



Review Essay

True Cross for Sale

Selling Jerusalem: Relics, Replicas, Theme Parks

Annabel Jane Wharton, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Penny Johnson

Some thirty years after the sack of Constantinople by the armies of the Fourth Crusade,¹ in 1237, the second (and last) Crusader King of Byzantium, Baldwin II, facing a mountain of debt, pawned the great Constantinopolitan relic of the True Cross. Some nine hundred years later, in 2002, yet another relic of the True Cross, along with a fragment of the Crown of Thorns, was auctioned on E-bay – its “authentication” dated to 1859, and its main selling point the silver reliquary in which it was placed.

Jerusalem, as art historian Annabel Jane Wharton observes, has been a “productive source of sacred debris” (p. 45) for pilgrims in particular and for the West in general since Queen Helena of Constantinople began to rummage through the city in the fourth century. Wharton’s well-illustrated and attractively written

volume, *Selling Jerusalem*, offers the reader both descriptive pleasures and analytical insights in contemplating the trajectory of Jerusalem and its holy fragments from fourth-century seekers to the contemporary Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida. Over this long span, there is perhaps something enduring in human behavior—in one fourth century account, we recognize the perennial desire of travelers to chip a bit off a monument to take home when the writer describes a wayward pilgrim who takes a bite of the Holy Cross. (p. 27)

Wharton's subject is the less literal consumption of the sacred debris of Jerusalem and her analytical project is ambitious: she aims to relate changes in the circulation of Jerusalem and its sacred fragments to major shifts in Western economies. Returning to the two transactions of the True Cross, King Baldwin's pawning of a relic of the True Cross stands at the beginning of the transformation of sacred relics from gifts to economic goods. In the Ebay auction, as Wharton observes, the True Cross is entirely eroded as a relic and its value rests mainly in its silver packaging. In her words, "the object gives up something when it enters the modern market." (p. 47)

Given the vast sweep of history she covers, Wharton's argument, which traces this movement from sacred relic to price-tagged commodities, is necessarily schematic. We move from relics (gift and barter) to replicas (monetization and primitive accumulation) to reproductions (capitalism) – and finally, in our age, to spectacle (late capitalism and globalization) (p. 235) In this process, both money and representations of Jerusalem become increasingly less material and more illusionary. If these correspondences between economic stages and transformations in art objects is perhaps too reminiscent of the worn base-superstructure paradigm, Wharton's rich historical and aesthetic descriptions of "selling Jerusalem" both speak to her argument and complicate it.

Thus, in the early Middle Ages, when law and custom forbade the traffic and sale of "the relics of a martyr," (p. 28) and money was in limited supply and often seen as tainted, relics were gifted but the exchange was frequently fraught with political power. Fragments of the True Cross may have "resisted commodification" (p. 45) but certainly functioned as displays of power in diplomatic exchanges. Indeed, Jerusalem's relics seem to have been very skillfully deployed by church officials in the Holy City to sell Jerusalem as a privileged church site. Saint Cyril, and later Juvenal in the early fifth century, tirelessly promoted—indeed arguably created – the cult of the True Cross to advance the status of the city and its church hierarchy. Wharton notes:

Jesus's historical presence in the city, rendered immediate in the form of relics, persuaded church officials to recognize an otherwise unimportant provincial town as one of the great patriarchates in the formidable ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Roman Empire." (p. 31)

Sacred Spaces: Replicating Jerusalem, Reshaping the West

The transition from a gift to a commodity commencing in the late Middle Age was protracted, not the least because of problematic place of money, exemplified in the extended debate on usury. Although she does not make the point directly, Wharton's analysis suggests the Crusades partially solved this long debate on the place and function of money. She is particularly good on the multiple roles of the Knights Templar, a crusading order, (and later the Franciscans) as early bankers², in tandem with their special role as guardians and producers of sacred Jerusalem. The Templars, a militant order operating under strict vows of poverty, mobilized money for the Crusades and in so doing, both built a financial empire, and contributed to economically re-shaping the West. Noting that "it is tempting to claim that what war bonds were to World War II, the Templars were to the Crusades," Wharton observes:

The Crusades stimulated the production of money; increased its fluidity and contributed to the slow erosion of the suspicion that money occasioned.
(p. 67)

Wharton links the economic history of the Crusades, and in particular the role of the Templars, with the many effects of the Crusaders' living encounter with Jerusalem and its sacred spaces. Replicas – particularly of the Holy Sepulchre – began to circulate in Europe during the period of the Crusades, from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, where "devotion to holy fragments was increasingly complemented by a veneration of sacred spaces" (92) Notably, the Knights Templar had their Jerusalem headquarter in the Al Aqsa mosque and Wharton argues that the London Temple,³ founded in London by the Templars during that period, "revisits the arrangements of both of Jerusalem's great sanctuary complexes," the Holy Sepulchre and the Dome of the Rock. Of particular interest is Wharton's observation that the later ruinous fall of the Templars is related not only to their wealth and the envy and anxieties it provoked, but also to their association with the East. The Templars had "embraced the East and made it available to the West," but "in the aftermath of the collapse of the Crusader empire, the Templars' attachment to the East was no longer an asset but a serious liability," (p. 94) and contributed to their downfall as alleged heretics.

