

MIRACLES IN THE HOLY LAND: MIEVEAL PILGRIMS AMONG DEVOTION AND SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION (1330-1630)*

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Abstract

The paper relates to the different interpretation of more or less “miraculous” phenomena in the accounts of pilgrims.

1. This essay discusses miracles and science in the perception of medieval Christian pilgrims, who sometimes used scientific explanations to deny certain events the nature of miracles.

My concern is neither to discuss the concept of science, nor that of miracle, which is linked very closely to the concept of holiness. I'm not even going to take a stand as regards the authenticity of the miracles described: it is well-known that in the mindset of medieval people miracles belonged to everyday life. I intend to show some cases in which pilgrims, or their guides, took a particularly critical view of some miracles.

From the middle of the Fourteenth century, the Friars Minor served as guides for European Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem and in the neighboring places. Contacts with other local figures (translators, traders) were limited and discouraged. Therefore, we can reasonably expect that testimonies after 1350 referred to miracles the pilgrims were aware of because the friars of the Custody of the Holy Land had told them.¹

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¹ Saletti 2016a; Ead. 2016b. About miracles in the Holy Land, see also Ead. 2011; Ead. 2018.

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What is a miracle, for a late medieval Christian of Latin obedience? We can use as a starting point the concise definition of St. Thomas Aquinas: the miracle stands outside the order of nature – although in accordance with it – and is a direct intervention of God. Usual and miraculous events, then, are both manifestations of God's will, and, as such, in harmony with each other to fulfill God's providence.

2. According to an important branch of medieval thought, characterized by the so called *reductio ad unum*, theology is the highest knowledge that man can reach, and it can be achieved only through divine illumination. In the concept of science that Thomas Aquinas proposes, the active intellect is able to know everything that is possible to know naturally, without the need of divine help. However, «all human scientific knowledge is doomed to a radical incompleteness».² The miracle, for the Aquinas, is intended to stimulate a person to believe in God («per aliquos supernaturales effectus, qui miracula dicuntur, in aliquam supernaturalem cognitionem credendorum homo adducitur»)³ The intelligibility of the miracle, therefore, depends on divine help, that allows for the understanding of a supernatural event in order to urge man to believe in the divine.

The point is in which divine interventions the pilgrim should believe, and which not.

In the Holy Land, the pilgrims seek the signs of Jesus' presence: footprints on the rocks or other objects he touched, such as water or plants (the Jordan river, the sycamore tree in Jericho..., for example). In the Holy Land every place came in contact with the Holy Family, the Apostles, the saints, and with the main characters of the Old Testament. Thus, the miracle is the natural dimension of the Holy Land.

What Dierkens writes about the Old Testament, in short, is always valid about the Holy Land: «Le miracle n'existe pas en tant que tel: la Nature en elle-même reflète la volonté ou l'action divine et tout phénomène a priori inexplicable doit être interprété comme message de Dieu».⁴ In fact, in the Holy Land miracles repeat themselves: they are not exceptional events, but a permanent condition of nature, which has been sanctified by Jesus. I will mention only few examples to prove that the repetition of miracles is common in the Holy Land: from the Fourteenth century, the

2 Brock 1994, pp. 71-72, my translation.

3 Thomas de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, II-III, q. 178.

4 Dierkens 1995, p. 12.

field purchased with the thirty pieces of silver is said to dissolve in a few days, miraculously, the bodies buried there.⁵ The Bolognese Varthema visited Damascus in the early Sixteenth century. He recounts that, despite the Moors having walled it up several times, the window through which the apostle Paul was let down in a basket the morning after its walling is miraculously broken, as it was broken by the angel who freed St. Paul.⁶ In the late Sixteenth century, Aquilante Rocchetta states that the stone on which Jesus was sitted while Marta and Mary told him that Lazarus was dead, from which pilgrims continuously detached fragments of stone in a sign of devotion, always remains of the same size.⁷ In the post-Tridentine era the Franciscan Faostino da Toscolano, Guardian of Bethlehem, provides examples of the same type: in Jerusalem, in the house where the birth of the Virgin Mary supposedly took place, women cannot reside, because («it happened several times») they immediately die.⁸ Faostino explains: «It is a clear sign that God does not want the habitation of St. Anne and of her purest daughter the Virgin Mary [...] to be inhabited and soiled with the conversation of dishonest women».⁹

From these miracles emerges a sort of *sympathy of nature*: the stone of Lazarus' tomb and the window of St. Paul must remain eternally in the state in which they were at the time of their contact with the holiness, to demonstrate both the evidence and the timelessness of the salvation message.

