it, as well as of experiencing it in mystical or visionary terms.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, it proves to be a transformational act whose intensity depends on the viewer's inner state. Indeed, only those pilgrims who have already attained an elevated state of purification can be enabled to thoroughly see the special category of holy objects represented by the Buddha's imprints. Consisting of footprints and »shadows,« as well as traces of his garments, these are able to hint at his body only partially, in that they bear no witness to his physical appearance; moreover, they are not movable objects, but rather portions of ground included in a landscape and visually interacting with it. Most notably, their

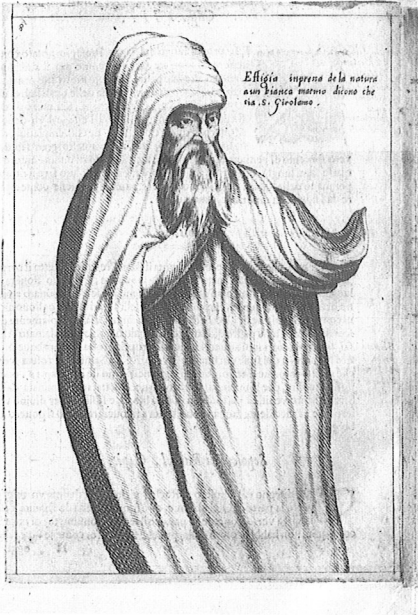
appearance changes depending on the viewpoint: »The footprint,« writes Fa-Hian, »is sometimes long and sometimes short, according to the thoughtfulness of a man's heart.«<sup>15</sup> The experience of such holy traces as the Buddha's shadow in Nagarahara, in present-day Afghanistan, is described as a progressive visual approach to the site: Upon leaving the town, one sees the mountain, then the cave, then the very spot where the Tathāgata left the imprint of his whole body, which only from a precise viewpoint can be perceived in iconographically recognisable terms:

»At a distance of ten paces or so we see it, like the true form of Buddha, of a gold colour, with the marks and signs perfectly clear and shining. On going nearer to it or farther off, it becomes less and less like the reality. The kings of the bordering countries have sent noble artists to copy the likeness, but they have not been able.«<sup>16</sup>

Such expressions indicate that the pilgrim's goal was the appropriation of a site's *darśan* by means of a seeing technique that proved simultaneously to be a meditational and a visionary experience introducing the worshipper to a more powerful, spiritual sight.

#### **Kinetic, Mental, and Visual Exercises in the Nativity Grotto**

It proves exciting to compare Fa-Hian's passage with one written much later by a much more famous Christian pilgrim to the Holy Land, the Dominican friar from Zurich, Felix Schmidt, *latine* Fabri, who visited the sites of Palestine in 1480. In his erudite and somewhat verbose travelogue entitled *Evagatorium*, he made all possible efforts to describe each site at length and in all details, as well as the associated experiences and emotions and, of course, also the memorial and theological meaning. After descending into the Nativity Cave in Bethlehem and worshipping the site of Christ's birth, he turned to the left toward the small chapel of the Holy Crib and he realised, as did every pilgrim, that it was excavated in the *grotto* itself and had been most devoutly reveted with polished marble slabs. He then bowed to earth and kissed the very spot where the Child's body had been laid. First, he experienced a strong olfactory sensation, in that he felt that the site smelt lovely; this was no real surprise to him, as he was accustomed to think of pleasant fragrances as supernatural manifestations normally associated with relics and other holy objects. Then he rose to his knees, raised his eyes up and looked



**3 Bernardino Amico, *Miraculous imprint of Saint Jerome in a marble plate of the Crib chapel at Bethlehem* (1609).**

at a polished marble slab, which he thought looked nice, yet nothing more [Fig. 3]. He was made aware that it was indeed a worship-worthy object by a Franciscan friar, who instructed him to use his gaze properly. I will let him describe in his own, rather rationalistic words this thoroughly unsettling experience:

