

# Local Cults and Their Integration into Bethlehem's Sacred Landscape in the Late Medieval and Modern Periods<sup>1</sup>

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Bethlehem has been a goal for pilgrims since the very beginnings of Christian pilgrimage and its memorial meanings as birthplace of Jesus are so universally acknowledged that, paradoxically enough, it is much easier to evaluate it as a global phenomenon than to understand it in its local context. The symbolic efficacy of the holy cave was enhanced by its magnificent architectural frame, its specific *mise-en-scène*, and the ritualized approach to it organized by its clerical custodians.<sup>2</sup> As elsewhere in the Holy Land, worship was addressed to a cult-object that, in striking contrast with the believers' habits in their home countries, was not a body relic or a miraculous image, but rather a portion of ground deemed to bear witness to scriptural events and, at least to some extent, to have been hallowed by contact with Christ's body. As every cult-object, it could be worshipped also in its copies, which could be diminutive and portable as the wooden and mother-of-pearl models of the holy cave created, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the Bethlehem workshops: such replicas, as the one preserved in the Dominican nunnery of Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo, Spain (Fig. 1), disseminated knowledge of the holy site's materiality throughout Europe and were perhaps the most important contribution of local artists to the shaping of their town's global renown.<sup>3</sup>

But for the rest, we are admittedly very scarcely informed about the ways in which the auratic power associated with the holy site, whose experience is described in countless pilgrims' travelogues from almost all corners of the world, made an impact on local religious life and everyday habits in the Middle Ages and the Modern era. Western visitors were eager to recognize and record those details of the place that corresponded to their own expectations and preconceived ideas, and paid much less attention to the approach of local people, in part as the latter did not share in the same beliefs and most of them belonged to either Islam or other Christian denominations. Nevertheless, the few hints we are provided with by texts are revealing enough to make us aware, for example, that the Bethlehem

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1 This article was first published in M. RAHEB, *Bethlehem. A Sociocultural History* (Bethlehem 2020), 25–39, 245–256.

2 On the different ways in which, in the course of history, the complex relationship between the upper sacred space and the underground holy place was perceived and staged cf. M. BACCI, *The Mystic Cave. A History of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem* (Brno-Rome 2017).

3 On the production of such objects see esp. M. PICCIRILLO, *La Nuova Gerusalemme. Artigianato palestinese al servizio dei Luoghi Santi* (Bergamo 2007), 123–136. To the best of my knowledge, the model in Toledo is still unpublished.



Fig. 1 – Model of the Nativity cave, wood and mother-of-pearl, 17th century. Toledo (Spain), Santo Domingo el Antiguo.

Muslims constantly payed homage to the holy cave and that the latter played a very special role for local women, irrespective of their faith.<sup>4</sup> From time to time, women went there to prepare very special breads which were eaten as blessings and charms against labour pains: they mixed flour with water from the Well of the Star and rolled out the dough on the marble table covering Christ's birthplace.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, whenever children fell ill, their mothers were accustomed to lay them into the manger, in the hope to obtain their immediate recovery.<sup>6</sup>

4 BACCI, *The Mystic Cave*, 96–102, 210, 232, 236–237, 240–242, 246–247.

5 This practice is recorded by Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *Libro d'Oltremare* [1346], A. LANZA/ M. TRONCARELLI (Eds.), *Pellegrini scrittori. Viaggiatori toscani del Trecento in Terrasanta* (Florence 1990), 83; Francesco Suriano [ca. 1500], G. GOLUBOVICH (Ed.), *Il trattato di Terra Santa e dell'Oriente di frate Francesco Suriano missionario e viaggiatore del secolo XV* (Milan 1900), 124; P. D'AVEYRO, *Itinerario da Terrasancta e suas particularidades* (Lisbon 1593), 155v.

6 Charles de la Rivière, *Pèlerinage en Terre Sainte* [1507], F. POUGE (Ed.), *Édition commentée du pèlerinage en Terre Sainte, fait en 1507 par Charles de la Rivière*, master thesis (Université François Rabelais of Tours 1975), 109.



Fig. 2 – Bethlehem, the Milk Grotto, interior view.

Such usages are known to us thanks to some 14<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> century authors, who, unlike most visitors, were curious enough to record them. Nevertheless, interferences between the pilgrims' and the local people's distinctive approaches could not only take place, but also contribute to reshape, promote, and multiply the memorial sites associated with Bethlehem. Since the earliest times, the Nativity site had been part of a larger topographic network, defined by the roads and routes walked down by pilgrims. In the late Middle Ages, the number of memorial sites located along such routes tended to be increased. Catholic pilgrims were animated by a cumulative approach to worship: since they were granted indulgences in each visit to a holy place, they were particularly eager to see as many as possible, and their Franciscan guides gladly pointed to stones, ruined buildings, cisterns, wells, fields, caves, and even trees that could be associated with some Scriptural event.

Many secondary sites (such as the place of Circumcision in the south transept or the site where Jerome translated the Bible) emerged within the basilica itself.<sup>7</sup> Others were localized along the route from the Nativity church to the Shepherds' field, which no pilgrim omitted to visit. Since the late 13<sup>th</sup> century foreigners walking on this road started noticing the cave which came later to be known as the "Milk grotto" (Fig. 2). It was located below the ruins of an abandoned Greek monastery dedicated to Saint Nicholas and was said to stand out for the unusually white colour

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7 BACCI, *The Mystic Cave*, 226.

of its walls.<sup>8</sup> Our earliest source on this place and the associated cult-phenomenon, the Dominican friar Philip of Savona who was in the Holy Land in the 1280s, witnesses that the site worked as a local shrine and its cultic specificities were associated once again with the material needs, and anxieties, of women. When they lacked their milk, they were accustomed to get there, scrape off some powder from the walls, dissolve it in water, and drink it.<sup>9</sup> As with the breads prepared in the birthplace of Jesus and in keeping with the principles of sympathetic magic, they tried to appropriate the supernatural power attributed to the cave by ingesting some of the holy matter it consisted of. Most likely, they were also responsible for the acknowledgement of the site's miraculous virtues as deducible from the white colour of its rocks. This natural quality was explained as produced by some drops of milk that had fallen there from Mary's breast: the cave's whiteness was therefore connected to a Scriptural event and was deemed to bear witness to the transformational power and miraculous agency connected with the Virgin's body.

Pilgrims, who were mostly male, appropriated this popular shrine and invested it with new meanings, turning it into the site of a customary miracle. The curative qualities, formerly attributed to the whole of the grotto, were associated with a stone pillar, known metonymically as *lac sancte Marie* ("Mary's milk") and probably corresponding to the one that, still today, separates the main cave from the inner one.<sup>10</sup> The latter was said to behave like a body and perpetually pour out a holy liquid looking and tasting like milk or cheese. In this way, it evoked other prodigious fluids well-known to Holy Land pilgrims and deemed to efficaciously manifest divine presence, such as the balm of the Matarriyya garden in Cairo or the oil from the "incarnated" icon in Saydnaya.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, the milk-exuding

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8 T. TOBLER, *Bethlehem in Palästina* (Sankt-Gallen/Bern 1849), 227–249; B. BAGATTI, *Gli antichi edifici sacri di Betlemme* (Jerusalem 1952), 245–247, 258–261; C. KOPP, *Die Heiligen Stätten der Evangelien* (Regensburg 1959), 78–80; S. STARR SERED, "Rachel's Tomb and the Milk Grotto of the Virgin Mary: Two Women's Shrines in Bethlehem" (*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2/2, 1986, 7–22); D. PRINGLE, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus* (Cambridge 1993–2009), I, 156–157; BACCI, *The Mystic Cave*, 216–219.

