

The Head of St John the Baptist – the Early Evidence

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In 1881, the *New York Times*, in an article condemning what it called 'the silly worship of relics' recounted the anecdote of two rival French monasteries, which each possessed a head of John the Baptist.¹ The monks explained this uncomfortable fact by saying that the first skull belonged to John as a man, whereas the smaller skull was from 'when he was a boy'.

However, this story appears to have its origins in a footnote to the 1854 translation of John Calvin's *Treatise on Relics* by the Polish exile, Count Valerian Krasinski, and relates in fact to two skulls of the rebel Prince Ragotzi, one smaller than the other, kept in the museum of curiosities in the Palace of Prince Grassalkovich in Hungary.² Falsification or perhaps simple confusion can therefore occur not only in the evidence for relics but also in the works of critics.

Like the relics of the Baptist's head, the abundance of relics from the Wood of the Cross have been used as arguments against the authenticity of relics in general. However, a study by Anatole Frolow has shown that far fewer fragments of the True Cross are known than one would expect.³ Today only about a thousand major pieces, mostly smaller fragments, are thought to survive.⁴ Perhaps, given their limited number and the fact that wood permits tests such as radiocarbon dating, a scientific study could tell us the age of these fragments and whether they share a common origin.

Both historical and legendary records of the Baptist's relics increase significantly in the Middle Ages, a phenomenon also seen in the case of the Wood of the Cross, complicating the picture presented in the earlier sources. Perhaps as a result, the relics of John the Baptist are usually mentioned only in passing, with one scholar apologising that "their enumeration would be too tedious here."⁵ To my knowledge, only one detailed study of the relics of the Baptist exists, that of Charles Du Fresne from 1665.⁶ From this, it appears that the number of relics of the Baptist is not so large as to preclude a scientific study of their date and origin, as has been suggested for relics of the Wood of the Cross. In anticipation of such a study, one must begin by disentangling as much of the existing evidence as possible, in order to trace the heritage of the known relics as far back as one can, starting with the earliest evidence as recorded in contemporary or near-contemporary sources.

The Gospels relate that John was decapitated 'in prison', with the historian Josephus specifying that it took place at the fortress of Machaerus.⁷ This was ordered by Herod Antipater, known as Antipas, ruler of Galilee and the Perea, at a banquet, attended by the 'leading men of Galilee'.⁸ This feast may have taken place at Tiberias, Antipas' new capital, constructed in Galilee in A.D. 20. The head was brought to Salome on a board or round platter, who gave it to her mother, Herodias.⁹ John's disciples

¹ 'Silly Relic Worship', *New York Times*, 16 January 1881.

² V. Krasinski (tr.), *A Treatise on Relics by John Calvin* (Edinburgh, 1854), 256 (footnote).

³ A. Frolow, *La relique de la Vraie Croix; recherches sur le développement d'un culte* (Paris, 1961).

⁴ A. Frolow, "The Veneration of the Relic of the True Cross at the End of the Sixth and the Beginning of the Seventh Centuries", *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, 2, No.1 (winter 1958) / *AtlaReligion* (22 February 2004), 15.

⁵ E.g. Jean Calvin, *Traité des Reliques* (Geneva, 1543): "Les reliques de Jean Baptiste."

⁶ C. du Fresne, *Traité historique du chef de saint Jean-Baptiste* (Paris, 1665).

⁷ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.119 (L. H. Feldman (ed. / tr.) *Jewish antiquities / Josephus* (Cambridge, Mass. / London (1996)); Mark 6.27; Matthew 14.10. Luke 3.19 mentions that John was locked up 'in prison'.

⁸ Mark 6.21.

⁹ Mark 6.28; Matthew 14.11.

then came to collect his body, presumably from Machaerus, and laid it in a tomb.¹⁰ It is not related whether or not these remains included John's head.