»Indeed, the polished marble slab that faces whoever kneels in front of the Crib is as skilfully polished as a mirror and is noteworthy because of this: if one looks at it carefully and on purpose it reveals to bear the image of a bearded old man, stretched out on his shoulders on a mat and dressed as a dead monk, with the image of a lion close to him. And this image is not made by virtues of art or industry, yet it was created by the polishing itself, or purposefully by the man who polished it: in much the same way we see that, when some burlwood table is smoothed and polished, it shows the outline of different things independently of the polisher's intention. There the same has happened, even if they say that this is made by God's will on account of the glorious Jerome's special sanctity. This image cannot be seen by everybody, yet only by those who are made aware and by those who already know it; whoever ignores

it, won't be enabled to see it. Therefore, when they showed this to me for the first time, I thought that the friar, who was indicating it, was just saying by joke that he could see Saint Jerome's image in the stone, and I myself could not see it, until that friar pointed to the veining; only then I saw it so clearly, as if it were skilfully painted.«<sup>17</sup>

Fabri's sceptical attitude should not prevent us from considering that the viewing exercise promoted by the Franciscans was merely an outcome of the generalised perception of the holy sites and their material setting as visual indicators enabling the mental evocation of the sacred events commemorated there. Specifically, in the context of the Nativity Cave, sight functioned as part of a more thoroughly physical apprehension of the mysteries of God's Incarnation. In the late Middle Ages, most pilgrims got to Bethlehem from Jerusalem and walked through a number of holy sites along the route, until they were rewarded for their pain by the sight of the Basilica at the top of a prominent hill. The first sight of a holy landmark exerted a strong impact on travellers and was supposed to bring spiritual comfort to the soul. A deep emotion was felt when the outline of Mount Carmel was finally visible from ships or when pilgrims





4 Bethlehem, Nativity Church, view of the interior.

first glimpsed the port of Jaffa, and even more when, from the hill of Montjoie, they were able to view the sacred landscape of Jerusalem, while performing prayers and genuflections and shedding tears. In this way, they began to appropriate the memorial power associated with sites, more or less as their Indian colleagues made efforts to assimilate their *darśan*. This was all the more crucial in the late Middle Ages because sight was more and more considered to be efficacious enough to surrogate physical pilgrimage: from the so-called Galilee Church at the top of the Mount of Olives, the panoramic views of the Temple Mount, the desert of Judah and Samaria enabled visitors to earn the indulgences associated with the holy sites of those areas, which were inaccessible to or too dangerous for Christian visitors.<sup>18</sup>

Especially with the major Christological holy sites, pilgrims experienced sites in a distinctly physical way and their act of viewing was combined with the feeling of traversing a number of alternately small and large rooms that presented themselves as either dark or bright, spacious or claustrophobic, solemnly ornamented or bare, raised above ground or excavated in the earth. Pilgrims to the site of Christ's Nativity approached the church, went through the square close to the wall of the Armenian monastery and finally bowed their heads to pass through the little door opening to the vestibule. They then raised their eyes and saw the wooden door embellished with finely carved *khatchkars*. Upon entering the building, they were struck to see a sumptuous and luminous church, still in rather good condition, and decorated with fine mosaics, high columns, and a marble pavement [Fig. 4]. They were glad to learn that

the building did not share the ruinous or precarious state of most of the Palestinian holy sites and that a monumental building was still doing its part to celebrate the mystery of Christ's Nativity. However, they were highly satisfied with its overall visual effectiveness and hardly wasted any time looking at such pictures carefully, even if the most learned of them recorded that some mosaics represented the Davidic genealogy of the Saviour, i. e. a theme invested with special meaning in the context of Bethlehem. Indeed, this was still the sumptuous frame, and not the object of the worshipping experience they were longing for: Excess in the appreciation of *temporalia* even proved to be dangerous, when one had the chance to contemplate such *spiritualia* as the mystery of the Birth of the Son of God. As so often in the Holy Land, the pilgrims' real goal was located not on surface, but underground. They walked along the choir to the left transept and from there entered the holy *grotto*, which was accessible only to small groups. If they were forced to wait for a while because of the crowd, they could look around and imagine, upon suggestion of the Franciscan friars, that the nearby altar marked the place where the Magi had dismounted from their horses, or that another *mensa* located a little bit further on was the very place where Christ had been circumcised – the Florentine pilgrim Alessandro Rinuccini, in 1474, went so far as to recognise the face of the old Priest Simeon in the veining of its stones.<sup>19</sup>

Only by descending the sixteen steps and entering the underground chapel could pilgrims discover how tiny was the space chosen by the Almighty to be born as a Man; its dark, rocky appearance,



5 Bethlehem, Nativity Cave, the site of Christ's birth.

which the light of candles endowed with an intimate atmosphere, could trigger a deep emotion and stimulate the beholder's imagination. The Tuscan priest Mariano da Siena, in 1431, admitted that this was the most »devout« place he had ever seen, because of its being wholly cut from rock.<sup>20</sup> By quickly examining the spatial setting of the holy spots, pilgrims could immediately visualise and feel physically involved in the Nativity narrative; they did so both by projecting their visual habits, determined by their familiarity with religious iconography, onto the sites they were looking at, and by transforming their act of viewing into an authentic contemplative experience.