9 Philip of Savona, *Liber peregrinationum* [ca. 1280–1289], S. DE SANDOLI (Ed.), *Itinera Hierosolymitana cruce signatorum* (Jerusalem 1978–1984), IV, 238.

10 Ludolf von Sudheim [Suchem], *De itinere Terrae sanctae liber* [1336–1341], F. DEYCKS (Ed.) (Stuttgart 1851), 72–73.

11 On the Matarriyya balm see most notably M. JULLIEN, *L'arbre de la Vierge à Matarieh. Souvenirs du séjour de la Sainte Famille en Égypte* (Beirut 1886); S. TIMM, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden 1984–1991), V, 1613–1620; U. ZANETTI, "Matarieh, la Sainte Famille et les baumiers" (*Analecta Bollandiana* 111, 1993, 21–68); S. HALIKOWSKI SMITH, "Meanings behind myths: the multiple manifestations of the Tree of the Virgin at Matara" (*Mediterranean Historical Review* 23, 2008, 101–128). On the myron-pouring icon in Saidnaya, cf. M. BACCI, "A Sacred Space for a Holy Icon: The Shrine of Our Lady of Saydnaya", in: A. LIDOV (Ed.), *Hierotopy. The Creation of Sacred Spaces in Byzantium and Medieval Russia* (Moscow 2006), 373–387; M. IMMERZEEL, "The Monastery of Saydnaya and Its Icon" (*Eastern Christian Art* 4, 2007, 13–26); IDEM,



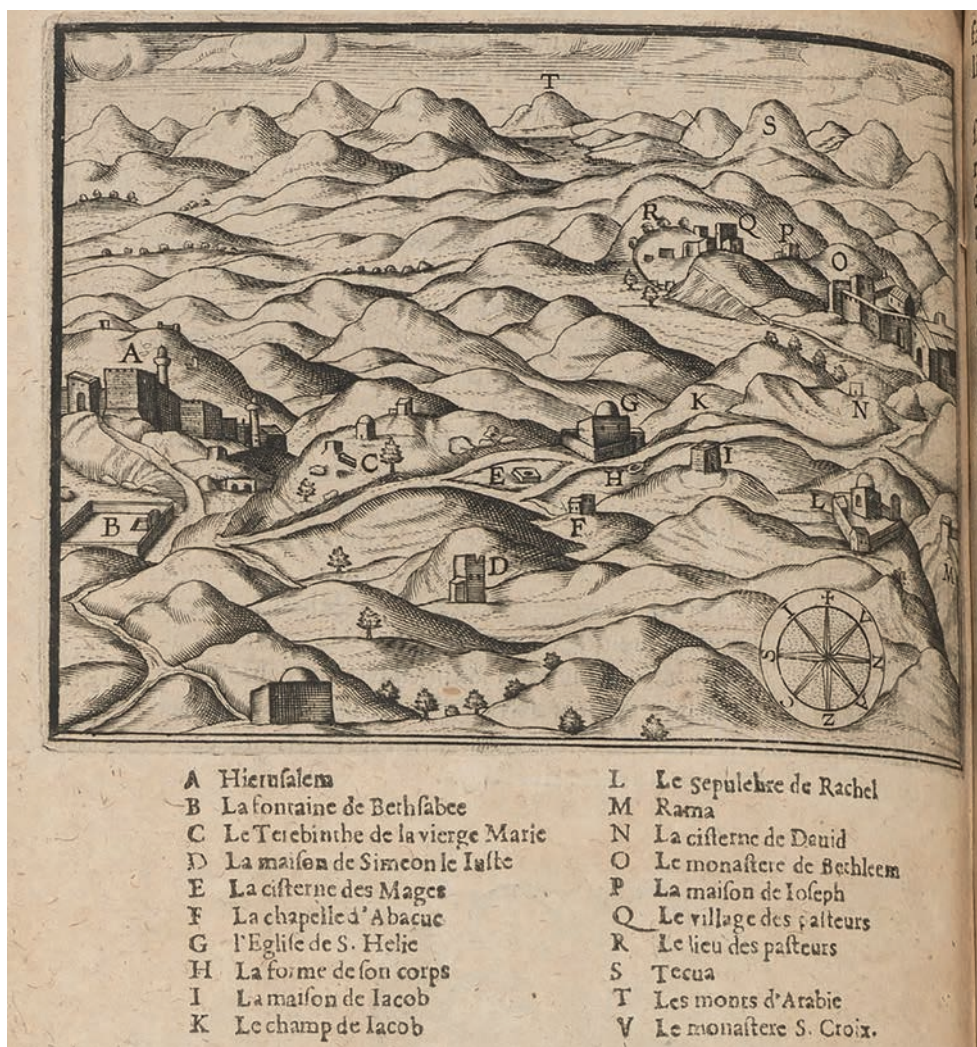


Fig. 3 – Natale Bonifacio, The Road to Bethlehem, engraving, 1587, after *Le tres devot voyage de Ierusalem [...] faict & descript par Iean Zvallart* (Anvers 1608), 190.

pillar worked as a surrogate of Mary's body itself, and, accordingly, it was said to have been "activated" as soon as the Virgin had pressed her breast against it. Very soon, the site was also invested with more precise memorial qualities: already by the 1330s it was identified as the starting point of the Flight into Egypt and, later, also as a shelter from Herod's soldiers.

Identity Puzzles. Medieval Christian art in Syria and Lebanon (Leiden 2009), 43–49; E. GAROSI, "The Incarnated Icon of Ṣaydnāyā: Light and Shade" (Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 26, 2015, 339–358).





Fig. 4 – Jerusalem's Countryside, drawing from Sebastian Werro's *Itinerarium Hierosolymitanum*. Fri





In the aim to intensify the experience of pilgrimage by locating an increasing number of worship-worthy places, a number of local cult-phenomena, traditions, and folkloric narratives were integrated into the topographic network of the routes from and to Bethlehem. Those who arrived in the birthplace of Jesus from Jerusalem were particularly excited, as they knew that they were following the same itinerary made by the holy family, the three Magi, and several Old Testament figures, including Jacob, Rachel, Elijah, Habakkuk, and David. Therefore, they were likely to believe that some traces of the latter's passage could still be identified along their path, which they described as a "most holy and joyful road".<sup>12</sup> Inasmuch as pilgrimage was conceived of as "kinetic" form of Christian devotion, visitors were encouraged to enhance their meditational and contemplative experience by imitating the physical stress and uncomfortable travel underwent by their Biblical predecessors along that same road, and were particularly eager to identify and pay homage to any, even minimal, trace the latter may have imprinted on the ground. Furthermore, these places were viewed as anticipations, in both spatial and metaphorical terms, of the major goals of their pilgrimage: the Magi's stop on their way announced their final stop at the entrance of the Nativity cave, Rachel could be worshipped as a Biblical prefiguration of the Virgin Mary, the site-bound memory of Prophet Habakkuk surrogated his hardly accessible shrine in Tekoa. In the 14<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the road to Bethlehem was described as especially worship-worthy and was celebrated not only in textual descriptions, but also in cartographical representations, like the one engraved by Natale Bonifacio and included in the 1587 edition of Jan Zvallart's travelogue (Fig. 3),<sup>13</sup> or that sketched by the Swiss pilgrim Sebastian Werro, a citizen of Fribourg, in his handwritten travelogue dating from 1581 (Fig. 4).<sup>14</sup>

The tomb of Rachel, whose history was regarded, in many respects, as an anticipation of the events of Christ's Nativity, was undoubtedly the oldest and most famous landmark,<sup>15</sup> but other less evident elements of landscape came to be invested with Biblical associations. The apocryphal tradition mentioned that Mary, feeling a movement in her womb, had dismounted from her donkey

12 F. FABRI, *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti peregrinationem*, C.D. HASSLER (Ed.) (Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, II; Stuttgart 1843–1849), I, 428.