The sources are then silent about John's remains for over 300 years. Then, at the end of the 4th c., everything changes: the tomb of John the Baptist is recorded alongside that of the biblical prophet Elisha, at a place called Sebaste in Palestine. This was in the possession of a community of monks and nuns, established presumably between ca.330 (Constantine ended persecution of Christians in the region in 324 and the Bordeaux Pilgrim's account of 333 mentions no monastic settlement) and 361, when the site was attacked by pagans during paganism's brief revival under the Emperor Julian.¹¹ John's bones were burned and scattered, as were those of Elisha.¹² Monks from Jerusalem, who happened to be visiting the shrine, collected as many fragments of the relics as possible, and brought them to Philip, founder of their monastery.¹³ He in turn, fearing for their safety, sent the relics to the Patriarch, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in ca. 362, and afterwards, it seems, to the Bishop of Jerusalem also, who, according to the same source, "closed them up within a hollowed-out place in the sacristy wall [...], preserving them for the benefit of the next generation". A 7th c. account records these were duly discovered a generation later under the Patriarch Theophilus (385-412), who constructed a Martyrium in Alexandria for the relics in 395.¹⁴ The same source asserts that these relics, originally from John's tomb in Palestine, included his head, which would therefore have been found in the tomb with his body.

John's relics are recorded again not long after. In the reign of the emperor Valens (364 to 378), it became known at court that John the Baptist's head had been discovered by monks living in Jerusalem, who had later moved to Cilicia, in southern Anatolia. Valens commanded that the relic be brought to Constantinople. When the cart carrying it got to the district of Pantichium in the territory of Chalcedon, the mules pulling it would go no further. Assuming piously that this was God's will, rather than the animals' usual stubbornness, they deposited the relic at Cosilaos, a place nearby owned by Mardonius the Eunuch, a member of the imperial court. The monastic community attending the relic appears to have migrated with it. These monks adhered to the teachings of Macedonius, bishop of Constantinople, and it would therefore appear that they found the head at a point between his accession in 342 and 378, the death of Valens. Given the absence of any other such references at this point, it therefore seems plausible that these monks were from the same monastery of Philip in Jerusalem that had received the relics from the desecrated tomb of the Baptist at Sebaste in 361-2.

In 391, the emperor Theodosius came to Cosilaos and removed the relic to Constantinople. He enclosed it in a small casket or urn, wrapped it in a cloak of imperial purple and carried it off to the Hebdomon, just outside Constantinople, where he built a magnificent church to hold it.¹⁵ The words used to describe this apparently portable casket (*θήκη* and *σορός*) are used by the same author to describe another reliquary buried in a martyrial chapel in Constantinople at around the same time.¹⁶ Its description matches that of the most common reliquary type known from Constantinople – the miniature marble sarcophagus reliquary. Indeed, when relics of John's father, Zacharias, and of

¹⁰ Mark 6.29; Matthew 14.12.

¹¹Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, III.3 (F. Scheidweiler (ed.), *Theodoret, Kirchengeschichte*. GCS 44 (Berlin, 1954)).

¹² Philostorgius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII.4 (J. Bidez, F. Winkelmann (eds.), *Philostorgius: Kirchengeschichte. Mit dem Leben des Lucian von Antiochien und den Fragmenten eines arianischen Historiographen*. GCS 24 (1981)). It should be noted that Elisha's relics were famous in the Bible for having brought a dead man back to life upon contact with them 2 Kings 13:21, providing a connection between the Baptist's remains and the earliest example of human relics possessing miraculous powers.

¹³ Rufinus of Aquileia, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II.28 (PL XXI.461-540c).

¹⁴ John of Nikiu, *Chronicle*, LXXVIII.42 (R.H. Charles (tr.), *The Chronicle of John* (c. 690 A.D.) *Coptic bishop of Nikiu : being a history of Egypt before and during the Arab conquest* (London, 1916)).

¹⁵ Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII.21 (J. Bidez and G. Hansen (ed.), *Sozomenus: Kirchengeschichte*. GCS 4 (Berlin 1995)).

¹⁶ This was the reliquary of the Forty Martyrs buried in the tomb of the Macedonian deaconess Eusebia, the excavation of which, at the order of the Empress Pulcheria when Proclus was archbishop of Constantinople (434-446), Sozomen himself witnessed. Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IX.2.

Joseph, son of Jacob, were paraded through Constantinople upon their arrival in the city in 415, they were kept in two separate caskets, held upon the knees of the Patriarch, Atticus and Moses, bishop of Antioch in Phoenicia, both seated in carriages drawn by mules.¹⁷ A similar scene is depicted in the Trier Ivory, also made in Constantinople. The reliquary depicted is indeed of the type described. Furthermore, when relics said to be of John the Baptist were excavated in a 5th - 6th c. church at Sozopol in the summer of 2010, they were found in a casket of precisely this type, which my research suggests was most probably made in Constantinople.¹⁸ If the Sozopol relics came from the capital during our period, like the sarcophagus reliquary in which they were found, and were indeed considered to be those of the Baptist, it seems likely that they came from those deposited at the Hebdomon by Theodosius.