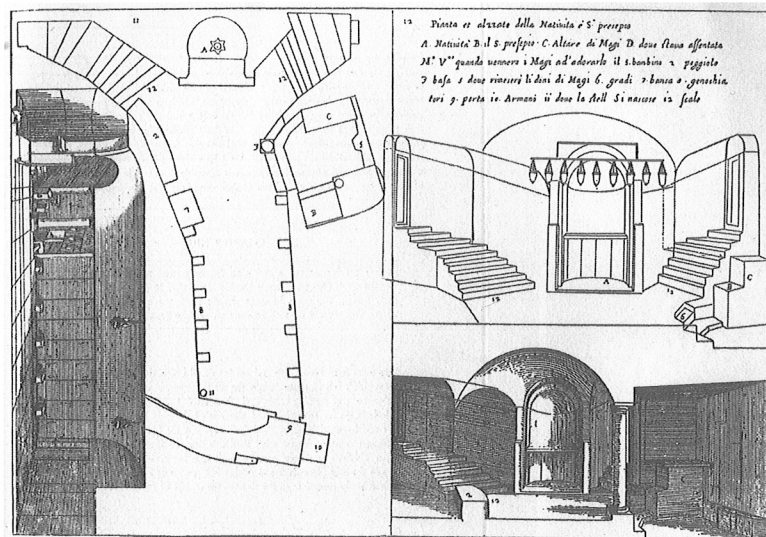
The very spot where Christ was born was immediately visualised by a small niche to the right, whose apse was decorated with a 12th century mosaic representing the Nativity according to the standard Byzantine iconography [Fig. 5]. Yet, more than by this image, the pilgrim's eye was attracted by the portion of pavement which was to be seen below the altar table: it was revetted with marble slabs, but a hole in the middle, encircled within a star-shaped frame, gave



6 Bethlehem, Nativity Cave, the site of the Crib.

visual and tactile access to the holy ground underneath. The latter was displayed as a relic and could easily remind worshippers of the peculiar *mise-en-scène* of the location of the Holy Cross on the rock of Calvary and other framed »holes« imitating it, such as the site of Saint James's beheading in the Armenian cathedral in Jerusalem. Moreover, the star shape hinted at the Magi's star, which had stopped right over that very spot, before falling into the cistern located right behind the *grotto*. Each pilgrim bowed there, kissed the hole, and pronounced a prayer in front of it, before turning to the nearby Crib, located on the opposite side in a lower recess [Fig. 6].

Visitors did know that the holy Empress Helena had conceived this latter space as a monumental reliquary to the original crib made of brick, which had been included within a quadrangular structure in marble and silver before being transferred to Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, universally known as *Sancta Maria ad Praesepe*.<sup>21</sup> In the late Middle Ages only a small recess, partially revetted with marble slabs and some remnants of the architectural



7 Bernardino Amico, *The Holy Cave at Bethlehem* (1609).

*mise-en-scène* of the Crusader period, was left there as a visual and material support to their devotional experience: Father Bernardino Amico's sketch, made in the late 16th century, bears witness to the rather scanty and empty appearance of the spot [Fig. 7].