13 J. ZVALLART, *Il devotissimo viaggio di Gierusalemme* (Roma 1587), 223.

14 S. WERRO, *Itinerarium Hierosolymitanum* [1581], Fribourg, Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire, MS L181, fol. 86v–87r.

15 T. TOBLER, *Topographie von Jerusalem und seinen Umgebungen* (Berlin 1853–1854), II, 782–792; G. LOMBARDI, *La tomba di Rahel*, Jerusalem 1971, 100–118; SERED, "Rachel's Tomb and the Milk Grotto"; EADEM, "Rachel's Tomb: The Development of a Cult" (*Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2, 1995, 103–148); PRINGLE, *The Churches*, II, 176–178; F. STRICKERT, *Rachel Weeping. Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Fortress Tomb* (Collegeville, MI, 2007); G. BOWMAN, "Sharing and Exclusion: The Case of Rachel's Tomb" (*Jerusalem Quarterly* 58, 2014, 30–49); A. PETERSEN, *Bones of Contention: Muslim Shrines in Palestine* (Singapore 2018), 132–134.



for a while before reaching Bethlehem. In Byzantine times, this episode had been located approximately halfway between Jerusalem and the birthplace of Jesus, on a huge stone around which an octagonal building, the so-called *Kathisma*, had been erected.<sup>16</sup> After the latter's destruction in 614, the location of the associated event became much more uncertain and variable: early 14th century pilgrims mentioned, for example, a "halt of the Virgin" either somewhere to the south of the city, or on the way to Beit Sahur,<sup>17</sup> and some texts claimed that this place corresponded to the Milk grotto.<sup>18</sup> Only in the second half of the 14th century, as first witnessed by a Franciscan list of indulgences, the episode was located on the Hebron road, initially to the south of Rachel's tomb, that is not far from the village.<sup>19</sup>

On the contrary, in the late 15th century the site, described by the Swiss Felix Fabri as "a stony place",<sup>20</sup> was one of the first to be encountered by pilgrims coming from the holy city, after a detour to the church of Saint Simeon in Katamoun (identified as the house of Simon the Just),<sup>21</sup> and at a distance of about 300 steps from the so-called Cistern of the Magi (Fig. 5), marking the site where the star had stopped, and known in Arabic as *Bir al-kadismu* – so

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- 16 M. JUGIE, "La première fête mariale en Orient et en Occident. L'Avent primitif" (*Échos d'Orient* 22/130, 1923, 129–152), 131–144; M. JUGIE, "La fête de la Dormition et de l'Assomption de la sainte Vierge en Orient et en Occident" (*L'année théologique* 4, 1943, 11–42); O. KEEL/ M. KÜCHLER, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel. Ein Handbuch und Studienreiseführer zum Heiligen Land. Band 2: Der Süden* (Zurich-Göttingen 1982), 600–601; B. BAGATTI, *Antichi villaggi cristiani di Giudea e Neghev* (Jerusalem 1983), 34–37; J.E. TAYLOR, *Christians and the Holy Places. The Myth of Jewish-Christian Origins* (Oxford 1993), 338; S.C. MIMOUNI, *Les traditions anciennes sur la Dormition et l'Assomption de Marie. Études littéraires, historiques et doctrinales* (Leiden-Boston 2011), 353–354; R. AVNER, "The Initial Tradition of the Theotokos at the Kathisma: Earliest Celebrations and the Calendar", in: L. BRUBAKER/M.B. CUNNINGHAM (Eds.), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium* (Farnham 2011, 9–30), 17–19; V. SHALEV HURVITZ, *Holy Sites Encircled. The Early Byzantine Concentric Churches of Jerusalem* (Oxford 2015), 117–140.
- 17 Francesco Pipino [1320], L. MANZONI (Ed.), "Frate Francesco Pipino da Bologna de' PP. Predicatori, geografo storico e viaggiatore" (*Atti e memorie della R. Deputazione di storia patria per le provincie di Romagna*, ser. III, 13 1895, 316–334), 318.
- 18 *Chemins et pèlerinages de la Terre Sainte*, version 2 [1252–1268], DE SANDOLI (Ed.), *Itinera*, IV, 68–78, here 76; Italian anonymous [ca. 1300], M. DARDANO (Ed.), "Un itinerario dugentesco per la Terra Santa" (*Studi medievali* 3/7, 1966, 154–196), 168.
- 19 List of indulgences [ca. 1360–1380], M. DE CASTRO (Ed.), "Dos itinerarios de Tierra Santa de los siglos XIV y XV" (*Hispania Sacra* 10, 1957, 443–486), 466.
- 20 FABRI, *Evagatorium*, I, 429.
- 21 First mention in the travelogue of an anonymous Dutch pilgrim [1472], L. CONRADY (Ed.), *Vier rheinische Palaestina-Pilgerschriften des XIV., XV. und XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden 1882), 72–181, here 142–143; TOBLER, *Topographie*, II, 892–896; PRINGLE, *The Churches*, II, 166–167.



Fig. 6 – Ruins of the Cistern of the Magi (*Bir al-Kadismu*), on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

preserving some reminiscences of the ancient *Kathisma*.<sup>22</sup> The structure included three holes, which were sometimes said to have been created in the very moment as the star indicating the visitors' path to Bethlehem had appeared in heaven and its

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22 TOBLER, *Topographie*, II, 530–535; PRINGLE, *The Churches*, II, 157–158. First mention of the site, without any clear hint at the well, in Pipino, ed. MANZONI, 317, whereas Niccolò da Poggibonsi (ed. LANZA/TRONCARELLI, *Pellegrini scrittori*, 79) – associates the episodes with the ruins of a church and a mosaic located close to Mar Elias, perhaps the remnants of the Byzantine Kathisma. Cf. also the English anonymous [ca. 1350], J.H. BERNHARD (Ed.), *Guide-Book to Palestine* (ca. 1350) (London 1894), 28. Giorgio Gucci – Giorgio Gucci, *Viaggio ai luoghi santi* [1384], ed. LANZA/TRONCARELLI, *Pellegrini scrittori*, 257–312, here 288 – is the first to clearly hint at a well, possibly the same that Wilhelm von Boldensele misunderstood as Jacob's well: Wilhelm von Boldensele, *Liber de quibusdam ultramarinis partibus*, C. DELUZ (Ed.) (Paris 1972), 246. Since the mid-14th century it is included in Franciscan Lists of indulgences (see List of indulgences, ed. DE CASTRO, 466).

rays had been reflected in their water.<sup>23</sup> Pilgrims were animated by strong pious expectations when looking at the place, but their contemplation was made hard by the turbid appearance of the liquid inside.<sup>24</sup> In principle, the site was invested with legendary qualities which made it a double and an anticipation of the Well of the Star, the cistern located close to the Nativity cave and marking the place where the celestial body had finally stopped.<sup>25</sup>

Starting from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century several sources witness that the event of Mary's stopover was associated with a quite unusual cult-object: a majestic terebinth tree that could be easily seen from the road among the vineyards and was particularly appreciated by wayfarers as it gave much shade.<sup>26</sup> The Greeks, who were possibly still aware of the ancient location of the Byzantine *Kathisma*, suggested that Mary had rested under the branches of that tree during her trip to Bethlehem.<sup>27</sup> Latins, on their turn, preferred to think that she had stopped there on her way to Jerusalem on the occasion of Christ's presentation in the Temple.<sup>28</sup> In

