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Jerusalem-on-Thames: Thomas Whete on the Empress Helena's Foundation of the Crosiers

John Aspinwall

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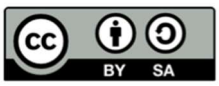

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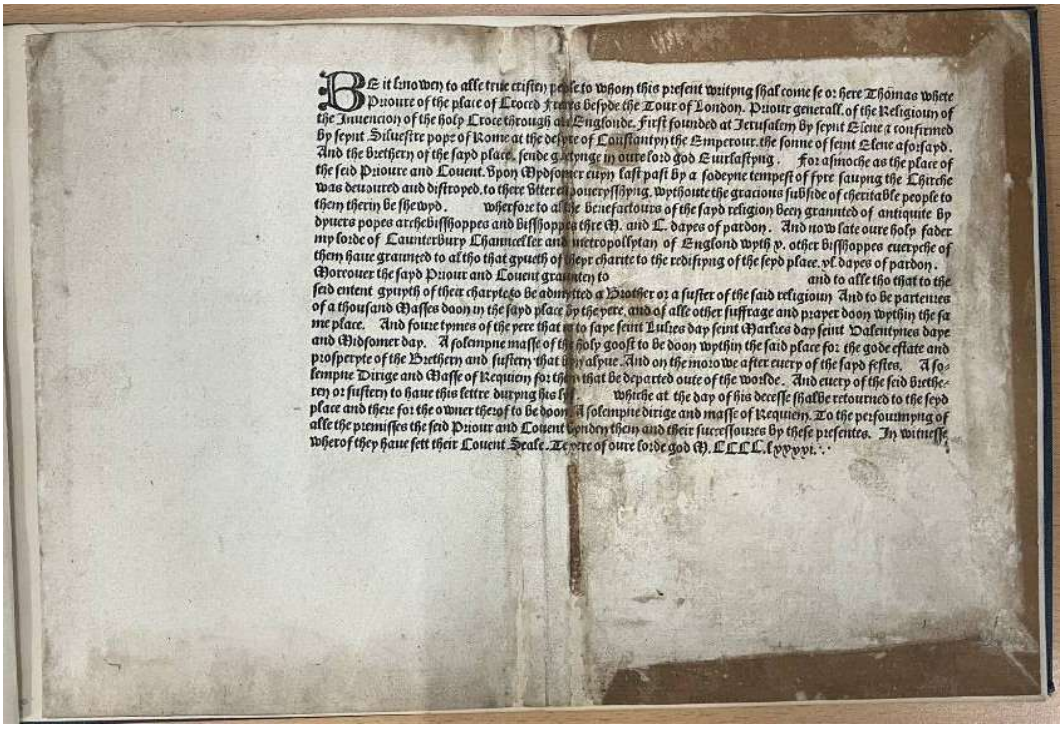
Jerusalem-on-Thames:
Thomas Whete on the Empress Helena's Foundation of the Crosiers

John Aspinwall (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg)

London, British Library, IA.55480	Translation (John Aspinwall)
Be it knowen to alle true cristen people to whom this present writyng shal come se or here Thomas Whete Prioure of the place of Crochedfreres besyde the Tour of London, Priour generall of the Religioun of the Invencion of the Holy Croce throughe all Englonde, First founded at Jerusalem by Seynt Elene & confirmed by Seynt Silvestre pope of Rome at the desyre of Constantyn the Emperour the sonne of Seynt Elene aforesayd and the brethren of the sayd place send greyting in our Lord God Everlastyng.[1]	Let it be known to all true Christian people to whom this present writing shall come, be seen, or heard, that I, Thomas Whete, prior of the house of the Crutched Friars beside the Tower of London, and general prior of the Order of the Invention [i.e. the discovery] of the Holy Cross throughout all England – which was first founded at Jerusalem by Saint Helena and confirmed by Saint Sylvester, pope of Rome, at the request of Constantine the emperor, the son of the said Saint Helena – together with the brethren of the said house, send greetings in our Lord God Everlasting.



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[1] The text has been published in: BUCKLER, Charles A., Form of Appeal from the Crouched Friars, in: The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Review 16.1, 1864, pp. 633f., cols I–II; CAMERON, Kenneth Walter, The Pardoner and His Pardons Indulgences Circulating in England on the Eve of the Reformation, Hartford 1965, p. 5. For the manuscript's catalogue entry, see 'London: Richard Pynson', in: Catalogue of Books printed in the XV[th] Century now in the British Museum, 13 vols, ed. Alfred W. POLLARD et al., London 1908–2007, vol. XI, 2007, p. 264.

Despite their significance to the spiritual landscape of medieval Europe, the Crosiers remain one of the lesser-studied religious orders which emerged in the aftermath of the Crusades. To a large extent, such scholarly neglect is a product of extreme document loss. In 1410, a reform movement aimed at reorienting the order towards the *devotio moderna* led to the widespread destruction of its archival records. As a result, understanding of its origins has come to rest almost entirely on late-medieval and early-modern sources, many of which were produced by the institution itself with the aim of reconstructing a coherent historical narrative. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that throughout the medieval period, a series of divergent and often conflicting historiographical interpretations emerged which has left the order's foundational chronology and geographical point of origin subject to considerable scholarly debate.

