A PROCESSIONAL CROSS

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One department of life in which modern and ancient times are joined by a peculiarly close bond is that of religious ceremonial. Thanks to the inherently conservative character of both religion and ceremony we are today—often without realizing it—repeating both the words and the ritual forms of our predecessors of many centuries ago.

The ritual implements and vessels of early Christianity happen to have been preserved in greater number in Syria than in any other one region of the Greco-Roman world. The silver "treasures" and single objects, as they have found their way into collections, have evoked vivid pictures of the religious life of the time. The most famous single piece of this kind is the celebrated Chalice of Antioch, now displayed at The Cloisters as an Early Christian object of the fourth century. It is the earliest known Christian chalice in existence (few scholars today, in the light of recent evidence, believe that there is archaeological probability for an earlier date). The chalice is a splendid example of Syrian silversmith's work.

Other utensils exhibited in various collections—silver chalices, patens, candlesticks, ewers, spoons for the administration of the bread and wine, silver fans, and bronze censers—re-create for us the ancient services in which they were employed exactly as our modern church silver is used, except that the elements of the Eucharist are no longer administered by spoon and ceremonial fans are no longer used, save at St. Peter's in Rome and in the rite of the orthodox churches. Many of these objects are inscribed with the donors' names and with pious phrases and vows; one chalice, for example, is appropriately inscribed "Drink ye all of this." Many of the items from Syria have been dated—so far as such pieces can be dated—in the sixth century. A number of them are said to have been found with the Chalice of Antioch, supposedly in or near Antioch in 1910. These silver objects, which are now a part of the Museum's collections (Main Building), include another chalice, a mirror, three plaques, and a processional cross.

We now have, for the first time in a public collection in this country, a large silver processional cross. It is fitting that this cross, which makes so important an addition to our knowledge of the ancient liturgy, should belong to the great treasure that has already given us such fine specimens of liturgical silver. Crosses must have been carried in religious processions from very early times, though the earliest specific reference to the custom appears to be in a hymn in honor of the Cross by Venantius Fortunatus, the famous religious poet of the sixth century. The only silver crosses from Syria that have thus far been known are small (none over fourteen inches high); some of these are of the type which would stand on an altar, others are of the kind which would be mounted on a short staff to be carried in procession. The use of this kind of cross is illustrated on one of the silver plaques from the Antioch treasure, possibly the cover of a Bible or of some book of liturgical offices, which is probably of about the sixth century. Another of the plaques shows two men supporting a large cross, but it is not clear whether this is a symbolic composition, alluding to the piety of the persons shown, or whether large crosses were carried in processions in this manner.

The cross recently acquired by the Museum is made of thin sheets of silver originally mounted on wood. The wooden core has long since disappeared, and some of the silver has also been lost. The fragments that remain were skillfully mounted by the firm of André in Paris on a new wood core covered with plaster which simulates the texture and appearance of the original metal. The silver covering of the foot of the upright bar has been preserved, and this is dented and battered where the cross has been rested on
Silver processional cross with the Trisagion inscribed on the front (left) and a dedication on the back. Like the silver plaques on the next two pages, this cross was part of the Antioch treasure. Syrian, 6th century. Height 58 1/2 inches. The fragments have been remounted on a new core. Rogers Fund, 1950.
Silver plaque with a saint, possibly Peter, holding a small cross. Syrian, vi century. Fletcher Fund, 1949

to a church by some unnamed donor for the salvation or the repose of the souls of Herodotus and Komitas. On the front is inscribed the Trisagion (thrice holy), “Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us.” This invocation, a very appropriate one to be inscribed on a cross borne at the head of a procession, is famous in the Byzantine liturgy, and it is of the greatest interest to find it on the first processional cross of this type that has come to our knowledge.

The history of the Trisagion begins with an earthquake. Earthquakes, for the Greeks and Romans, were matters of even greater seriousness than they are today. For one thing, important parts of the Greco-Roman world, including Greece, Thrace, Palestine, Syria, and parts of Asia Minor, lay in an “earthquake belt.” All these regions were particularly liable to seismic disturbances, so that earthquakes, with their attendant loss and suffering, were much more common experiences than they are with us. A German scholar has calculated that between 500 B.C. and 1890, Constantinople alone (with its predecessor Byzantium) experienced five hundred and eighty-four earthquakes. Moreover, there was almost complete ignorance of the natural causes of earthquakes. In pagan times they had been regarded as portents of divine wrath, and the Hebrews and Christians came to look upon them as miraculous manifestations of supernatural power, sometimes as dreaded prophetic signs. An earthquake marked one of the most solemn moments in the history of the Hebrews, when Mount Sinai smoked “and the whole mount quaked greatly” as the Law was given to Moses (Exodus 19:18). For the Christians the most portentous earthquake, a truly terrifying manifestation, was that which accompanied the Crucifixion: “Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. Now when the centurion, and they that were with him,
watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:50-54). It is no wonder that earthquakes were looked upon with awe, not merely because they destroyed lives and property but because they were signs of divine anger. The Byzantine chroniclers, as a kind of euphemism, called an earthquake a theomenia, an “anger of God.”