Jerusalem on an Italian Hill: Franciscans and Sacred Mountains

Commencing in the late fifteenth century, the somewhat overextended Franciscans, busy with pawn banking in Italy and their hard-won Custody of holy places in Mameluke Jerusalem, took time to found the "sacred mountain" of Varallo, an Italian hill northwest of Milan turned into an intricate built environment over the course of a century. This elaborate replica of the sacred spaces of Jerusalem included the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb of Christ, and the staging of the Crucifixion and other

events of the Passion, through theatre-like chapels with painted tableaux sometimes accompanied by life-size sculptures. Wharton reads Varallo, and other *sacre monti*, as “late medieval Jerusalem as interpreted by Franciscan piety” (p. 105).

Looking at Wharton’s well-chosen illustrations of Varallo and the glorious baroque Crucifixion altarpiece (from the late 16th century), the complex historical, economic and aesthetic forces that produced this replica of Jerusalem cannot be completely contained within the framework of her argument. For example, her point that the art and architecture of the sacred mountain responds to the “hybridity of the Franciscan medieval experience of Jerusalem” is surely valid. But the same art and architecture is also surely shaped by the course of Italian painting and architecture and the moment of baroque illusion.

Wharton also sees the production of sacred mountains as “expressions of a Franciscan commitment to redistributing increased material and spiritual resources ... to a broader segment of the population,” (p. 124): pilgrims could experience sacred Jerusalem on an Italian hill rather than travelling there. Interestingly, this commitment included Franciscan involvement in pawn broking, termed, in a curious parallel, *monte di pieta*, (Mons – mountain or rock – was traditionally associated with money as well as landscape). These money mountains of piety provided both money and chits remitting their possessors from time in purgatory.⁴ The fact that the same amount of indulgences were dispensed to pilgrims to sacred mountains in Italy as to pilgrims who made the journey to Jerusalem itself is also surely relevant. Yet other historical forces and conflicts are also embodied in Varallo (and other sacred mountains).

Consider the function of the life-size sculptures in Varallo. Wharton perceptively contrasts them with a late twentieth-century moulded-from-life sculpture (*Museum Guard* by Duane Hanson) which startles the viewer, but does not “move its observer... to a different historical moment, or to an exotic or remote location.” (p. 103) But these sculptures also are a response to a raging contemporary conflict. Such “lifelike” sculptures as those in Varallo, as Peter Campbell points out⁵, were mandated by the Council of Trent (1563) in a series of decrees designed to strengthen the Catholic Church to challenge the Protestant Reformation then sweeping Europe. This is not to say that Wharton does not acknowledge that the “new visual strategy of the Counter-Reformation,” re-shaped Varallo in the late sixteenth century. (p. 139) However, the seminal events of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, crucial to many of the subjects of her study, weave in and out of the narrative rather than having a central analytical position.

Pilgrims into Tourists?

In Jerusalem itself, Franciscan guides were transforming pilgrimage as well as struggling to maintain their precarious hold on the city. Contrasting the Franciscan-led pilgrims of the fifteenth century with earlier accounts by pilgrims, Wharton opines:

Pilgrims no longer traveled independently or in small groups. Rather, they booked package tours... Within Palestine, the Franciscans had become the organizing agents – the Thomas Cook and Sons – of pilgrimage... By the fifteenth century, pilgrimage had already taken on some of the practical aspects of tourism, if not its commercial secularism.” (p. 118)

Wharton also notes that pilgrims could ask for the day’s version of first-class, business or tourist accommodation. Indeed, another pleasure of this volume is in the unexpected, but resonant, linkages Wharton finds between, for example, the Franciscan creation of the iconic fourteen Stations of the Cross in the late seventeenth century, and a London tourist bus tour. To wit:

The experience of the city was codified and ordered... Like the itinerary of a London tour bus, the Franciscan Way of the Cross rescued the Western visitor from the discomfiting complications of the alien urban experience. (p. 139)

This “schematic set of images,” Wharton believes, replaced living Jerusalem. In a similar move, she sees that travel to the Holy City, “revised to meet expectations of the Western Stations of the Cross, was become ever more like tourism.” (p. 143) In so doing, she quite acutely locates one of the entry points to capitalist modernity.