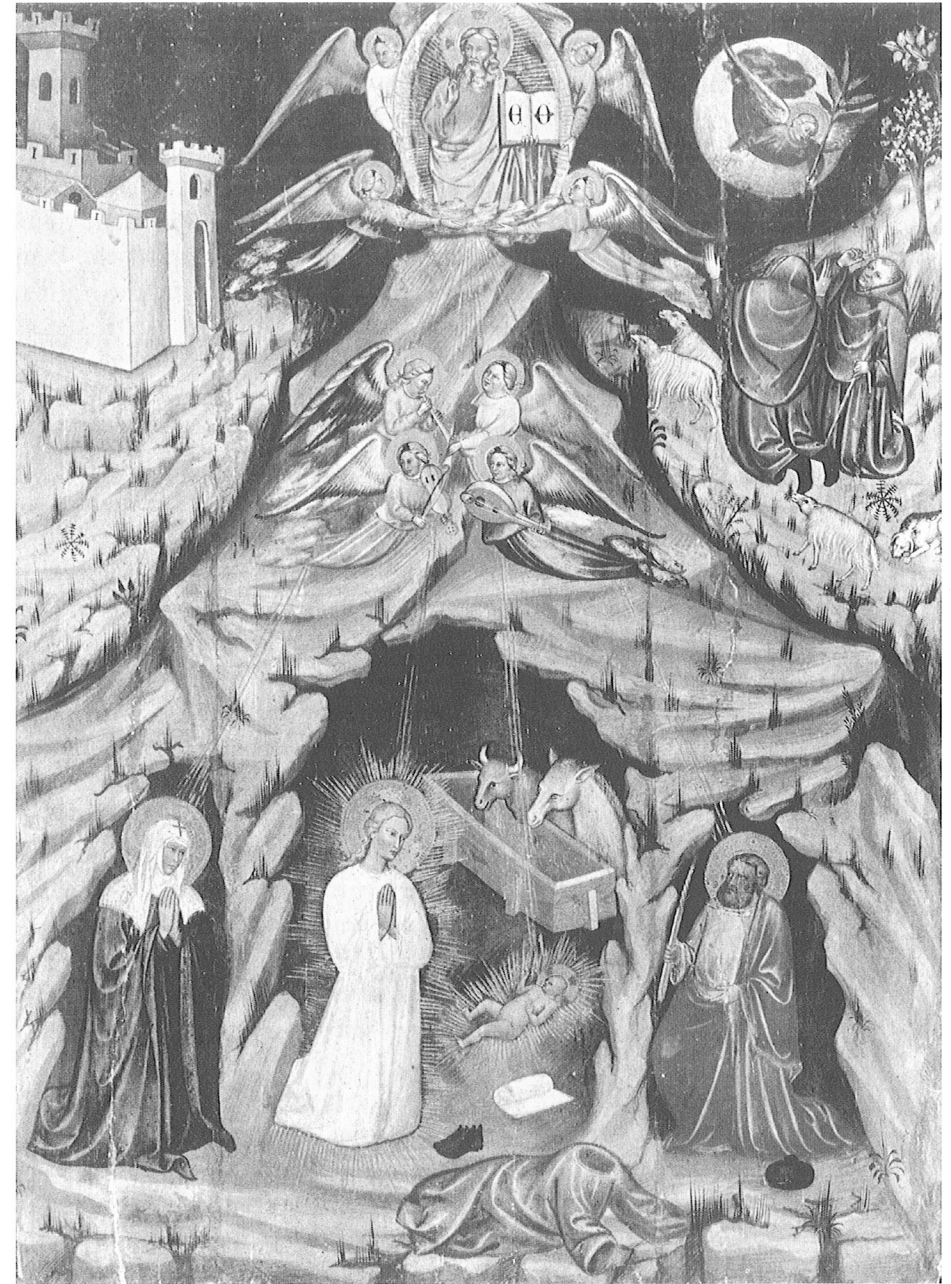
While looking at this site, pilgrims were encouraged to think of the Child Jesus by accurately scrutinizing and deciphering its material setting. The lack of marble incrustations in the roof and walls around the holy spot, at odds with the rich decoration of the rest of the cave, contributed to investing it with a special aura. An intensive gaze, if necessary instructed by the Friars' words of advice, could quickly reveal that two iron bars were inserted in the nearby rock, allowing the inference that they had been used to tether the ox and the ass.<sup>22</sup> A tiny hollow in the soil was a clue for imagining that it had been pressed by the Child's hand.<sup>23</sup> A somewhat taller stone located at one end of the crib and decorated with a cross could easily be regarded as the rudimentary pillow where Christ's head had been laid. Some pilgrims could also have sensed that the small spiral column embedded in the right corner might have served as support for the Virgin Mary during the Child's delivery.<sup>24</sup> Sight combined here with a kind of synaesthetic experience involving the senses of touch and smell: Fabri wrote that in no other place had he smelt such an extraordinary fragrance as at the very moment when he kissed the holy crib.<sup>25</sup>