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- 23 Ulrich Leman [1472–1480], M. REININGER (Ed.), Ulrich Lemans Reisen. Erfahrungen eines Kaufmanns aus St. Gallen vom Ende des 15. Jahrhunderts im Mittelmeer und in der Provence (Würzburg 2007), 77.
- 24 M.K. RADZIWIŁŁ, Hierosolymitana Peregrinatio [1583–1584] (Antwerp 1614), 81–82.
- 25 BACCI, The Mystic Cave, 120–121, 228, 231, 237, 244.
- 26 S. MANTEGAZZA, Relatione tripartita del viaggio di Gierusalemme [1600] (Milan 1616), 269 specifies that this was the only big tree along the whole way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.
- 27 Arsenios, Προσωνητάριον [ca. 1512–1520], G. MAVROMMATIS/ G. ARVANITAKIS (Eds.), Προσωνητάριον Ἀρσενίου (1512–1520) (Alexandria 1899), 470–475. The Greek tradition is also reported by Alvise Contarini, Viaggio [1516], S. DE SANDOLI (Ed.), “Viaggio di Alvise Contarini in Terra Santa (24 luglio–29 settembre 1516): introduzione, trascrizione e note” (Studia Orientalia Christiana Collectanea 28, 1995, 285–316), 303.
- 28 GABRIEL OF PECSVARAD, Compendiosa quedam ne minus lectu iocunda descriptio urbis Hierusalem atque diligens omnium locorum Terre Sancte in Hierosolymis adnotatio (Vienna [1519 c.]), 18r, is the first to clearly state that the tree was located to the north of Mar Elias: the same author mentions that it was kissed by worshippers. Later mentions include: Josue von Beroldingen [1518], O. LANG (Ed.), Pilgerfahrt zu dem Heiligen Lande 1518: selbst gestellt und von eigener Hand geschrieben (Egg 2008), 67 (who tries to harmonize Greek and Latin traditions by suggesting that Mary stopped there both on the way to Bethlehem and on that to Jerusalem); Dietrich von Kettler, H. HOOGEWEG (Ed.), “Eine westfälische Pilgerfahrt nach dem Heiligen Lande vom Jahre 1519” (Zeitschrift für vaterländische Geschichte und Alterthumskunde 47, 1889, 165–208; 48 (1890), 55–84), 60; Don Fadrique Henriquez de Ribera, Viaje a Jerusalén [1518–1519], M. DEL CARMEN ÁLVAREZ MÁRQUEZ (Ed.), in: P. GARCÍA MARTÍN (Ed.), Paisajes de la Tierra prometida. El Viaje a Jerusalén de Don Fadrique Enríquez de Ribera (Madrid 2001, 171–347), 247; P.M. DE URREA, Peregrinacion de Jerusalén, Roma y Santiago [1517–1519] (Burgos 1528), E. GALÉ (Ed.), Peregrinación de las tres casas sanctas de Jherusalem, Roma y Santiago (Zaragoza 2008), 186; Heinrich Wölfl [1520–1521], H. BLOESCH (Ed.), Heinrich Wölflis Reise nach Jerusalem 1520/1521 (Bern 1929), 55; Otto-Henry, Elector Palatine [1520], F. REICHERT (Ed.), Die Reise des Pfalzgrafen Ottheinrichs zum Heiligen Land 1521 (Regensburg 2005), 191; Philipp van Hagen [1523–1524], L. CONRADY (Ed.), Vier



any case, it is striking that a typical element of Palestinian vegetation may have been regarded as an important memorial site, and it seems evident that pilgrims appropriated traditions circulating among local Christians. Indeed, a frequently evoked story, telling that the tree would have inclined towards the Virgin – either to shelter her against sun or rain – was clearly reminiscent of the miraculous behaviour attributed to a palm-tree in the Quranic narrative of Christ's birth (19:22–26).<sup>29</sup> The frequent trans-religious use of this Islamic motif is witnessed by the identification, witnessed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by a Franciscan text, of the “hole of Christ's first bath” in the north-western corner of the Nativity cave with the *locus palmae*, the site of the palm-tree.<sup>30</sup> It is a well-known fact that many Palestinian cult-phenomena were associated with plants and vegetal elements of landscape, and that the latter could be shared by both Christians and Muslims, even if each group could attribute a different legendary identity to the trans-religiously worshipped tree.<sup>31</sup> This hold true also with the Bethlehem terebinth: the story reported by the Franciscans Blas de Buysa and Francesco Quaresmi, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, according to which a Bedouin shepherd had seen it wrapped in a fire in the manner the Burning Bush of Sinai, may perhaps be regarded as the core of an alternative Islamic tradition.<sup>32</sup> Muslim respect for the plant was not only frequently recorded as a distinctive form of worship,<sup>33</sup> but also regarded as a divine sign.<sup>34</sup>

The terebinth attracted attention on account of his isolated position and large dimensions: it was said to be the only tree along the whole road and to be extremely old. Furthermore, it was regarded as hallowed matter: it was touched and kissed, prayers were performed in front of it, and an indulgence of seven years and seven

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rheinische Palaestina-Pilgerschriften des XIV., XV. und XVI. Jahrhunderts (Wiesbaden 1882), 223–289, here 264; Arent Willemz [1525], C.J. GONNET (Ed.), *Bedeavaart naar Jerusalem in 1525* (Bijdragen voor de geschiedenis van het Bisdom van Haarlem 11, Haarlem 1884, 1–180), 119; ZVALLART, *Il devotissimo viaggio*, 224; Samuel Kiechel [1586], K. D. HASSLER, *Die Reisen des Samuel Kiechel* (Stuttgart 1866), 309; A. ROCCHETTA, *Peregrinatione di Terra Santa e d'altre provincie* (Palermo 1630), 248. The German anonymous of 1521 – R. RÖHRICHT (Ed.), “Zwei Berichte über eine Jerusalemfahrt (1521)”, (*Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 25, 1893, 163–220), 189 – is the first to mention an indulgence associated to the tree.

29 F. QUARESMI, *Historica, theologica et moralis Terrae Sanctae elucidation* (Antwerp 1639), II, 603; F.C. DU ROZEL, *Voyage de Jérusalem* [1644], Paris 1864, 78.

30 BACCI, *The Mystic Cave*, 232.

31 T. CANAAN, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London 1927), 69–73.

32 B. DE BUYZA, *Relación nueva, verdadera y copiosa de los sagrados lugares de Jerusalén y Tierrasanta* (Madrid 1622), 23v; QUARESMI, *Elucidatio*, II, 603. Cf. also S. PIETRASANTA, *Thaumasia verae religionis contra perfidiam sectarum proposita* (Rome 1643–1655), III, 181, who interprets this tradition in a thoroughly Christian way and reports that the miracle regularly took place on Saturdays.