Re-producing Jerusalem: Text, Landscape, Spectacle

Although she has much to say of interest in later periods of capitalist modernity and then globalization, Wharton’s argument is perhaps at its most original in the pre-modern and early modern period. This is partly because of her scrupulous attention to the objects discussed and their intrinsic interest, and partly because this period is less familiar territory for an analytical approach that brings to bear economy, art history, and wide-ranging historical considerations. Her treatment of the age of capital and globalization brings less surprises; inevitably, if indirectly, it echoes other writers, from Walter Benjamin’s loss of “aura” for art in the age of mechanical reproduction, to Marx on capitalist commodification to a whole slew of romantic and Marxist writers mourning the desolation of industrial and late capitalism. Nonetheless, she offers interesting, well-chosen and close examinations of objects as diverse as nineteenth century panoramas of Jerusalem, the lithographs of the “entrepreneurial” David Roberts with their “ostensible objectivity” (p. 159), and a long-forgotten novel published in 1892, *Three Vassar Girls in the Holy Land*, which foregrounds not one, but two conversions of Jews to Christianity (a father and daughter) through travel to the Holy Land, Bible in hand. As with other nineteenth century travelers, “the Bible mapped the Holy Land” and Jerusalem was indecipherable without it. Wharton comments that the reverse is also true:

In the nineteenth century, the landscape without the text remained unreadable for the Christian reader. More remarkably...the text without the landscape also became inadequate.

Storrs and the Antiquing of Jerusalem

When we finally arrive in the twentieth century and the British Mandate, we find not cultural reproductions of Jerusalem but the reproducing of the city by British Mandate officials, as a spectacle, whereby “Jerusalem was reworked to conform to a Western imaginary” (p. 213) Under the command of the governor of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs (who also ran a fund-raising NGO, the Pro-Jerusalem Society), the Ottoman clock tower inside Jaffa Gate and other signals of emerging modernity were destroyed to make way for the antiquing of Jerusalem. Noting Storrs’ emphatic rejection of a plan for a Bethlehem-Jerusalem tram, Wharton says he “sought to produce ancient Jerusalem, not only by reconstructing what has been, but also by eliminating that which might become.” (p. 213) While the schemes of current Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat (and previous mayor Olmert) for tower blocks and a “Tuscany-like” theme park on the ruins of Palestinian Silwan might induce some Storrs nostalgia, Wharton reminds us of the colonial imprint on the city.

Wharton closes her book with a consideration of the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida as well as other modern spectacles such as Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ*. In Orlando’s Holy Land theme park, the “archaeological” model of Herod’s Jerusalem, she writes,

Empties the city of the debris of those religions that, for both Jewish and Christian extremists got it wrong—Byzantine Orthodox, Roman Catholicism, and most obviously, Islam... For extremists, the model functions also as a site of radical speculation about a city without a Muslim presence. (p. 229).

It is worth considering if this emptying of history through selective spectacle might return us to the question of sacred relics.

Return of the Relic?

Although Wharton allows that “erasure is not a simple act,” (p. 72), her argument is linear and does not consider the possibilities of returns or re-configurations of older forms such as the relic. She states clearly that “the forms by which Jerusalem has been appropriated in the West have shifted sequentially.” (p. 134) This is an ambitious and fascinating correlation which can be fruitfully extended to the transitions explored in this volume of *Jerusalem Quarterly* from pilgrims to travelers to tourists.

However, while she is persuasive in the overall movement, she does not accommodate the returns and re-configurations of the past that are characteristic of nationalism in general, and the Zionist movement in particular in relation to Jerusalem. One can argue, for example, that sacred relics – which as Wharton aptly observes collapse time and are a “sign of previous power, real or imagined” (p. 9) – have been reconfigured in present-day Jerusalem as “national relics” to borrow a phrase from Sigmund Freud. In a 1930 letter to Dr. Chaim Koffler of the Jewish Agency, Freud explained why he refused to sign a letter of protest to British Mandatory authorities, saying:

I can raise no sympathy at all for the misdirected piety which transforms a piece of an Herodian wall into a national relic...⁶

Queen Helena in the fourth century searched the ruins of Jerusalem for her sacred relics – in our time, some rummage through history on a quest that is much more dangerous for the future of the city.

Penny Johnson is an Associate Editor of Jerusalem Quarterly and edited this issue of JQ.

Endnotes

- 1 The Fourth Crusade – which could perhaps best be called the wrong-way crusade – famously took a detour on its way to Jerusalem as the result of a deal struck with the Venetians (who were providing the ships) and attacked, conquered, and looted Byzantine Constantinople. The diminished Crusader/Latin Kingdom ruled by King Baldwin II, who spent most of his reign begging, ended in 1261.
- 2 The Templars were also early landlords who supported their military operations through monetary rents (rather than labor obligations). Wharton notes “The treatment of urban space as a source of income presages modernity.” (p. 67)
- 3 Just to note another economic dimension, an annual visit to the London Temple, dedicated in 1185 by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, was worth sixty indulgences.
- 4 Wharton also argues that Franciscan charity was embedded in a larger project that included the isolation or expulsion of the Jews. Thus pawn broking was promoted as a way a city might rid itself of Jews (p. 124). In Jerusalem the Franciscans successfully lobbied for the exclusion of Jews from Christian holy sites.
- 5 Peter Campbell, “At the National Gallery,” *London Review of Books*, 3 December 2009.
- 6 Quoted in Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (Verso, 2007), p. 48.