A body of scholarship has shown how the Crosiers likely emerged at Huy in the Meuse Valley in the early thirteenth century, from where they soon expanded into major urban and religious centres across northern Europe.[2] However, the scarcity of surviving sources makes it difficult to trace the precise details of its early development. In the case of England, for instance, although there are indications of an earlier presence,[3] the first unequivocal evidence for the order's activities can only be traced to 1247 when Pope Innocent IV (sed. 1243–54) confirmed an earlier foundation of a house belonging to the *priori et fratribus sancte crucis* in Whaplode (*Quappelod*) in the diocese of Lincoln.[4] A London presence followed soon after. Two documents from 1268 and 1270 attest to King Henry III's (r. 1216–72) support for the maintenance of a Crosier chapel near Tower Hill. In 1269, the king authorised the further enlargement of the site with the construction of a church. This was completed in around 1319 and remained in use until the dissolution of the monastery and the suppression of the order in November 1538.

[2] For a broad problematisation, SANGERS, Willem, De oudste constituties der Kruisherenorde, in: Miscellanea historica in honorem Leonis van der Essen, Brussels – Paris 1947, pp. 315–327; PASCH, A. van de, De tekst van de constituties der Kruisheren van 1248, in: Bulletin de la Commission royale d'histoire. Académie royale de Belgique 117, 1952, pp. 1–9; ROOIJEN, Henri van, Les origines des Croisiers, in: Bulletin de la Société d'Art et d'Histoire du diocèse de Liège 42, 1961, pp. 87–113.

[3] BECK, Egerton, The Order of the Holy Cross (Crutched Friars) in England, in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 3.7, 1913, pp. 191–208; HAYDEN, Michael, Crutched Friars and Croisiers: The Canons Regular of the Order of the Holy Cross in England and France, Rome 2013, pp. 15–41.

[4] For the establishment of the Crosiers herein, see ibid. p. 73.

The source passage quoted above relates to this Crosier presence on Tower Hill. Dated to 1491, it constitutes an appeal for alms which was printed by Richard Pynson (d. 1529/30) on behalf of the prior, Thomas Whete (fl. 1491), following the destruction of the church by a *sodeyn tempest of fyre*. To encourage donations, the text detailed indulgences which had been granted to the order's benefactors by a succession of popes, archbishops, and bishops including recent forty-day indulgences from the archbishop of Canterbury, John Morton (sed. 1486–1500). These indulgences offered donors admission into a spiritual confraternity, with the opportunity to participate in all the order's masses and prayers, including four saints days on which dirges and requiem masses would be held for the deceased.[5] The document itself served as a proof of donation: by holding the letter, the donor was presumed to have contributed and its return upon their death secured the promised spiritual benefits.[6]

This document's appeal to charity and devotion is particularly noteworthy for the way in which it sought to elicit support for the priory by claiming that the Crosiers had been founded in Jerusalem by the mother of Emperor Constantine I (r. 306–37), Empress Helena (d. 330). This invokes a foundation legend which first appears in the thirteenth-century poem, the *Ad colendam mente pura*, but according to the order's historian, Henricus Russelius (fl. 1635), was also preserved in a number of other medieval texts which he had examined at Huy in the early-seventeenth century. Such texts temporally located these events in the decades after Constantine's victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, and his supposed granting of the *Donatio Constantini* to Pope Sylvester I (r. 314–335) in c. 315.[7] They report how Helena was seized by a longing to see Jerusalem

[5] *Moreover, the sayd Priour and Covent graunten to and to alle tho that to the said entent gyuyth of their charyte to be admitted a brother or suster of the said Religioun and to be partenres of a thousand masses doon in the said place by the yere and of alle other suffrage and prayer doon within the same place. And foure of the yere thayre to Seint Lusies, Seint Markes, day Seint Valentynes, Midsomer day a solempne masse Holy Goost to be doon wythin place for the gode estate and pros of the Brethern and Sustern alyve and on the morowe of the sayd festes a solempne Dirige and Masse of Requiem for them be departed oute of the worlde*: London, British Library, IA.55480. For an overview of indulgences in late-medieval England, see LUNT, William Edward, Financial Relations of the Papacy with England, 1327–1534 (Publications of the Mediaeval Academy of America 74), Cambridge 1962, pp. 525–570, 573–575, 582–593, 595–598.

[6] *and every of the seid Bretheren or Sustern to have this letter duryng his lyf whiche at the day of his decesse shall b retourned to the seyd place and there for the owner thereof to be doon a so lempne dirige and Masse of Requiem*: London, British Library, IA.55480.