33 G. BREMOND, *Viaggi* [1660] (Rome 1679), book II, chap. 36, 1.

34 L. RAUCHWOLFF, *Reyssbuch des Heyligen Lands* [1575] (Frankfurt am Main 1583), 274v; J. DE VILLAMONT, *Voyages* [1588] (Paris 1595), 189v.

carines (periods of fourty days) was granted to its worshippers.<sup>35</sup> Some remembered that that same plant was frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, and relied on a passage in the *Ecclesiasticus* or *Sirach* (24:22), already associated with the liturgy of Mary's conception, to claim that the tree would have spread out its branches to shelter the Virgin and her son.<sup>36</sup> It was accordingly known as "the Virgin's terebinth" or even "the Virgin-terebinth".<sup>37</sup> The silhouette of the tree was among the most popular designs used for the tattoos made by local craftsmen who worked close to the Nativity church.<sup>38</sup> Worshippers did not usually limit themselves to manifest their piety, but also detached pieces of bark and twigs, to such an extent that, already by the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, it looked eaten away and partly destroyed, in spite of the excommunication given by the friars to anybody who dared do this without their permission.<sup>39</sup> Even in this case the aim was to appropriate its miraculous power by ingestion: the feverish were expected to immediately recover health after drinking some water in which the wood of Mary's terebinth had been dipped.<sup>40</sup>

Then, sometimes in 1644, 1645, 1646, or 1649, the tree was burnt out in a fire: some reported that this happened by accident, after two peasants had left there the lighted wick used to smoke tobacco, whereas others claimed that it had been burnt intentionally, to keep wayfarers off the cultivated fields nearby.<sup>41</sup> Be this as it may, the residual trunk attracted many people who tried to cut off pieces of wood, until the Franciscans decided to uproot it and brought it to their convent: out of it the Bethlehem carpenters – whose activity was established in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and has come to our days – made crosses and rosaries which were soon in high demand

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35 B. DE STEFANIS, *Liber de perenni cultu Terrae Sanctae* [1552] (Venice 1573), 199; MANTEGAZZA, *Relatione*, 269; QUARESMI, *Elucidatio*, II, 601–603.

36 G. GIRAUDET, *Discours du voyage d'Outremer au Saint Sepulcre* (Toulouse 1583), 69. QUARESMI, *Elucidatio*, II, 603.

37 GIRAUDET, *Discours*, 69.

38 F. F. VON TROILO, *Orientalische Reise-Beschreibung* [1666] (Dresden 1676), 298.

39 N. DE HAULT, *Le voyage de Hierusalem* [1593] (Paris 1601), 35v; J. KOOTWIJCK, *Itinerarium Hierosolymitanum et Syriacum* [1596] (Antwerp 1619), 223; J. BOUCHER, *Le bouquet sacré* [1610] (Lyon [1690]), 235–236; Vincenzo Fani, *Relazione di viaggio* [1615–1616], P. G. LONGO (Ed.), *Memorie di Gerusalemme e Sacri Monti in epoca barocca* (Ponzano Monferrato 2010), 237; QUARESMI, *Elucidatio*, II, 603.

40 PIETR'ANTONIO DA VENEZIA, *Guida fedele alla santa città di Gierusalemme* (Venice 1715), 184.

41 See the different reports in E. ROGER, *La Terre Sainte ou description topographique très particulière des saints lieux et de la Terre de Promission* (Paris 1664), 190; E. ZWINNER, *Blumen-Buch des Heiligen Lands Palestinae* (Chur 1651), 346; J. BESSON, *La Syrie sainte, ou la mission de Jésus et des pères de la Compagnie de Jésus en Syrie* (Paris 1660), 237–240; J. GOUJON, *Histoire et voyage de la Terre-Sainte*, Lyon 1671, 263; A. LEGRENZI, *Il pellegrino nell'Asia* (Venezia 1705), 176–177; C. HIETLING, *Peregrinus affectuose per Terram Sanctam et Jerusalem a devotione et curiositate conductus* (Augusta 1713), 43–44.

and became extremely expensive on account of their alleged holiness.<sup>42</sup> As the Spaniard Antonio del Castillo specifies, the wood was inserted into crosses made out of the olive trees of the Gethsemani Garden, in the aim to make them even holier.<sup>43</sup>

In a sense, the destruction finally satisfied the believers' desire to appropriate the miraculous qualities of that blessed wood, given that no other solution was possible. The Friars made efforts to renovate worship, in the aim to avoid that "the memory of the (associated) indulgence" may be lost.<sup>44</sup> First, they delimited the portion of ground formerly occupied by the terebinth with a low circular wall and planted fig-trees all around it.<sup>45</sup> Second, they tried many times to plant a new tree of the same type, but all of them withered. Finally, after the last fruitless attempt, they decided to plant an olive tree.<sup>46</sup> In this way, this odd vegetal holy site was ensured some continuity, even if only in a surrogate form. Apparently, no further tree of any kind survived long time in that place: eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pilgrims were simply shown the empty field where the tree once stood and invited to figure it out in their minds.<sup>47</sup> By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the precise location seems to have been forgotten,<sup>48</sup> but local Christians seem to have identified a hackberry or *mes* tree, located very close to the Magi's cistern, as an offspring of Mary's terebinth. Tawfiq Canaan was still able to collect and document two amulets housing pieces of the holy wood, whose healing power was said to stem from that of the destroyed holy tree through the intermediary of its sapling.<sup>49</sup>

Along the same route, pilgrims were shown other worship-worthy places on both sides of the road. Apart from the already mentioned "Cistern of the Magi", a ruined building (Fig. 6) on a hill to the right side of the road, said to be a former

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42 GOUJON, *Histoire*, 263; P. TRESSAN, *Relation nouvelle et exacte d'un voyage de la Terre Sainte* (Paris 1688), 82.

43 A. DEL CASTILLO, *El devoto peregrino y viaje de Tierra Santa* (Madrid 1656), 265: "Deste santo árbol son aquellas cruces, que están embutidas en otras del monte Olivete, que se traen acá a la Christiandad para dar a los devotos".

44 E. DE SAN FRANCISCO, *Itinerario y segunda peregrinación* [1688] (Sevilla 1712), 88: "Este arbol viendo los Turcos villanos, la veneración que le daban los Christianos, lo quemaron una noche: viendo esto los Religiosos, plantaron la dicha higuera, que permanece al presente; porque no se perdiessse la memoria de indulgencias que se ganan, de siete años, y siete quarantenas de perdon".

45 LEGRENZI, *Il pellegrino*, 176–177.

46 D. LAFFI, *Viaggio in Levante al Santo Sepolcro di N. S. Gesù Christo* (Bologna 1683), 334; A. MORISON, *Relation historique d'un voyage nouvellement fait au Mont de Sinaï et à Jérusalem* (Paris 1714), 454.

47 F.J.M. DE SAN JUÁN DEL PUERTO, *Patrimonio seraphico de Tierra Santa* (Madrid 1714), 73–74; G. MARITI, *Viaggi per l'isola di Cipro e per la Soria e la Palestina* (Lucca-Florence 1769–1776), IV, 143–144; F. CASSINI DA PERINALDO, *La Terra Santa* (Genova 1851), II, 139.

48 B. MEISTERMANN, *Nouveau Guide de Terre Sainte* (Paris 1907), 207.

49 T. CANAAN, *Aberglaube und Medizin im Lande der Bibel* (Hamburg 1914), 63. Cf. IDEM, *Mohammedan Saints*, 73.





Fig. 6 – The House of Prophet Habakkuk on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

church in honour of Saint George,<sup>50</sup> was identified, since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as the house of Prophet Habakkuk<sup>51</sup> and the place whence, according to the “Bel and the Dragon” story (*Daniel* 14:33-39), he had been transported by an angel to Daniel’s den in Babylon.<sup>52</sup> Originally located in Tekoa,<sup>53</sup> the memory of this event was

<sup>50</sup> Johannes Poloner, *Descriptio Terrae Sanctae* (1422), T. TOBLER (Ed.), *Descriptiones Terrae Sanctae ex saeculo VIII. IX. XII. et XV.* (Leipzig 1874), 225–281, here 246, mentions only the church of Saint George without any hint at the Habakkuk connection. A Franciscan text possibly from the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century clearly state that the church of Saint George marked the site of Habakkuk’s house: cf. *Peregrinationes terrae promissionis*, G. GOLUBOVICH (Ed.), *Bibliotheca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell’Oriente franciscano*, vol. V: Dal 1346 al 1400 (Quaracchi 1927), 347–350, here 349: “ecclesia S. Georgii, que erat domus Abacuch”. Cf. also TOBLER, *Topographie*, II, 573–575.