The unappealing look of the holy spot effectively stimulated the mental reconstruction of the events that had taken place

there. This visionary approach was probably fostered by Mendicant patterns of piety, and especially by the Friars' emphasis on memory as a meditational technique by which a devotee managed to mentally reconstruct the holy narratives in their spatial and relational setting. In this respect, sensorial apprehension of the holy sites could be regarded as instrumental to an imaginative evocation of the holy events. One of the first pilgrims to take advantage of this opportunity was the learned Dominican Ricoldo da Montecroce in 1288: To him a small indigenous child whom he happened to find in the crib chapel presented a valuable object of contemplation, enabling him to see the site as if it were still inhabited by the newborn Jesus: »[...] in the crib we found a very nice baby, the son of a poor Christian woman who lived in the vicinity of the church. And full of joy we worshipped the newborn Christ in him and, after giving him gifts as they Magi did, we handed him back to his mother.«<sup>26</sup>

More than a century later, Mariano da Siena needed no such fortuitous meeting to convince himself that his mental eyes were able to see the small baby lying directly on the ground: »Indeed, I had a feeling that the lovely child was actually before my eyes in the crib.«<sup>27</sup>

In an anonymous Italian itinerary written in 1467, which was explicitly meant to be read as support for the exercise of meditation on the holy events, the author described the sight of the crib and the other holy spots in Bethlehem as a mental visualisation of the corresponding scenes and actors:



8 Turino Vanni, *Vision of Saint Birgitta of Sweden in the Nativity Cave at Bethlehem* (ca. 1400).



»Under the main altar is an underground cave [...]. Here He was laid in the crib between the ox and the ass, over some hay, and it is said to have been very hard and thorny [...]. Think here of that pure small virgin as she contemplates in company of that bearded old man the divine wisdom reflected by that baby, while the angels sing ›Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bone voluntatis.« Look at the shepherds adoring the small child, and the three Magi with their court presenting their gift to that nice small one [...].«<sup>28</sup>

This mental experience, taking place in the Nativity Cave and proposed as a devotional exercise that everybody could repeat in his or her private practice of prayer, was strongly imprinted by contemporary images displaying Mary and Joseph contemplating the Child lying on the ground outside the hut [Fig. 8].<sup>29</sup>

In their turn, such images strove to give visual expression to a famous revelation made by the Virgin Mary to Saint Birgitta of Sweden in 1373 inside the Nativity Cave.<sup>30</sup> The Mother of God had enabled that devout lady to see and confirm that Jesus was born in an extraordinary way, contradicting the evidence provided by traditional iconography. She namely was genuflecting, and not lying down, with her back turned to the crib and her eyes looking eastwards. Previously Mary had taken off her shoes, veil, and mantle. She felt that the baby was moving in the womb and suddenly the newborn appeared before her, surrounded with a supernatural, dazzling light. When the Lady realised she had given birth to the Son of God, she started worshipping Him, until the baby, trembling from the cold and hard pavement, stretched out his arms and requested to be taken in her arms. Then Joseph arrived and started praying in his turn. They finally dressed Him and turned in order to lay the baby in the crib. There they worshipped Him with extreme joy.

Far from reconstructing the event of the Nativity in historically or even theologically correct terms, Birgit's mental evocation, imprinted with her physical and visual experience of the holy cave, described the Virgin behaving exactly as a pious visitor to Bethlehem. That is, she knelt and prayed turned to the east, in the way in which pilgrims worshipped the niche of Christ's birth and, in looking at the tiny, empty spot below the altar table, imagined they saw the newborn freezing on the marble slabs. Mary and Joseph also shared the pilgrims' deep, joyful emotion as they turned to the south recess and

imagined they saw Jesus, wrapped up in swaddling clothes, inside the crib. In this way, the act of seeing functioned as a transformative process, which enabled devout visitors not only to appropriate the spiritual power associated with sites, but also to use them as visual supports for a visionary and intimate, yet constructive and original re-enactment of the holy events associated with them.