Theodosius now felt confident that the Baptist was on his side. In 394, he reunified the Empire at the Battle of the Frigidus, in modern Slovenia, not far from the border with Italy. He attributed his victory to God, having prayed over John's relics at the Hebdomon church in Constantinople before the battle that the Baptist might fight on his side.¹⁹ Following this victory, it seems, relics of the Baptist appeared in northern Italy. Gaudentius, Bishop of Brescia (387-410), was able to present relics of St. John the Baptist at the dedication of his basilica, the Concilium Sanctorum, along with others of St. Thomas, St. Andrew and St. Luke.²⁰ Victricius, bishop of Rouen in northern Gaul (393-417), also received relics of Sts. John the Baptist, Andrew, Luke and Thomas, along with others of St. Euphemia, a martyr from Chalcedon, her shrine facing Constantinople across the Bosphorus.²¹ Paulinus of Nola (d.431) also possessed relics of St. Euphemia.²² One might assume that such reliquaries were secondary items such as oil or cloth wrappings sanctified by contact, but the reliquary of Daedalia, found in what was Ambrose's Basilica Apostolorum in Milan, shows that this was by no means always the case. It is possible that the bone fragments this contained were also those of Sts. Andrew, Luke and Thomas, said to have been deposited in the Basilica Apostolorum after its dedication in ca.386.

It has been suggested that these relics of the Baptist were brought in the emperor's train.²³ Most appear in the collections of bishops, who obtained them along with relics of St Andrew and St Luke. Given that those relics were by that time both kept in an imperial foundation, the Holy Apostles (a sort of Byzantine Westminster Abbey where rulers were buried), and that relics of the Baptist were kept in another imperial foundation, the church at the Hebdomon, it would seem that the agent distributing them was the imperial government. One can observe a tight clustering of these collections around Milan, an imperial capital alongside Constantinople in Theodosius' time, when the Empire was united, ceasing to be so shortly after his death. This pattern is even more pronounced if one adds the ancient churches dedicated to St John the Baptist in which reliquaries from our period have been discovered or are mentioned: those at Castello Brivio, Monza, and Mariano Comense (which contained bone fragments).²⁴ There are probably a dozen or so other reliquaries from our period from Western Europe, almost all of them clustered in North Italy and the upper Adriatic. In the Balkans, on the route to Constantinople, numerous others have been discovered.

¹⁷ *Chronicon Paschale*, A.D. 415 (L. Dindorf (ed.), *Chronicon Paschale*. CSHB. (Bonn, 1832)).

¹⁸ G. Kazan, "Arks of Constantinople, the New Jerusalem", *Byzantion* 2015 (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Cf. Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII. 24.2.

²⁰ Gaudentius of Brescia, *Tractatus*, XVII (A. Glück, A. Polaschek (eds.), *S. Gaudentii episcopi Brixianensis Tractatus*. CSEL 68 (1936)).

²¹ Victricius of Rouen, *De Laude Sanctorum*, VI.35-6 (I. Mulders, R. Demeulenaere (eds.), *Victricii Rotomagensis de laude Sanctorum*. CCSL LXIV (1985), 69-93).

²² Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen*, XXVII, ll.400-439 (W. Hartel (ed.), *S. Pontii Meropii Paulini Nolani opera. Pars 2: Carmina*. CSEL 30 (Vienna, 1894)).

²³ N. McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan: church and court in a Christian capital* (Berkeley, 1994), 230-1.

²⁴ G. Baserga, "Antiche capselle liturgiche in Brianza", *Rivista Archeologica della Provincia e antica Diocesi di Como* (1904), 100-120 ; G. Sena Chiesa (ed.), *Milano capitale dell'impero romano : 286-402 d.c.* (Milan 1990), 301-4; A. Grabar, *Ampoules de Terre Sainte* (Paris, 1958).

In Constantinople, a number of churches dedicated to John the Baptist sprang up in these early years, most connected with Syrian monastic communities.²⁵ Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus in Syria (423-457), who spent much time visiting the region's ascetic monks and wrote about their miraculous deeds, also claims to have obtained some of the relics of the Baptist for his own church at Cyrrhus, which had come from Palestine and Phoenicia.²⁶ These unspecified relics are described as exerting huge popular appeal amongst the monks of Syria, who saw John as a model ascetic. The work is dated to the mid-5th c.

