



## The True Cross: Chaucer, Calvin, and the Relic Mongers

**A**lthough there is little justification in either the Old or the New Testament to support what would become a cult of relics in early Christianity, such a practice did develop. The earliest veneration of Christian relics can be traced to about CE 156 when Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was martyred and his burned remains were gathered for veneration. In time, the distribution and veneration of packets of dust and tiny fragments of bone or cloth, and the like—associated with martyrs and saints—became common. At about CE 400, St. Augustine deplored the excesses and outright fraud of the relic business, disparaging “hypocrites in the garb of monks for hawking about the limbs of martyrs,” adding skeptically, “if indeed of martyrs” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1978, s.v. “Relics”).

Among other, later, critics was Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340–1400), whose great unfinished work *The Canterbury Tales* contains a satirical attack on relic mongering. An even more scathing condemnation comes from John Calvin (1509–1564), the Protestant reformer, whose *Treatise on Relics* is a surprisingly modern look at the Roman Catholic Church’s veneration of relics. Both Chaucer and Calvin weighed in on those most quintessentially Christian relics, fragments of the reputed Holy Cross itself. Here is a summary of their views, supplemented by my own investigations and research on the cross,

which according to legend was discovered in the fourth century by St. Helena.

### Chaucer’s ‘Pardoner’s Tale’

*The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1386–1400) is Geoffrey Chaucer’s fictional classic compilation of stories told by traveling pilgrims, including the host of the Tabard Inn in Southwark, England, from whence said Pilgrims set out, wending their way to Canterbury Cathedral. “The Pardoner’s Tale” satirizes phony relics in a classic of skepticism worthy of a brief retrospective here. The Pardoner—one who sells the church’s forgiveness of sins—is a pre-tentious fellow, as hinted in the opening lines (in quaint Middle English):

‘Lordynges,’ quod he, in chirches  
whan I preche,  
I peyne me to han an hauteyn  
speche,  
And ryng it out as round as gooth  
a belle,  
For I kan al by rote that I telle.  
My theme is alwey oon, and ever  
was—  
“*Radix malorum est cupiditas.*”

That is, as I translate it (and all that follows) into modern English:

“My Lords,” said he, “in churches  
when I preach,  
I do take pains to have a haughty  
speech,  
And ring it out as roundly as a bell,  
For I know by rote all that I tell.  
My theme’s to be the same and al-  
ways will

That ‘Greed is at the root of all evil.’”

But the Pardoner is merely a hypocrite. First, he displays his letters of approval signed by the Pope. Then he brings out his reliquaries, with bits of cloth and other alleged relics, including the shoulder bone of a sheep, and declares:

“If when this bone be washed in any  
well,  
If cow, or calf, or sheep, or ox  
should swell  
From eaten worm, or by a snake’s  
been stung,  
Take water of that well and wash its  
tongue,  
And it is healed forthwith; and fur-  
thermore,  
Of poxes and of scabs and every  
sore  
Shall every sheep be healed, that of  
this well  
Drinks a draft; take heed of what I  
tell.”

He adds that the relic-treated water will cause farm animals to multiply and will put an end to all human jealousy, including distrust of a wife’s faithfulness—even if she has lain with two or three priests! Of another ruse, he admits,

“By this trick I’ve won, year by year,  
A hundred marks since I was Par-  
doner.  
I stand as if a cleric in my pulpit,  
And when the common people  
down do sit,  
I preach, so as you’ve heard me say  
before,  
And even tell a hundred falsehoods  
more.”

Acknowledging his hypocrisy, he states:

“Thus can I preach against the self-  
same vice  
Which I do use, and that is avarice.  
But, though I too am guilty of that  
sin,  
Yet can I make other folk to turn  
From avarice, and hurry to repent.  
But that is not my principal intent.”

The Pardoner then goes on to tell his tale. (It features three young rogues who set out on a drunken quest to slay evil Death. An old man directs them to a spot where they instead discover a treasure of gold coins. Unfortunately they end up killing each other out of avarice and so indeed find death.)

Finished with his morality tale, the Pardoner makes a direct pitch to his host, who rails against the fraudulent relics while indicating his own belief in the relic of the True Cross. The Pardoner begins the exchange:

“Come forth, sir host, and offer first  
then,  
And you shall kiss the relics every  
one,  
Yes, for fourpence! Unbuckle now  
your purse.”

