



Fig. 1: The fragment of the Title of the Cross, behind glass in a silver reliquary. The wood, very badly deteriorated, is now tobacco-color. Almost no flecks of white or red paint can be detected.

THE TITLE OF THE CROSS*

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Like the Holy Shroud, the Title of the Cross is a witness to the veracity of the evangelical texts concerning the last hour of the mortal life of Jesus, and like the Shroud it deserves to be known.

In Roman times, when a condemned man was led to his punishment, a placard indicating the motive of his condemnation was carried in front of him or he himself carried it suspended from his neck.¹ Pilate complied with this custom when he condemned Jesus and it was he who composed the text of the inscription. He wanted it to be written in Hebrew, language of the people of the country; in Greek, language of the Jews of the dispersion and of foreigners; and in Latin, the official language of the government. The Title was fixed at the top of the Cross and could be read by the great numbers of passersby (Jn 19:19,20).

All four Evangelists mention the Title but not all of them quote it exactly. The quotation most familiar to us must undoubtedly be the complete text, since it indicates not only the reason for condemnation but also the name of the condemned and his origin: Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. From all the accusations brought to his tribunal, Pilate picked the one which had overcome his hesitations; the title of "king" ascribed to Jesus, and which the Jews themselves pointed out to be in opposition to the rights of Caesar. All the Evangelists give this as the motive of condemnation.

Pilate's specific wording of the text was perhaps his revenge on the High Priests and the Pharisees. They had forced his hand, extorting the condemnation of Jesus because of what they termed his aspirations to national royalty. Pilate uses this motive in the official inscription not in the sense of pretensions of an imposter but as a reality. This offends the chiefs of the people? Too bad; or, so much the better! "What I have written," Pilate declares, "I have written."

From this incident it results that among the accessories of the last torments inflicted on Jesus, there is finally a little wooden tablet inscribed in three languages which read: Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews.

Now in the Basilica of Holy Cross in Jerusalem at Rome, a little panel is conserved carrying the characters of the Greek and Latin alphabets and traces which could be elements of the Hebrew alphabet (Fig.1). Are we here in the presence of a fragment of this tablet which

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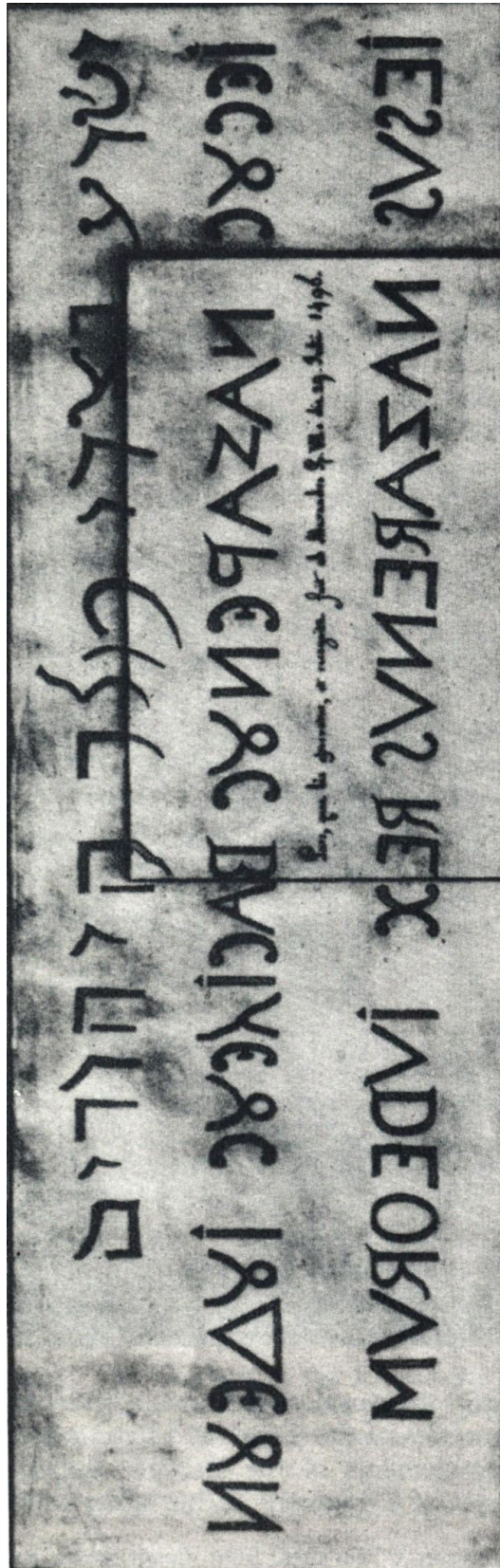


Fig. 2: Reconstruction (1827) of the Titulus Crucis. The section outlined represents the fragment conserved in the Chapel of Relics.

Both photos from *Le Reliquie Sessoriane*.