Syrian monks are again mentioned in the account of what became known as the Second Finding of the Baptist's Head. It is recorded that the Baptist himself revealed the location of this relic in a dream to two Eastern monks during their visit to Jerusalem. They discovered the head, still wrapped in a cloth sack, within what is described as the former palace of King Herod the Great. As they journeyed into Syria on their way home, a potter who had been travelling with them made off with the head to his home city of Emesa, also allegedly under the instructions of the Baptist, who had appeared to him in a dream. The relic was still concealed within its bag, and the potter is said not to have known what this contained. Eventually, before he died, he placed it in a sealed urn and left it to his sister, who had no knowledge of what it was. Later, Eustochius, a priest who secretly adhered to the Arian heresy, came into possession of it. It appears that he was claiming the miraculous healing powers of the relic as his own. When he was found out, he was expelled from the city. He appears to have buried the object in a cave outside Emesa. Later still, this cave came to be used by monks. Finally the relic was revealed, again in a vision, to Marcellus the priest, leader of their community, while he was living in that cave. The bishop of Emesa, Uranius, commemorated the event as having happened on the 24th of February, 452-453.²⁷ However, the sources record that the relic stayed in Syria, being moved from the monastery to the city itself in 761.²⁸

This 'Second Head' captured the public's imagination and appears to have supplanted the 'First Head'. The Church of Constantinople came to commemorate the finding of this head at Emesa, not the earlier one, holding services and a procession in its honour every 24th of February.²⁹ Perhaps the older head was seen as an embarrassment -as the Benedictine abbot, Guibert of Nogent (†1125) would later declare, to admit that there be two heads would suggest that there were either two John the Baptists or one John who had two heads – both equally impossible assertions!³⁰ It is possible that the relics brought by Theodosius fell from favour, were lost, or simply ran out.

However, the choice of preferring this 'second head' of the first is bizarre. The 'second head' was authenticated only by the Emesa church, whereas the earlier head, recorded by Sozomen, had been recognised by the Emperor himself. Secondly the details of the story appear fabulous – how could details of the monks, the potter, his sister or Eustochius have been known to the monk who simply found it buried in the floor of his cave? Thirdly the story features repeated dream visions of the Baptist without a clear purpose – as a result, the head ends up in the possession of various minor

²⁵ The earliest monastery in the capital, that of Dalmatos, founded by the Syrian monk Isaac in 382, is said to include a church to John the Baptist by the 5th- 6th c. (R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin. Volume III: Les églises et les monastères*. 2nd ed. (Paris, 1969), 82). Between 395 and 408, a church of St John Baptist is said to have been built in the Arcadianae, the estate of the emperor Arcadius, north-east of Hagia Sophia (Janin (1969), 410). By 400, what later became known as the Monastery of John the Baptist was developing near the saint's martyrdom at the Hebdomon (built in 392), as individual ascetics established themselves there (Janin (1969), 267).

²⁶ The Life of James of Cyrrhestica in Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa XXI* (P. Canivet, A. Leroy-Molinghen (eds.), *Histoire des moines de Syrie: Histoire Philothée. SC 234, 257. 2 Vols.* (1977-9)).

²⁷ Marcellinus Comes, *Chronicon*, A.D. 453 (P.L. LI). For the discordance on the precise year, see A.-M. Talbot et al, *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington D.C., 1996), 16, n.13.

²⁸ Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, A.D. 761 (C. De Boor (ed.), *Theophanis Chronographia. 2 Vols.* (Leipzig, 1883-5)).

²⁹ *Synaxary of the Church of Constantinople* in C. de Smedt, H. Delehaye et al., *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano nunc Berolinensi* (Brussels, 1902).

³⁰ See Du Fresne (1665), 42.

characters and a heretical priest, presumably for many years, before eventually again falling into the hands of monks. Finally the palace where the relic is said to have been found belonged to the wrong Herod- Herod the Great, rather than Herod Antipas.