Let us recall a consideration of Le Goff that today may seem obvious, but should make us reflect:

5 «Post triduum nihil aliud nisi sola ossa reperiuntur»: Sudheim, *De itinere Terre Sancte* (about 1341), in Deicks 1851, p. 85.

6 «Li Mori più volte l'hanno murata, e la mattina si trova rotta e smurata, come l'angelo la ruppe quando tirò san Paolo fuor di detta finestra»: Ludovico Varthema, *Itinerario* (about 1500-1508), in Milanese 1978-1988, p. 768.

7 «Con tutto che i peregrini sempre ne prendano, tutta via per miracolo del Signore non è diminuita altrimenti»: Aquilante Rocchetta, *Peregrinatione* (1598), in Roma 1996, p. 116.

8 «Non voglio lasciare il raccontar un prodigio di questa santa casa di S. Anna, che li turchi l'hanno in singular veneratione per la concettione di Maria Vergene, nella qual casa ancora tengono, per esperienza più volte fatta, che le loro donne non vi possono habitare, dicendo che subito morono, che però solo due santoni senza donne ivi habitano»: Faostino da Toscolano, *Itinerario di Terra Santa* (1633-1653), in Bianchini 1992, p. 395.

9 «È segno manifesto che Dio non vuole che l'habitatione di S. Anna e sua purissima figliuola Vergene Maria [...] sia habitata e sporcata con la conversatione di donne poco honeste»: *Ibidem*..

«Marc Bloch a montré que le miracle existe à partir du moment où on peut y croire et décline puis disparaît à partir du moment où on ne peut plus y croire». ¹⁰ It's not so easy.

Around Cairo, from the Thirteenth century it was said that during the Flight into Egypt Jesus, at Matariya, would miraculously create the balm plants, which could grow only there because irrigated from a source, which was also created miraculously, by Jesus. Following the devastation and carelessness due to the Mamluk-Ottoman war, the garden stopped producing balm.

Le Goff writes that there comes a time when we can no longer believe in a miracle. In the case of the balm, however, the faithful must continue to believe in the miracle; otherwise, they should disavow the authorities, which for centuries have justified it: the apocryphal gospels, or Jacopo da Varagine, for example. ¹¹ They thus must find an explanation of why the miracle ceased. The friar minor Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, ambassador of Isabella of Castile to Egypt in 1501-1503, provides a strong anti-Jewish reason for the cessation of the miracle.

If the child Jesus made the miracle, it was another child who ended it, a Jew, whose parents had dipped him in the miraculous source: we can read «They say that careless ministers of the Soldan introduced a Jew and his Jewish wife, who professed to be Muslim, into the balm Garden. And in the same source that Jesus had created, they bathed their son and their clothes, in defiance of Jesus; thus the plants dried up». ¹²

10 Le Goff 1983, p. XI.

11 «Balsamum significat beatam virginem Mariam. Est autem balsamum arbor sive frutex duorum cubitorum in quantitate, similis viti in stipite, in foliis vero similis rutæ. Olim autem in vineis Engaddi nascebatur, sed facta captivitate Iudeorum translate sunt ille plante in Egyptum, et in quodam campo plantate ubi sunt septem fontes. In uno quoque fontium beata virgo Maria, dum in Egyptum fugeret, dicitur puerum balneasse»: Jacobus de Voragine, *Laudes beatae Mariae Virginis*, Hamburg, Johann and Thomas Borchard, 14 Nov. 1491 (ISTC n. ij00185000), c. c iir.

12 «Cautum fuit semper priscorum regum soldanorum decreto, ne Iudaicae pervicaciae balsametum quisquam ingrederetur: né quid ignominiosum in loci numen perpetrarent: cum in eo fonte parvuli Iesu, quo tempore in Aegypto latitavit, pannos quibus involvebatur, Maria virgo laverit: ubique arbusta germinabant, ibi soli siccandos exposuerit. Beatam nanque virginem Mauri observant, eiusque nomen religiosissime venerantur. Incautos igitur ad horti custodiam soldani oconomos, Iudaeum, qui se Maurum profitebatur, admisisse inquit: Iudaeamque uxorem suam quam intromisit, parvulum utriusque filium, linteaque infantuli, in opprobrium loci Christi, in ipso fonte immersisse, ac lintea ibidem siccanda protendisse, volunt»: Petri Martyris ab Angleria Mediolanensis, *De*

Sometimes, however, put simply, there is no more memory of the miracle, as in the case of the grave of St. Pelagia, on the Mount of Olives. The miracle is that those who are in mortal sin cannot enter the crypt. Attested from the Thirteenth century, already in the Fifteenth century almost no pilgrim remembers it anymore. This probably happened because the building had become a mosque, and, as a rule, Christians were not allowed to access it, yet every day they could see the entrance therein, unopposed, of the Muslims (I have not encountered so far any text that tried to justify the cessation of this miracle).