Pilate commanded to be put at the top of the Cross? (Fig.2)

But first let us describe it. "The little board is of oak, poplar or sycamore, but it is so pitted that one can no longer determine its exact nature. Originally it must have been 65cm x 20cm; it is now only 23cm x 13cm. The letters are red on a white background. They are slightly rutted, either because they were traced with some sort of gouge or because the red paint had more corrosive effect on the wood than the white had. The letters are 28mm to 30mm high, which allows them to be easily read from the foot of the Cross and from a short distance. One detail of the inscription proves its authenticity: the Greek and Latin words are written in the Hebrew manner, from right to left. In principle, the Greeks had written this way too; later they adopted the system called *boustrophedon*, after the manner of plowing oxen, beginning a line at the left, the following line beginning at the right, and so on. The system prevailed for many centuries in Greece and Italy and was still in use in the times of the Evangelists, but the inscription on the Cross was written in the archaic form either in conformity to the Jewish custom of the time (perhaps it was a Jew who prepared the Title) or to achieve a certain parallelism between the three texts. On what remains of the Title, we see that the inscription was reported word for word by St. John. Of the Hebrew words there remains only the lower part of six down-strokes rather difficult to identify."²

As for the question of its authenticity, let us first look at the historically-certain limits of its existence. This, in fact, is the first thing to do for every document, written or monumental.

For this relic, we can go back to the XII century. On 1 February 1492 some workmen were making repairs in the Sessorian Basilica, that is, the church now called Holy Cross in Jerusalem. At the moment they arrived at the main arch, they noticed a brief inscription in mosaic, illegible because many tesserae had fallen away. Behind this was a terracotta brick of about 32cm x 21cm, on which was written in large letters, Titulus Crucis.³ Removing the brick they discovered a little niche in which a leaden box fit perfectly. And in the box there was a wooden tablet on which were some Greek and Latin characters.

But the date of 1492 is not the extreme limit of its certain existence. In fact, the box was sealed with three seals stamped "Gerardus Cardinalis S. Crucis." The date was 1143; a time when repairs were made by Gerard Cardinal Caccianemici, titular of the church. In 1144 he became Pope as Lucius II and died in 1145.

From this information we reach our first conclusion: that little fragment of wood was known as the Title of the Cross in the middle of the XII century. But it was in the First Century that Pilate had composed the Title which was fixed to the Cross!

To explain its presence in Rome, one must turn back to the history of the Invention of the great relics of the Passion by St. Helen, mother

of the Emperor Constantine, in 326. The fact that the Cross was found is not put in doubt, even though the details that certain later reports signalize should be discarded. Now these same ancient documents that tell of the finding of the Cross, say that the Title was discovered with it. Among early accounts, there are those of St. Ambrose (†397), St. John Chrysostom (†407), Rufinus (†410). That pieces of the Title and the Cross were in Jerusalem about 385 is witnessed by the pilgrim Etheria.

There is nothing surprising that a large fragment of the Title as well as of the Cross should be found in Rome. The Sessorian Palace was the residence of the Empress Helen. It was here that an underground chapel was constructed to house the relics of the Passion. Bags of earth brought from Calvary were laid beneath the floor, hence the name Holy Cross "in Jerusalem". Until about the VI century, the church was known as the Basilica Eleniana, and sometimes Basilica Ierusalem.

That the Title was discovered in an almost inaccessible place above the keystone of the triumphal arch of the Basilica is explained thus: the Emperor Valentinian III, whose reign (423-455) was dominated by the fear of barbarian invasions, wanted to assure the security of the relic. Already in 410, Rome had been taken and sacked by the Visigoths; soon after, in 451, Attila the Hun would be in Italy, and in 455 it is the Vandals who attack the Imperial City. These invasions and the troubled times which followed explain how the hiding place of the relic could be forgotten for nearly seven centuries. The future Lucius II, after authenticating the Title in 1143, returned it to its hiding place, and another three-and-a-half centuries elapsed before it was rediscovered. But this time it was not put back in its inaccessible niche, to be forgotten perhaps a third time. A silver reliquary was made for it, and since 1930, when the new chapel was dedicated, it has its place of honor with the two Thorns and the Nail.

Although Pilate may have acted in a spirit of revenge when writing the text of the Title to put over the Cross of Christ, it is no less true that Divine Providence at that moment made the Roman procurator his instrument. As long as men kneel before a crucifix—and that is to say, until the end of time—they will be reminded that this Crucified, dying in the most immane humiliation, is in truth King of Kings and Lord of Lords. God-made-Man made of his Cross a Throne on which He reigns. For He let himself be attached to this wood only through love, and nothing is as strong as love, nothing but his Love has the strength to subjugate the hearts of men.

NOTES:

1. Eusebius reports the letter of the Christians of Lyon describing the martyrdom of Attalus, where it is said that a placard was carried before him, on which was written: "This is Attalus the Christian."
2. H. LESÈTRE; *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, 1922.
3. BALDUINO BEDINI: S.O.CIST.: *Le Reliquie Sessoriane della Passione del Signore*, Rome 1956. (See also O'RAHILLY: *The Crucified*, Kingdom Books, Dublin 1985 pp. 18-29. Ed.)