“Nay, nay,” said he, “then I’d have  
Christ’s curse!  
It shall not be, however you beseech  
me.  
You would have me kiss your old  
breeches,  
And swear they were a relic of a  
saint,  
Although they’re stained with your  
own fundament!  
But by the cross which Saint He-  
lena found,  
I’d like to have your bollocks in my  
hand  
Instead of relics or reliquarium;  
Let’s cut them off, I’ll help to carry  
them;  
They shall be enshrined within a  
hog’s turd.”

This pardoner answered not a  
word. . . .

(The Knight helps make peace between the two men, whereupon the pilgrims “rode forth on their way.”)

Now, Chaucer’s own view of the True Cross is unstated, but having it endorsed by his central character, a good

Christian and a man of seeming integrity, suggests that Chaucer accepts the relic allegedly found by St. Helena as authentic. Nevertheless, if he does not condemn all relics outright, Chaucer does identify and disparage fraudulent relic practices. At the time when he was writing, this was a bold stance for a writer to take. Reformist John Calvin, however, writing a century and a half later, took the matter several steps further.

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Calvin had much to say about the pieces of the alleged True Cross—the location of which was supposed to have been miraculously revealed to St. Helena in CE 326. Calvin suggested that “if we were to collect all these pieces of the True Cross exhibited in various parts, they would form a whole ship’s cargo.” He also said that there were more relics of it “than three hundred men could



Figure 1. The *Titulus Crucis*, allegedly the placard on Jesus’s cross as mentioned in the gospels, has now been radiocarbon tested. (Drawing by Joe Nickell)

### Calvin on Relics

John Calvin’s condemnation of relics is sweeping. In his *Treatise on Relics* (1543), he observes that “the desire for relics is never without superstition, and what is worse, it is usually the parent of idolatry” (Calvin 1543, 218). He is unrelenting in his withering look at relics—from the reputed Holy Blood, “exhibited in more than a hundred places” (226), to the many bogus Holy Shrouds (including today’s controversial one, which was kept at Nice in Calvin’s time; it wasn’t trans-

ferred to Turin until 1578 [Nickell 2009, 40]). Calvin specifically refers to the alleged fragment known as the *Titulus Crucis* (cross title board). Bearing the inscription “This is the King of the Jews,” the *Titulus*—with text in Greek, Latin,

carry!” adding: “As an explanation of this, [the relic mongers] have invented the tale, that whatever quantity of wood may be cut off this true cross, its size never decreases. This is, however, such a clumsy and silly imposture, that the most superstitious may see through it” (233).

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**Figure 2.** Purportedly, the True Cross, “discovered” in the fourth century, could replenish itself miraculously—no matter how many pieces like these, mounted in a cross reliquary in Genoa, were removed. [Photograph by Joe Nickell]

and Hebrew—was ordered by Pilate to be placed on the cross (Luke 23:38). Two churches, Calvin delights in observing, lay claim to this relic. Actually, Helena supposedly divided the *Titulus* into three pieces, only one of which now remains—kept, as Calvin noted (234), in Rome’s Church of the Holy Cross.

Modern science has validated Calvin’s skepticism of the *Titulus*. First, the artifact contains a number of anachronisms and other problematic elements that indicate it is a probable forgery (Nickell 2004). For example, although the Hebrew (or Aramaic) letters are correctly written from right to left, so—incorrectly—are the Greek

and Latin lines. Based on my research on the history of writing, as soon as I saw this error (See my drawing, figure 1), I thought it a *prima facie* indication of spuriousness. (See my *Pen, Ink, and Evidence* [Nickell 1990].)

Another paleographic error is found in the Greek line. Although it is written in mirror-image fashion from right to left, one letter—the *z*—is not reversed. This further emphasizes the problematic nature of the writing and suggests that the writer may not have been familiar with the ancient languages. Unless we accept the rationalizations of the *Titulus*’s defenders (Thiede and d’Ancona 2000, 96–100), spelling errors also

cast doubt on the inscription. Another doubtful feature is the letters having not just been painted but first incised into the wood—a seemingly gratuitous enhancement—whereas one would instead expect a hastily prepared placard intended to be used quickly and then discarded.

Indeed, such suspicions are confirmed via radiocarbon dating. A sample of the walnut wood (*Juglans regia*) was taken from the back of the slab, cleaned to remove any contamination, and then subjected to the carbon-dating process. Control samples of varying ages were also included to confirm the accuracy of the process. The tests on the *Titulus* revealed that it was made between CE 980 and 1146 (Bells and Azzi 2002)—a date range incompatible with its alleged first-century origin, but consistent with the period (1144–1145) when the artifact was apparently acquired (Nickell 2007, 86–90).