## Endnotes

- 1 I have discussed such issues, and especially the »kinetic« dimension of pilgrimage, in a previous study: cf. Michele Bacci, *Performed Topographies and Topomimetic Piety. Imaginative Sacred Spaces in Medieval Italy*, in: Alexei Lidov (ed.), *Spatial Icons. Performativity in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, Moscow 2011, pp. 101–118.
- 2 Fa-Hian, Fu-kwō-ki, in: Si-Yu-Ki. *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, trans. Samuel Beal, 2 vols., Delhi 1994, vol. 1, p. xlv.
- 3 On the mythic lifetime portraits of the Buddha and their parallels in other Asian traditions: cf. Martha L. Carter, *The Mystery of the Udayana Buddha*, Naples 1990; Michele Bacci, *Cult-Images and Religious Ethnology. The European Exploration of Medieval Asia and the Discovery of New Iconic Religions*, in: *Viator* 36, 2005, pp. 337–372.
- 4 Cf. Donald F. McCullum, *The Replication of Miraculous Icons. The Zenkoji Amida and the Seiryōji Shaka*, in: Richard H. David (ed.), *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions*, Boulder 1998, pp. 207–226; Takeo Oku, *Seiryō-ji Shakanyōrai-zō*, Tokyo 2009; Akira Akiyama, *Interrelationship of Relics and Images in Buddhist and Christian Traditions. Comparative and Performative Aspects*, in: Lidov, *Spatial Icons* (note 1), pp. 643–649.
- 5 Fa-Hian, Fu-kwō-ki (note 2), vol. 1, p. xlv.
- 6 Mahasamghika-vinaya, as quoted by: Alexander C. Soper, *Early Buddhist Attitudes Toward the Art of Painting*, in: *Art Bulletin* 32, 1950, pp. 147–151, esp. p. 148.
- 7 Cf. Thiophridus of Epternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum*, III, 1, in: Michele Camillo Ferrari (ed.), *Thiofridi abbatis Epternacensis Flores epytaphii sanctorum*, Turnhout 1996, p. 57.
- 8 Cf. Kalinga-bodhi jātaḥ, in: *The Jātaka, or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births*, transl. William Henry Denham Rouse, 7 vols., Cambridge 1895–1913, vol. 4, p. 228.
- 9 Cf. D. Max Moerman, *Outward and Inward Journeys. An Introduction to Buddhist Pilgrimage*, in: Adriana G. Proeser (ed.), *Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art*, exhibition catalogue, Asia Society Museum, New York, 16. 3.–20. 6. 2010, New Haven/London 2010, pp. 5–9. This conception encouraged Buddhist mystics and believers to devise many different strategies of visual evocation of the holy sites, including the making of substitutive places as supports for meditation: cf. Robert E. Morrell, *Early Kamakura Buddhism. A Minority Report*, Berkeley 1987, p. 119.
- 10 Cf. Fa-Hian, Fu-kwō-ki (note 2), vol. 1, p. xlix.
- 11 Cf. *ibid.*, p. xlii.
- 12 Cf. Hiuen Tsiang, Si-Yu-Ki (note 2), vol. 1, p. 68.
- 13 Fa-Hian, Fu-kwō-ki (note 2), vol. 1, p. lx.
- 14 Cf. Diana L. Eck, *Darśan. Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Delhi 2007.
- 15 Fa-Hian, Fu-kwō-ki (note 2), vol. 1, p. xxxi.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.
- 17 Felix Fabri, *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti peregrinationem*, ed. by Konrad Dietrich Hassler, 3 vols., Stuttgart 1843–1849, vol. 1, p. 442 (author's translation). Despite the large number of works on the architecture and decoration of the Nativity Church, we still lack an accurate scientific work on the making of its sacred topography: cf. esp. Titus Tobler, *Bethlehem in Palästina, topographisch und historisch nach Anschau und Quellen geschildert*, Sankt Gallen/Bern 1849; Louis-Hugues Vincent, Félix-Marie Abel, *Bethléem, le sanctuaire de la Nativité*, Paris 1914; Bellarmino Bagatti, *Gli antichi edifici sacri di Betlemme*, Jerusalem 1952; Denys Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. A Corpus*, 4 vols., Cambridge 1993–2009, vol. 1, pp. 137–156.
- 18 Cf. Michele Bacci, *Locative Memory and the Pilgrim's Experience of Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages*, in: Bianca Kühnel (ed.), *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, forthcoming.
- 19 Cf. Alessandro di Filippo Rinuccini, *Sanctissimo peregrinaggio del Sancto Sepolcro 1474*, ed. by Andrea Calamai, Pisa 1993, p. 143.