3. Rarely, however, science is called into question to deny the miraculous nature of a phenomenon. By way of example, I describe here 5 miracles: one belongs to Islam, two to Eastern Christians, and two to Latin Christians.

Francesco Suriano, twice Custos of the Holy Land in late Fifteenth and at the beginning of the Sixteenth century, in his *Trattatello di Terra Santa* derides and deplores the belief on the part of the Muslims, that the crazy are saints. The mad, he writes, claims to cast out demons with powerful beatings, and Muslims not only do not try to escape this violent treatment, but they also consider themselves fortunate to endure it.

When Francesco (young and not yet a friar) lived in Alexandria, a Venetian merchant was awfully beaten. He then received the warmest congratulations from local merchants «so that [...] he was sorrier for the blindness of those dogs than for the pain that he suffered». Francesco himself often risked being attacked by the “saint” and he obtained from the authorities, along with other Christians, the permission to move around the city armed with a stick in order to defend himself.

Francesco concludes, with a clearly mocking tone, that thanks to his stick he himself performed several miracles to the Muslim saint: a metaphor to say he had clubbed him.¹³ The Islamic miracle, in Suriano’s

rebus oceanicis et nouo orbe, decades tres, item eiusdem De Babylonica legatione, libri 3, Coloniae, apud Geruinum Calenium & haeredes Quentelius, 1574, p. 437.

13 «Vidi uno *Santum* de Mori che havia fama de scazar li Demonii in questa città, et qual havia soto di se alquanti discipoli. E per una curiosità essendo io zovinetto, me delectava veder scazar questi Demonii, in fra li quali tre ne vidi in pocco tempo al lor modo liberati. Lo primo fo miser Iusto Moresini, gentilomo e mercante venitiano; el qual *Santum* passandoli davanti cum molti altri mercanti e zoveni, li dete tamante la bastonata e sì terribile, che lo fece cader in terra [...]. Li saraceni adunque, li quali se ritrovarono al facto, de presente se rallegavano cum lui de tanto beneficio che Dio li havea facto quel giorno per esser stato liberato dal homo sancto dalla potentia del Demonio [...], per modo che più li despiaque ad

opinion, not only has nothing supernatural, but is also a behavior without reason, which only the credulity of infidels can justify. The *Trattatello*, written as a dialogue between Francesco and a Clare nun, concludes the argument with a reflection by the latter. Infidels show, by continuing not to recognize the truth of the Christian faith, that they are either deprived of rationality or in bad faith. But the episode of the beating is so absurd as to make the nun incline towards their bad faith.

Miracles of other Christian faiths have also been sharply criticized, and considered false: in Jerusalem, the best known is certainly that of the Holy Fire, which continues to be celebrated today. According to the orthodox Christians, on Holy Saturday the Holy Spirit would send the Holy fire from heaven to the Holy Sepulcher, lighting all the lamps inside it.

The fiercest critics of the miracle are the Friars Minor. They must share (and contend) the Holy Sepulcher with other confessions, which they deemed heretical: not surprisingly, the section of the treatise of Francesco Suriano dedicated to the Greek Orthodox is called: «the cursed Greeks», where he states that «they are troublesome to God». Suriano is of the opinion that once the miracle really did occur; but the sins of the Greek scismatics caused the miracle to cease.¹⁴ Nevertheless, all the other Christian confessions pretend the miracle happens («all the other nations, except us friars, feign this falsehood to be true»).

In addition to Suriano, I quote two other Franciscans that express the concept very clearly: Paulus Walther and Faostino da Toscolano. For them, the liturgy of the Holy Fire desecrates the Holy Sepulcher, and would be cause for derision by Muslims, amused by the credulity of the Christians. According to the friars, Greeks, for personal gain, knowingly commit fraud against both the ingenuity and the spiritual salvation of the faithful:

miser Iusto predicto la ciechità de quelli cani che lo male che lui patete. ... E io dubitando insiema cum molti altri zovani havemo licentia da l'armiraglio de deffenderce contra lui; et ogni volta che per necessità bisognava passar dove lui dimorava, portavamo bastoni per scazarli li mali spiriti da dosso, et far anche nui de li myracoli del paese.