One of the most severe earthquakes of the later Roman Empire is that which visited Constantinople in 437, when Theodosius II was emperor and Saint Proclus was patriarch of the city. There are different accounts of the miraculous manifestation which occurred at this time. One of the best known is that of the Byzantine chronicler Theophanes: “In the time of Proclus, who is now among the saints, great earthquakes occurred in Constantinople for four months, so that the people in fear fled the city, going to the Kamos, which was outside of it; and with the bishop they prayed daily to God. One day, when the earth was rolling like the sea, and all the people were crying the ‘Lord have mercy’ [Kyrie eleison] without ceasing, about the third hour of the day, suddenly, when everybody was looking, by divine power, one of the young boys was lifted into the air, and he heard a divine voice commanding him to tell the bishop and the people to pray thus, saying ‘Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us.’ Proclus, who is now among the saints, accepted this instruction, and the people sang in this way, and the earthquake ceased at once. The blessed Pulcheria and her brother [Theodosius II], rejoicing in the miracle, decreed that this hymn should be sung throughout the world; and from that time all the churches began to sing this hymn to God every day.”

The words have indeed been sung throughout the world since that time, and they are inscribed as a permanent intercession on our processional cross, and may have been inscribed on other such crosses as well. In the Greek services of the Roman church, the Trisagion, carried from Syria to Gaul, became a part of the introductory section of the Mass; and on Good Friday it is said responsively in both Greek and Latin. (The Trisagion is not to be confused with the Tersanctus, which is based on Isaiah 6:3, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”)

The Monophysites of Syria, who denied the existence of the Trinity and maintained the unity of God, produced their own version, “Holy God, holy Mighty One, holy Immortal One, crucified for us, have mercy upon us.” Thus the original words, an invocation of the Trinity, were changed to give the highly controversial implication that God, as one person, was crucified. This Monophysite version is found in the Syrian liturgy, and it also appears, with interpolations, in the Abyssinian and Coptic services. It is interesting to note that the other chalice found with the Antioch Chalice also has an inscription which echoes the Monophysite liturgy of Syria (see the author’s article in the American Journal of Archaeology, LV, 1951, pp. 349-354). Thus in one find, curiously enough, are two
inscribed silver objects, one reflecting eastern orthodoxy and the other a conflicting eastern heresy.

By reason of its construction, in three symmetrical phrases followed by a fourth, the orthodox Trisagion was admirably suited for inscription on crosses and other objects and was soon so used. Some years ago the French archaeologists who were excavating the locality called the Hebdomon (named from its being seven miles outside Istanbul), where the Trisagion was supposed to have been originally revealed, found the fragments of a large and handsome marble cross, evidently designed to stand in the open air, on which the orthodox version was inscribed. On the back is inscribed a dedication by the Emperor Leo I (457-474). This cross, which is now in the museum at Istanbul, was probably placed on the spot at which the divine message was said to have been received. It is curious to note that the phrases of the prayer are inscribed in a different order on the Museum's cross than on the cross from the Hebdomon. In the former, each of the four phrases occupies a separate member of the cross, arranged so that they are read in the order: top, left, right, and bottom. On the stone cross, however, the phrases are read from top to bottom and from left to right corresponding with a spectator's point of view of the order in which a Greek orthodox person makes the sign of the cross.

The cross in the Metropolitan Museum serves, then, to bring back to our imaginations the majesty of the procession, one of the most impressive parts of the Christian ritual. The appearance of the Trisagion on it adds to our growing knowledge of the interests and the motives that governed the choice of phrases placed upon such objects. As one more element of the treasure associated with the Chalice of Antioch it becomes one of the most interesting pieces of Christian liturgical silver thus far recovered.

The inscription on the front of the silver cross (p. 277) reads, top: "Ἀγι[ος Θεός], "Holy God"; left: "Ἀγιὸς Ἱσχὺ[ρός], "holy Mighty One"; right: ["Ἀγιος Θεός] ἐνατός, "holy Immortal One" (the two end letters have been mounted upside down); bottom: ἔλη[έπος] ἡμῶν, "have mercy upon us" (differs on the stone cross but has the same meaning).

Drawing of a marble cross, inscribed with the Trisagion, found near Istanbul. Istanbul Museum