It is possible that both relics could be genuine, if they consisted merely of fragments. The relics received at the monastery of Philip appear to have consisted of mere fragments, since John's remains had been damaged by pagans at Sebaste, and many of today's best known relics of John's head indeed consist of fragments.³¹ The venerable Bede, writing in the 7th c., suggests that the Emesa relic indeed originally came from his tomb at Sebaste (Samaria).³² This would not have been the only occasion on which Syrians covertly spirited away fragments of famous relics from the Holy City: Procopius, records that a portion of the True Cross was removed secretly by a Syrian to Apamea, not far from Emesa. A further consideration might be the fact that one historian records that the bones of the Biblical Prophet Elisha were also desecrated at the same time as John's: this may allow for the possibility of some reduplication of the bone fragments and perhaps even for a second head.³³

Before I conclude, I thought I would mention one last detail which may be of interest. As we have seen, the source of the major relics of the Baptist in our period appears to have been a monastic community in Jerusalem. It is curious to remark that in 2007, following the excavation of an Early Byzantine monastic settlement beside the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, fragments of four reliquaries were discovered.³⁴ One of these was a Jewish ossuary box dated to between 20 BC and 70 A.D.³⁵, i.e. dating back to the time of John the Baptist. It was found *in situ*, in use as reliquary, set upon two field stones on the floor of an alcove in a crypt beneath the Monastery. The artefact appears to date to the period before ca. 450-500, after which point local reliquaries of Jerusalem limestone began to be replaced by imported marble reliquaries from Constantinople and its surrounding regions. This object was found to contain human remains: the partially broken skull of an adult, on its side, with lower jaw placed next to it. Could this be a lost relic of John the Baptist from the monastery responsible for the distribution of his remains? Only scientific analysis can provide further answers.

In conclusion, one observes that the relics of the Baptist appear to have come from a single source in our period, and were distributed initially as high-status gifts by the imperial government. In addition, a strong association with monastic settlements emerges, particularly with those of Syrian or Palestinian origins. The authority and success of Syrian monks as impresarios in the field of relics, resulted in the successful establishment of a shrine to John's relics at Emesa. Indeed, in ca. 706, according to Arab sources from the 12th c. and later, a head of St John the Baptist was once again discovered miraculously in Syria, this time in Damascus, during the construction of Caliph al-Walid's new mosque there.³⁶ Meanwhile, Constantinople continued to distribute relics, perhaps eventually running out of these later in our period. In 823, following the Emesa example, Constantinople's Patriarch was revealed the location the Baptist's head in a dream, resulting in what became known as the Third Finding of the Head. This time, however, the relic was brought to Constantinople.

³¹ E.g. the Amiens relic of John's face consisted only of the front part of the skull, whereas the Topkapı relic of John's head in Istanbul, once in the possession of the Knights of St John, consists of a fragment from the crown of the head. In 2010, a tooth and a skull fragment were discovered at Sozopol in Bulgaria. In Rome, the church of San Silvestre in Capite exhibits a skull-shaped reliquary, although it would seem that only part of the Baptist's jaw is in its possession (see E. Ofenbach, *Sulle orme dei santi a Roma* (Vatican City, 2003), 75).

³² Venerable Bede, *Martyrologium de Natalitiis Sanctorum*, August. 29 "IV. Kal. Romæ S. Sabinæ virginis atque martyris. Eodem die decollatio S. Joannis baptistæ, qui primo in Samaria conditus, tunc in Alexandria, porro caput de Hierosolymis ad Phœniciaë urbem Emissam delatum est." Cf. Venerable Bede, *Homilia XXIX*.

³³ See n.12.

³⁴ N. Adler, "Reliquary covers from the Temple Mount excavations" *Qedem* 46 (2007) .

³⁵ L. Shapira "A Second Temple Period Ossuary from the Large Byzantine Structure in Area XV", in E. Mazar "The Temple Mount Excavations in Jerusalem, 1968-1978. Final Reports. Vol II." *Qedem* 43 (2003), 129-132. Shapira notes that Jewish use of ossuaries in Jerusalem started in ca. 20 BC and continued until AD 70.

However, Jews only buried the dead outside the city precincts, suggesting a non-Jewish context for this object.

³⁶ E.g. See Ibn 'Asākir's Description of Damascus (S. al-Munajjid (ed.), Mukhtaṣar Tārīkh Madinat Dimashq (Damascus, 2009), 21). The mosque is said to have replaced an earlier 'cathedral of St John', but this appears to be dated to after ca.570, since it is not mentioned by the Piacenza Pilgrim.