## Endnotes/Figures

- 20 Cf. Mariano da Siena, *Viaggio fatto al Santo Sepolcro* [1431], ed. by Paolo Pirillo, Pisa 1991, pp. 115–116.
- 21 Cf. Victor Saxer, *Sainte Marie Majeure. Une basilique de Rome dans l'histoire de la ville et de son église, Ve–XIIIe siècle*, Rome 2001.
- 22 Cf. Ludolph von Südheim, *Ludolphi, rectoris ecclesiae parochialis in Suchem, de itinere Terrae Sanctae liber. Nach alten Handschriften berichtet*, ed. by Ferdinand Deycks, Stuttgart 1851, p. 72 [= Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, 25]; Ogier VIII, *Lord of Anglure, Le saint voyage de Jherusalem* [1395], ed. by François Bonnardot, Auguste Longnon, Paris 1878, pp. 32–34; *Pilgrims from Metz* [Jehan de Raigecourt, Remion de Mitry, Poince le Gournaux, Nicole Louve], *Relation d'un voyage de Metz à Jérusalem entrepris en 1395 par quatre chevaliers messins* [ed. by E. de Huart], in: *L'Austrasie* 2, 1838, pp. 149–168, 221–236.
- 23 Cf. Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *Libro d'Oltremare* [1342], in: *Pellegrini scrittori. Viaggiatori toscani del Trecento in Terrasanta*, ed. by Antonio Lanza, Marcellina Troncarelli, Florence 1990, pp. 31–158, here: p. 82.
- 24 Cf. *ibid.*
- 25 Cf. Fabri, *Evagatorium* (note 17), p. 442.
- 26 Ricoldus of Montecroce, *Itinerarius de Terra sancta*, in: *Itinera Hierosolymitana Crucesignatorum* (saec. XII–XIII), 4 vols., ed. by Sabino De Sandoli, Jerusalem 1978–1984, vol. 4, p. 268 (author's translation).
- 27 Mariano da Siena, *Viaggio* (note 19), p. 116 (author's translation).
- 28 Pier Giorgio Longo (ed.), *Lo itinerario de andare in Hyerusalem* (1469). *Loca sancta visitanda in partibus Jerusalem*. Ms. G 10. Biblioteca del Seminario Vescovile di Casale Monferrato, Ponzano Monferrato 2007, p. 185 (author's translation).
- 29 Cf. Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 5 vols., Gütersloh 1966–1991, vol. 1, p. 78.
- 30 Cf. Sancta Birgitta, *Revelaciones*, VII, 21–22, in: ead., *Revelaciones*, ed. by Carl-Gustaf Undhagen, Birger Bergh, 8 vols., Uppsala 1967–1991, vol. 7, pp. 187–190. On this episode and its visual representations: cf. Anette Creutzburg, *Die heilige Birgitta von Schweden. Bildliche Darstellungen und theologische Kontroversen im Vorfeld ihrer Kanonisation (1373–1391)*, Kiel 2011, pp. 86–93.

## Figures

- 1 Zhāng Yǎnjiǎo, Zhāng Yǎnxí, copy of lost Buddha-Statue of King Udayana (986), wood, 160 cm, Kyoto, Seiryō-ji, from: Takeo Oku, *Seiryō-ji Shakanyōrai-zō*, Tokyo 2009.
- 2 Vulture Peak, Rajgir, India, available from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Vulturepeak1.jpg> [1. 1. 2013].
- 3 Bernardino Amico, *Miraculous imprint of Saint Jerome in a marble plate of the Crib chapel at Bethlehem* (1609), from: id., *Trattato delle piante et imagini de i sacri edifici di Terrasanta*, Rome 1609, pl. 7.
- 4–6 Bethlehem, Nativity Church, photo: Michele Bacci.
- 7 Bernardino Amico, *The Holy Cave at Bethlehem* (1609), from: id., *Trattato delle piante et imagini de i sacri edifici di Terrasanta*, Rome 1609, pl. 8.
- 8 Turino Vanni, *Vision of Saint Birgitta of Sweden in the Nativity Cave at Bethlehem* (end of the 14th–beginnings of the 15th century), painted panel, Pisa, Museo nazionale di San Matteo, from: Enzo Carli, *Pittura pisana del Trecento*, Pisa 1958–1961, vol. II.