<sup>51</sup> Starting from the 1460s the identification with the church of Saint George is forgotten and the Habakkuk tradition is constantly repeated: the earliest clear mention occurs in the itinerary of William III, Landgrave of Thuringia [1461], J. G. KOHL (Ed.), *Pilgerfahrt des Landgrafen Wilhelm des Tapferen von Thüringen zum Heiligen Lande im Jahre 1461* (Bremen 1868), 69–132, here 117.

<sup>52</sup> First mentions of this tradition in the German Bernd Koster’s travelogue from 1463, A. STROICK (Ed.), “Der Bericht des Koster Bernd über seine Pilgerfahrt ins Heilige Land aus dem Jahre 1463”, (*Westfälische Zeitschrift* 90/1, 1934, 89–111), 107, and in a roughly contemporary Franciscan List of indulgences, R. PERNOUD (Ed.), *Un guide du Pèlerin de Terre Sainte au XVe siècle* (Mantes 1940), 28.

<sup>53</sup> *De situ urbis Ierusalem* [1130], DE SANDOLI (Ed.), IV, 74–115, here 100.

associated with this place probably as the latter was far from the most usual pilgrims' circuits. Furthermore, it could be easily integrated into the visitor's experience of Bethlehem inasmuch as the prophet's travel could be connected, in some way, with the Gospel narratives: indeed, since the Assyrian capital of the Bible was by then currently identified with Cairo, the capital of the Mamluk empire, it could be viewed by pilgrims as paralleling and anticipating the event of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, whose departing point was located in the Milk Grotto and the nearby Chapel of Saint Joseph.<sup>54</sup> Apparently, pilgrims were happy with simply glancing at the building, since it was inhabited by unfriendly Muslim people.<sup>55</sup>

Going further on the same road, pilgrims reached the Greek monastery of Mar Elias. In keeping with local traditions, the latter was said to be the place where Prophet Elijah had been nourished by a raven, and this story was repeated also in Western sources since the Crusader period.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the Friars who guided visitors in their trip to Bethlehem gradually diffused claims about the latter's identification as his native house.<sup>57</sup> This idea was frequently mentioned in pilgrims' travelogues, even if somebody remarked that it contradicted the Biblical indication of the prophet as "Tishbite", that is coming from Tishbe in Gilead (1 Kings 17:1).<sup>58</sup>

To a big extent, pilgrims paid attention to some landscape elements and were eager to invest them with special meanings inasmuch as they were associated with springs and cisterns that they used to quench their thirst along the trip. At the height of Mar Elias Monastery they refreshed themselves with water drawn from a tank located on the right side of the road: close-by they started worshipping a stone, on which they were able to discern the outline of a body, which they most obviously deemed to be that of Prophet Elijah.<sup>59</sup> This stone came therefore to be considered as an important integration to the site's worship-worthiness, stemming

54 The German pilgrim Hans Tucher explicitly specifies that Babylon was to be understood as modern-day Cairo: cf. R. HERZ (Ed.), *Die "Reise ins Gelobte Land" Hans Tuchers des Älteren (1479–1480). Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung und kritische Edition eines spätmittelalterlichen Reiseberichts* (Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter 38, Wiesbaden 2002).

55 Oldřich Prefát of Vlkavov [1546], H. Bočková (Ed.), *Oldřich Prefát z Vlkavova. Cesta z Prahy do Benátek a odtud potom po moři až do Palestiny* (Prague 2007), 164. I am indebted to Dr. Sabina Rosenbergová (Brno), who provided me with an English translation of this text.

56 TOBLER, *Topographie*, II, 547–558; A. Augustinović, "El santuario 'Mar Elías' entre Jerusalén y Belén" (*Tierra Santa* 24, 1949, 203–208; PRINGLE, *The Churches*, II, 224–226).

57 This identification is mentioned from the 2nd half of the 14th century onwards: cf. Rhenish anonymous [ca. 1350–1360], L. CONRADY (Ed.), *Vier rheinische Palaestina-Pilgerschriften des XIV., XV. und XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden 1882), 20–48, here 38–39; Giorgio Gucci, ed. LANZA/ TRONCARELLI, *Pellegrini scrittori*, 287.

58 FABRI, *Evagatorium*, I, 430–431; QUARESMI, *Elucidatio*, II, 605.

59 TOBLER, *Topographie*, II, 550–551. The association with a cistern is clearly mentioned by ZVALLART, *Il devotissimo viaggio*, 226, and Fani, *Relazione*, ed. LONGO, 236. Cf. the critical remarks on the authenticity of the holy imprint in M. NAU, *Voyage nouveau de la Terre-Sainte* [1676] (Paris 1757), 391.

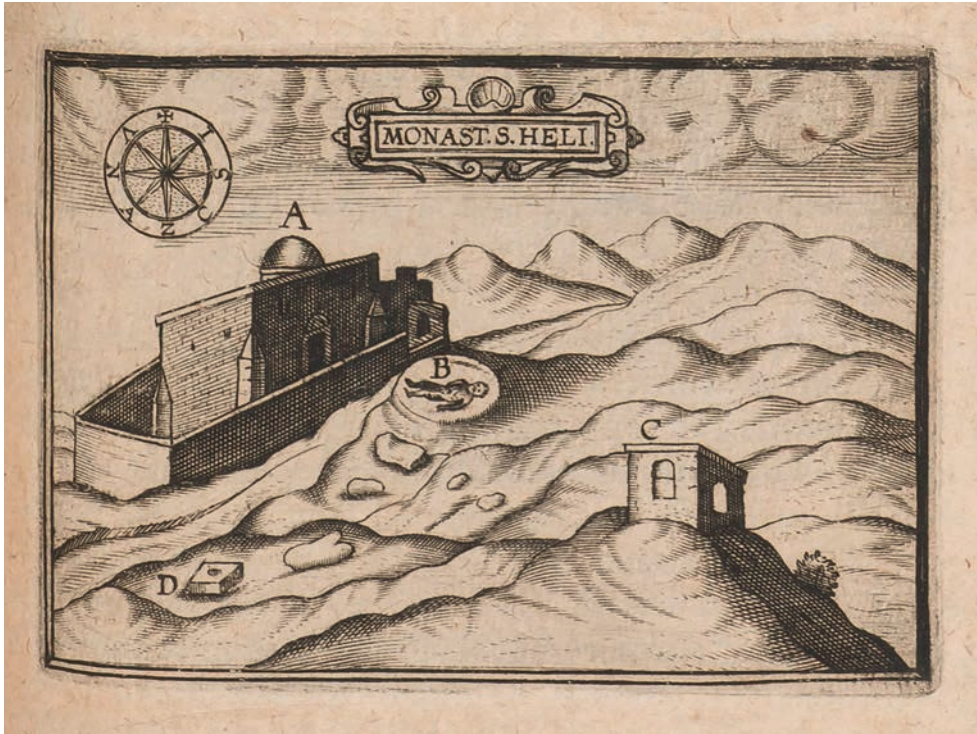


Fig. 7 – Natale Bonifacio, *The House of Elijah and Associated Sites*, engraving, 1587, after *Le tres devot voyage de Ierusalem [...] faict & descript par Iean Zvallart* (Anvers 1608), 191. [Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF]

in first instance from its identification as either the place where the Prophet had been nourished by a raven, in keeping with local Greek-Melkite tradition,<sup>60</sup> or as his native house, as suggested by the Franciscans.<sup>61</sup> The importance attributed to the holy imprint is made clear by the visual prominence attributed to it in Natale Bonifacio's engraving included in Jan Zvallart's 1587 travelogue, and later reproduced in a great many later texts (Fig. 7).<sup>62</sup>

60 TOBLER, *Topographie*, II, 547–558; A. AUGUSTINOVIĆ, “El santuario ‘Mar Elías’ entre Jerusalén y Belén” (*Tierra Santa* 24, 1949, 203–208); PRINGLE, *The Churches*, II, 224–226. The episode of the raven was more specifically associated to a stone located behind the main apse: cf. Markantonis Degrés, *Συντυχία (α)πάνω στα προσκυνήματα του Ιεροσολυμάτου* [ca. 1590], G. KEKHAGIOGLOU (Ed.), Nicosia 2017, 237.