### The Fragments

Over the years I have encountered pieces of the alleged True Cross (figure 2), together with the pious legends of their acquisition. In my own collection are a pilgrim’s token of the True Cross (reputedly made in the seventh century by mixing clay with some ash from a burned piece of the cross) and a small bronze Byzantine cross of about the same time period (Nickell 2007, 79, 93). The latter was a legacy of Constantine the Great (274–337), who made Christianity the Roman Empire’s official religion after having a miraculous vision of a flaming cross in the sky—a vision, as doubtful as it is, of late vintage (Nickell 2007, 77–79).

It is another reputed vision—that of Constantine’s mother, Queen Helena (later St. Helena)—to which is attributed the finding of the True Cross. In 326, nearly three centuries after the crucifixion, Helena went to Jerusalem where she allegedly discovered the site of the cross’s concealment, supposedly with divine inspiration: either by heavenly signs, dreams, or the guidance of a

Jew named Judas. In fact, she supposedly located, beneath rubble, three crosses—supposedly of Jesus and the two thieves crucified with him (Matthew 27:38)—but was unable to distinguish which was Jesus’s own. Each cross was then tested on a mortally ill woman, and one—according to the fanciful legend—miraculously healed her, thus proving it was the *Vera Crux*, the True Cross.

Supposedly a portion of the cross was given to Constantine, while another was taken to Rome. The main portion remained in the custody of successive bishops of Jerusalem; it was captured by Persious in 614 but then victoriously returned in 627. Finally, in 1187 it was lost forever, after crusading Franks occupied Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, alleged fragments of the True Cross and Roman nails from the crucifixion proliferated. As early as the mid-fourth century, St. Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–386) wrote that “already the whole world is filled with fragments of the wood of the Cross.” From the fifth century on, a “cult of the Cross” developed and churches were erected in the True Cross’s name. In a letter, St. Paulinus of Nola (353–431) dared to explain (and Calvin would later satirize, as we have seen) the claim that, regardless of how many pieces were taken from the cross, it never diminished in size—a “fact” that has been compared with Jesus’s miracle of the multiplying loaves and fishes (Cruz 1984, 39).

In Turin in 2004, I was able to view a purported piece of the True Cross, set in a cruciform reliquary (along with a purported relic of the Holy Blood). The lighted reliquary is the focal point of a relic chapel—the crypt of the Church of Maria Ausiliatrice—which contains a fabulous collection of some five thousand relics of saints, exhibited in seemingly endless panels and display cases along the walls. Included are relics alleged to be from Mary Magdalene and, more credibly, St. Francis of Assisi.

In 2009 in Genoa I saw no fewer

than four pieces of the “True Cross” arrayed in an elaborate reliquary cross (figure 2). The fragments were specifically claimed to be from the True Cross—or so “tradition has it.” (Translation: “This is only a handed-down tale.”) Known as *Croce degli Zaccaria* (or “cross of the Zaccaria”), it was formerly owned by a family of that name, who were among the major merchant traders of the eastern Mediterranean when Genoa was at its commercial and political peak. The reliquary was reportedly first commissioned in the ninth century, then remade in its present form (again see figure 2) between 1260 and 1283—a gilt and bejeweled cruciform artifact now displayed in the Museum of the Treasury of the Cathedral of San Lorenzo (St. Lawrence) of Genoa (Marica 2007, 6; “Museum,” n.d.).

Again, the lack of any credible provenance (its traceability to some known point)—together with the incredible proliferation of such fragments and even the suspicious neatness of these four pieces of the “True Cross”—makes the *Croce degli Zaccaria* a piece to be entirely skeptical of, not revered.

### Conclusion

There is no credible evidence that Helena, or anyone, found Jesus’s cross (with or without accompanying crosses of the two thieves) in the fourth century—or at any other time for that matter. The provenance is laughable. Even more so is the absurd tale of its miraculousness: its infinite ability to restore itself, no matter how many pieces were taken from it.

The proliferating pieces of the True Cross have been rivaled for outlandishness by many other bogus relics—such as over forty shrouds of Jesus and multiple corpses of Mary Magdalene (Nickell 2007, 40, 116). Geoffrey Chaucer and John Calvin were justifiably critical of relic hucksterism in their respective times, and we—with our modern scientific means of analysis, such as radiocarbon dating—must be no less so. ■

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