[7] For understanding of these events in the medieval period, see for example, FRIED, Johannes, "Donation of Constantine" and "Constitutum Constantini": The Misinterpretation of a Fiction and its Original Meaning (Millennium-Studien 3), Berlin – Boston 2007, particularly pp. 11–34; CANELLA, Tessa, Gli Actus Silvestri tra oriente e occidente. Storia e diffusione di una leggenda costantiniana, in: Costantino I. Enciclopedia

following her study of the bible.[8] However, upon her arrival, she found the city unrecognisable from the time of the apostles: its destruction under the Emperor Hadrian (r. 117–38) had not only erased its physical landmarks but also disrupted its toponymy. Confronted with this rupture between the imagined and the physical city, she determined to search for tangible traces of Christ's presence – most notably, the True Cross. To this end, she summoned a number of the city's most learned Jews to determine which hill had once been known as Calvary, the site of Christ's passion. Following consultation with ancestral records, a Jew named Judas Cyriacus, then revealed the location and led Helena to the relic.[9] The Empress then founded an order of twelve men to guard the cross, and they became known as c*ruciferi*.[10] According to the appeal under discussion, an alternative version of the legend appears to have held that the order later arrived in Rome where it was patronised by Constantine and confirmed by Pope Sylvester.[11]

The appeal of 1491, which treats this narrative as common knowledge, reflects how Huy's network of daughter houses played an influential role in the circulation of the order's foundational myths.[12] These became particularly significant following the collapse of Latin rule in Outremer when religious orders across Europe lost access to the sites, lands, revenues, and spiritual prestige once tied to their holdings in the Holy Land. In their place emerged a more competitive religious economy where diverse institutions vied for alms, patronage, and lay support. Within this landscape, foundation legends emerged as vital instruments of promotion and legitimisation which assured donors that their alms supported an institution of ancient, divinely sanctioned origins. In this case, the appeal reminded the faithful of medieval London that the Crosiers embodied an ancient tradition of collaboration

costantiniana sulla figura e l'immagine dell'imperatore del cosiddetto Editto di Milano 313–2013, ed. Alberto MELLONI et al. (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani 2), Rome 2013, pp. 241–258;

[8] For Helena's visit to Jerusalem between 326–328, Eusebius von Caesarea De vita Constantini – Über das Leben Konstantins, ed. Bruno BLECKMANN, transl. and comm. Horst SCHNEIDER (Fontes Christiani 83), Turnhout 2007, vol. III: c. 41–43, pp. 358–363.

[9] According to a number of traditions that were later co-opted into Crosier historiography, after Helena uncovered the True Cross, Judas Cyriacus converted to Christianity and became bishop of Jerusalem. For an overview, DRAKE, Harold A., Eusebius on the True Cross, in: The Journal of Ecclesiastical History 36, 1985, pp. 1–22.

[10] Heinrich Russelius, Chronicum Cruciferorum sive synopsis memorabilium sacri et canonici ordinis Sanctae Crucis, Cologne 1635, pp. 10–18.

[11] A reference to Constantine's role in the foundation is made in: Giacomo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo, Supplementum Chronicarum, Venice 1483, repr. 1513, f. 228^{r}.

[12] According to John Weever (d. 1632), there was some debate about the origins of the English Crosiers with some holding that Pope Cletus (sed. ca. 80–92) had founded the order: John Weever, Ancient Funerall Monuments within the United Monarchie of Great Britain, Ireland, and the Islands adjacent, with the dissolued Monasteries therein contained, London 1631, pp. 141–142.

between secular and religious power. They could claim not only the historical patronage of the imperial and papal figures who had driven the Christianisation of the fourth-century Roman world, but also a geographical origin in two of Christendom's most sacred centres: Jerusalem and Rome.

The indulgence in question remained unsold, as evidenced by the gap in the text where a scribe would have inserted the purchaser's name.[13] However, that the brethren believed this appeal would be successful can also say much concerning the interplay between these narratives and the devotional and political culture of late fifteenth-century England. By this period, direct English military participation in crusading had largely ceased. However, popular enthusiasm for the crusading ideal endured, sustained by liturgical appeals to recover the Holy Land alongside the papacy's continued sale of indulgences for campaigns against the encroaching Ottoman Empire.[14] In this context, benefactors were not merely asked to fund a local religious institution, but rather offered an alternative means to partake in the defence and sanctification of both Christendom and its most sacred city through local almsgiving. The appeal presented the priory as a physical landmark which joined the banks of the Thames to the shores of the eastern Mediterranean, a connection which had been legitimised by Rome itself. In doing so, it encouraged potential donors to secure a place for themselves within this sacred geography and enter into a communion with Jerusalem in both life and death – an act of piety which allowed them to reach the Holy City without ever having left the streets of London.

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[13] For the printing of indulgences, SWANSON, Robert N., Crusade administration in fifteenth-century England: regulations for the distribution of indulgences in 1489, in: Historical Research 84.223, 2011, pp. 183–188.

[14] TYREMAN, Christopher, England and the Crusades. 1095–1588, Chicago 1988, pp. 302–323; BORCHARDT, Karl, Late Medieval Indulgences for the Hospitallers and the Teutonic Order, in: Ablasskampagnen des Spätmittelalters. Luthers Thesen von 1517 im Kontext, ed. Andreas REHBERG (Bibliothek des Deutschen Historischen Instituts in Rom 132), Berlin – Boston 2017, pp. 195–218.

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