61 Whereas earlier Latin sources repeated the traditional Greek interpretation of the site, the new interpretation is recorded since the second half of the 14th century: cf. Rhenish anonymous [1350–1360], ed. CONRADY, *Vier Rheinische Palaestina-Pilgerschriften*, 20–48, here 38–39; GUCCI, *Viaggio*, 287; Nompars II de Caumont [1419], P. SCOTT NOBLE (Ed.), *Le Voyage d’Outremer en Jherusalem de Nompars, Seigneur de Caumont*, Oxford 1975, 45.

62 ZVALLART, *Il devotissimo pellegrinaggio*, 225.





Fig. 8 – Bethlehem, the Wells of King David.

Further away, they interpreted some ruins as Jacob's tower or house, and sometimes also as the place of the patriarch's fight with the angel of God.<sup>63</sup> In 1480 the sceptical Dominican Felix Fabri visited the place and assumed that the ruins should have belonged to the aqueduct that brought water to Jerusalem.<sup>64</sup> From there on pilgrims easily reached Rachel's tomb, and, finally, the wells of David at the entrance to the village (Fig. 8). The latter corresponded to the latest known topographical transcription of a Bible passage (2 Sam 23:15) reporting that David had longed,

63 TOBLER, *Topographie*, II, 637–639. The ruin is recorded as the tower marking the place where Jacob mourned for his dead wife in the earliest Franciscan List of indulgences [ca. 1360–1380], M. DE CASTRO (Ed.), *Dos itinerarios de Tierra Santa de los siglos XIV y XV*, in «Hispania Sacra» 10 (1957), 443–486, here 466, and as the site of the patriarch's fight with the angel in the roughly contemporary travelogue of a Rhenish anonymous, L. CONRADY (Ed.), *Vier rheinische Palaestina-Pilgerschriften des XIV., XV. und XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden 1882), 20–48, here 39. Such traditions are frequently repeated in subsequent travelogues and, in the late 15th century, some authors try to associate the building with the “tower of Eder”, close to which Jacob had pitched his tents after leaving the site of Rachel's burial (Genesis 35:21): cf. Wilhelm Tzewers, *Itinerarium Terrae Sanctae* [1477–1478], G. HARTMANN (Ed.), *Wilhelm Tzewers: Itinerarius terre sancte. Einleitung, Edition, Kommentar und Übersetzung* (Wiesbaden 2004), 260; Hermann Sina, *Prologus Arminensis* [ca. 1478], chap. 33, W.A. NEUMANN (Ed.), *Anonymi Lubecensis ut videtur Hermanni Sinae ord. Praed. Prologus Arminensis in Mappam Terrae Sanctae Lubecae ante annum 1480 impressam* (Geneva 1885), [no page].

64 FABRI, *Evagatorium*, I, 433. In 1546, Oldřich Prefát describes the ruins in this way: “there is a rounded wall and corner of some building in the field; there is a lot of stones and rubble”: Bočková (Ed.) Oldřich Prefát z Vlkanova, 164 (English translation by Sabina Rosenbergová).

during a military operation, for drinking some water from a well located just outside Bethlehem's walls. Since this place was deemed to mark the boundary of the village, it strongly wandered in the course of time and different locations were identified.<sup>65</sup> The present-day location of the three cisterns visible on the northern slope along King David Street is mentioned in pilgrims' sources since the late 15th century.<sup>66</sup>

All such places were deemed to bear witness to episodes clearly mentioned in either the Old or the New Testaments, but almost no pilgrim's travelogue, since the late 13th century, omitted to report the odd story of the so-called "Field of the stone chickpeas" (*campus cicerum lapidorum*), which is ostensibly a local folktale, never recorded in the Holy Scriptures, nor in apocryphal narratives. Already in the Crusader period the fields between Mar Elias and the Tomb of Rachel had attracted the attention of pilgrims: some texts located a mysterious *campus floridus*, or "field of the flowers", somewhere along the road, usually without giving any other details.<sup>67</sup> The mid-13th century *Liber de civitatibus terrae sanctae* described it as the place whence Elijah was carried to heaven, but this was possibly due to the site's closeness to the Greek monastery in honour of the prophet.<sup>68</sup> Other sources seem to invest the place, and its stony appearance, with eschatological meanings: its characterization in the *Pelrinages et pardouns d'Acre* as the place where "everybody, as they say, will receive what he or she will have deserved"<sup>69</sup> can be understood with reference to a practice mentioned by Theodoric in ca. 1170, according to which passers-by would have been accustomed to deposit stones in that place, in the hope that they may serve as seats on the Day of Judgment.<sup>70</sup> The ambiguities as to the precise meaning of this site may have encouraged John Mandeville (ca. 1356) to work out the rather odd story of the virgin accused of fornication who,

65 Best introduction in TOBLER, Bethlehem in Palästina, 10–15.

66 First mention in Hermann Sina, *Prologus Arminensis* (above, fn 57), followed by the French anonymous of 1480, CH. SCHEFER (Ed.), *Le voyage de la sainte cité de Hierusalem avec la description des lieux, portz, villes, citez et aultres passaiges, fait l'an mil quatre cens quatre vingz, estant le siege du grant Turc à Rhodes et regnant en France Loys unziesme de ce nom* (Paris 1882), 81; Pierre Barbatre [1480], P. TUCOO-CHALA/ N. PINZUTI (Eds.), "Le Voyage de Pierre Barbatre à Jérusalem en 1480. Édition critique d'un manuscrit inédit" (*Annuaire-Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de la France, années 1972–1973*, 1974, 73–172), 145. The site and some annexed spaces have been investigated archaeologically: cf. B. BAGATTI/ E. ALLIATA, "Scavo ai 'Pozzi di David' a Betlemme" (*Liber Annuus* 30, 1980, 259–262).

67 E. J. MYLOD, *Latin Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, 1187–1291*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Leeds 2013), 119.

68 *Liber de civitatibus terrae sanctae* [ca. 1244–1260], DE SANDOLI (Ed.), *Itinera*, IV, 342–367, here 359.

69 *Pelrinages et pardouns de Acre* [1258–1263], DE SANDOLI (Ed.), *Itinera*, IV, 110–116, here 112.

70 Theoderic, *De locis sanctis*, R.B.C. HUYGENS (Ed.), *Peregrinationes tres. Saewulf, John of Würzburg, Theodericus* (*Corpus christianorum. Continuatio mediaevalis* 139, Turnhout 1994), 142–197.

condemned to the stake, was not touched by the fire, whereas the combusting wooden branches were transformed into roses.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, lack of information about the exact meaning of the *campus floridus* may have led local believers to conflate the latter with another field, known in Arabic as *jrun el-hummus* (نورج صمحل) and originally associated with a stone quarry,<sup>72</sup> which all sources and Bethlehem's local lore until recent times located to the north of Rachel's tomb, more or less at the height of the Tantur hill, on the left side of the Hebron road for those coming from Jerusalem.<sup>73</sup> In our days, it does not exist any longer: it did not survive the widening of the road, the excavation of the nearby hill, the militarization of the area, and the construction of the separation wall.

In their irresistible wish to enrich their experience with as many worship-worthy holy sites as possible, the ancient pilgrims who passed by the field of stone chickpeas intercepted a local story, providing a popular explanation for those odd-shaped stones.<sup>74</sup> The latter ran that a holy personage (either Jesus or Mary) walking from or to Bethlehem once noticed a peasant in the field and asked him what he was sowing. Since this one was rude enough to answer that he was sowing stones, instead of chickpeas, that field was covered by God's will with roundish, pea-like stones. This seems to have been the core of a more complex narrative developed in local lore in different variants. One, recorded by Tawfiq Canaan in the early 20th century, told that Mary asked some Jewish peasants to give her a handful of the beans they were threshing on a rock to the east of Tantur hill and that, when they refused, they turned into stones. The peasants accused the Virgin of being a witch and tried to kill her and her son, but a rock opened and sheltered both.<sup>75</sup> Another version ran that the episode took place when the Holy Family was escaping to Egypt and was pursued by Herodes' soldiers: after turning the chickpeas into stones, the peasants repented and Mary prayed God that the field may be covered with ripe corn. When the soldiers came and asked about the runaways, the people

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71 A. BALE, "The Virgin of Bethlehem, Gender and Space", in V. BLUD/ D. HEATH/ E. KLAFTER (Eds.), *Gender in Medieval Places, Spaces, and Thresholds* (London 2019), xv-xviii.

72 A. KUBALA, *The Political Economy of Stone Quarrying in the West Bank (Palestine)*, MA thesis (University of Ghent 2015), 9.

73 MEISTERMANN, *Nouveau Guide*, 208.

74 Matthew Paris, *Itinerary from London to Jerusalem* [1250-1259], DE SANDOLI (Ed.), *Itinera*, IV, 514-521, here 514, mentions the field of the stone chickpeas as one of the wonders of the Holy Land without specifying its location, which is first clearly indicated by Philip of Savona, DE SANDOLI (Ed.), *Itinera*, IV, 236, and Riccoldo, *ibidem*, 268. The Dominican Humbert de Dijon attributed the story to the apocryphal Gospels of the Infancy, probably in the aim to legitimize it: Humbert de Dijon, *Le Liber de locis et conditionibus Terrae Sanctae*, TH. KAEPELI/ P. BENOIT (Eds.), "Un pèlerinage dominicain inédit du XIVe siècle, le Liber de locis et conditionibus Terrae sanctae et Sepulchro d'Humbert de Dijon O.P. (1332)" (*Revue biblique* 62, 1955, 516-540), 527.

75 CANAAN, *Mohammedan Saints*, 80, footnote 2.



there answered that they had passed by in the period they were sowing their wheat. Therefore, the killers were demotivated and desisted from their goal.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, also this variant proves to be very old, since it was mentioned by a Florentine pilgrim, Giorgio Gucci, in 1384, who specified that the wheat episode took place in a field located a little bit further, between the Jrun el-hummus and Mar Elias.<sup>77</sup> It corresponded to a narrative that was widespread enough in the Middle Ages, especially in North European literatures: probably inspired by the stories, transmitted by the apocryphal Gospels of pseudo-Matthew and Thomas about ears of corn ripening very quickly or turning into bread by will of the Child Jesus,<sup>78</sup> they associated the miracle with the Flight to Egypt without specifying its precise location.<sup>79</sup>

Notwithstanding the popularity of the cornfield miracle, Western pilgrims preferably recorded the story of the chickpeas. The latter was strongly associated with local lore, inasmuch as it laid emphasis on the legumes that were the most important source of proteins for the poor and, since the times of old, had been ubiquitous on Palestinian tables. It is perhaps not by chance that the Bethlehem field is first mentioned in the same time as the earliest known recipe of pureed hummus, preserved in a 13th century Egyptian cookbook, the *Kitāb waṣf al-aṭ'ima al-mu'tāda* (The Description of Familiar Food).<sup>80</sup> Be this as it may, it is worth stressing that, as with the Milk grotto, the blessed breads of the Nativity cave, or the terebinth of Mary, even the jrun el-hummus bore witness to an approach to the holy that befitted the circumstances and needs of everyday life in an agricultural context. Accordingly, stones, branches, and earth from this places were among the most common souvenirs collected by visitors and brought back to Europe as hallowed

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76 I am obliged to Prof. Qustandi Shomali for making me aware of this tradition in the Bethlehem folklore.

77 GUCCI, *Viaggio*, 287.

78 C. TISCHENDORF, *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Leipzig 1876), 104 (pseudo-Matthew), 164, 175 (Thomas).

79 H. WENTZEL, "Die Kornfeldlegende in Parchim, Lübeck, den Niederlanden, England, Frankreich, und Skandinavien", *Festschrift für Kurt Bauch* (Berlin 1957), 177–192; IDEM, "Die 'Kornfeldlegende'" (*Aachener Kunstblätter* 30, 1965, 131–143; L. SCHMIDT, *Die Volkserzählung: Märchen, Sage, Legende, Schwank* (Berlin 1963), 259–264; M. VON DIETZ-RÜDIGER, "Die Heilige Familie auf der Flucht: Apokryphe Motive in volkstümlichen Legendliedern" (*Rheinisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde* 21, 1973, 255–328); C. M. KAUFFMANN, "Art and Popular Culture: New Themes in the Holkham Bible Picture Book", in: D. BUCKTON/ T. A. HESLOP (Eds.), *Studies in Medieval Art and Architecture Presented to Peter Lasko* (Stroud 1994, 46–69), 55, 58; C. DAXELMÜLLER, "Kornfeldlegende", in: K. RANKE et alii, *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (Berlin 1975–2015), VIII, 295–300; K. PREISLER, *Fromme Lieder – Heilige Bilder. Intermediale Perspektiven auf die skandinavische Ballade und die spätmittelalterliche Bildkunst Schwedens und Dänemarks* (Munich 2019), 163–165.

80 M. RODINSON/ A. J. ARBENY/ CH. PERRY, *Medieval Arab Cookery* (Devon 2001), 383. Cf. L. ZAOUALI, *Medieval Cuisine of the Islamic World* (Berkeley 2007), 44, 65.

matter and blessings.<sup>81</sup> Even if all such local holy sites relied on narratives of popular origins and were unlikely on Scriptural grounds, they could be easily integrated into the topographic network of worship-worthy places as they hinted at aspects of human existence that even foreigners could immediately acknowledge and understand.

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81 In the list of relics he had acquired in Bethlehem in 1596, the Italian pilgrim Alessandro Giuliani mentioned small fragments from the Manger, St Jerome's, St Eusebius' and St Paula's tombs, and the Cave of the Innocents, some earth from the Milk grotto and the Shepherds' Field, some bits of the walls of Jacob's tower, some stones from the Jrun el-hummus, some bark of the Virgin's terebinth, and a bit of Prophet Elijah's stone bearing his imprint: see the text as quoted in LONGO, *Memorie di Gerusalemme*, 247, footnote 213.