Sora [the Nun]: Grande è la cechità de quelli populi alle cosse che hai narrate, a mio iuditio et oltra ogni senso humano: o parmi che peccano per malitia e non per ignorantia»: Francesco Suriano, *Trattatello di Terra Santa* (1514 second redaction), in Golubovich 1900, pp. 211.

14 «Non però descende lo predicto foco, secondo la verità [...] per ben che tute le altre natione excepto nui frati fingono questa falsità esser vera. La privatione de la qual gratia existimo che sia per li peccati et heresie de quelle natione»: Ivi, p. 30.

Et in ipso Sabatho sancto circa horam duodecimam aperitur a paganis Sanctum Sepulchrum. Tunc intrant tres episcopi [...], unus de Grecis, unus de Armenis, et unus de Abassinis, et sunt ibi inclusi per tempus unius Placebo. Tunc extendunt per foramina candelas accensas, et dicunt, quod ille ignis sit missus de celo. Sola natio Catholicorum [...] non intromittunt se de illo errore [...]. Et dicitur pro vero, quod portant occulte ignem intus. Et dixerunt notabiles Mauri ad nostros fratres, quod sit mentitum, et deludunt homines. Ipsi vero pagani recipiunt annuatim magnam pecuniam, et defendunt eos, et derident Christianos, qui talia credunt, et dicunt, si esset verum, ipsi etiam vellent fieri Christiani, sed cum sit mendacium, nunquam volunt converti.¹⁵

Mimicking the difficulties of the Greeks to express themselves in Italian, Faostino reports the cynical saying that a monk apparently told him in a broken Italian: «if not do fire, pilgrims do not come, and we starve to death».¹⁶

The holy fire is a very important miracle, because it is a part of the foundation of the Orthodox identity. Due to space constraints, I will not dwell with this topic here.

Faostino also describes another miracle, a little-known one, recognized as such by unspecified ‘schismatics’. This was the belief that, by placing an ear on a certain stone inside the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher, people would hear the continuous sound produced by the hammer that straightened the nails of the Holy Cross right on that stone.¹⁷

15 Paulus Walther, *Itinerarium* (1482-1484), in Sollweck 1892, p. 143.

16 «Tenendo per certo la plebaia che scenda miracolosamente dal cielo, come alcuni autori affermano anticamente nella primitiva Chiesa faceva, che, congregati tutti nel tempio della Resurrettione [...] con longhe et efficaci preghiere ottenevano il divin fuoco [...]. Ben che li capi o superiori di dette nationi sappiano benissimo che è fintione, dalla quale non vogliono desistere per avaritia, che cessando detto fuoco, dicono cessarebbono le visite de’ loro pellegrini. Et alcuni che malamente parlano italiano portano questo verso: “Si fuoco non fare pellegrini non venire e noi di fame morire”»: Faostino da Toscolano, *Itinerario* (1633-1653), in Bianchini 1992, p. 430.

17 «Dal Santissimo Sepolcro partendosi [...] verso la cappella dell’Apparitione [...] si trova una rotonda pietra [...]. La [...] seconda pietra è bucata nel mezo, et li scismatici redicolosamente dicono che quivi forno raddrizzati li chiodi de Christo, e colcandosi con l’orechio sopra dicono sentire continuo martellare, il che procede da altri che per la chiesa caminano, quale rimbomba»: Ivi, p. 425.

The friar uses the adjective “ridiculous” to describe this “miracle” because, without inventing fanciful explanations, it was quite obviously caused by the vibration of the church visitors’ steps.

There are, however, cases in which even miracles proposed by other Christians of Latin obedience are greeted with skepticism. For example, in late XIII century, regarding the already mentioned miracle of the tomb of St. Pelagia, the Dominican friar Burchard of Mount Zion uses an abundance of caution and writes: «Dicitur quod in peccato mortali existens inter tumbam eius [sc. st. Pelagia] et murum proximum non potest transire, sed nescio veritatem; ego vidi multos transire» (tacitly demonstrating his belief that very few people are not in mortal sin).

Turning back to false miracles, the Augustinian Jacopo da Verona, while visiting the Holy Sepulchre about 50 years after the words of Burchard, claimed that some columns «a die mortis Cristi die noctuque sudant omni tempore»:

In loco autem ubi est altare et cathedra sancta Helene sunt due columpne quasi marmoree in illa caverna, que a die mortis Cristi die noctuque sudant omni tempore [...]. Et si tergentur cum aliquot panno, non statim sed immediate sudant et emittunt aquam in tanta quantitate, quod balneant terram circumjacentem, quod mihi visum fuit valde mirabile, et sic videtur omnibus videntibus.¹⁸

As we can read from the passage, the friar has carefully observed the phenomenon; and yet he considers it a miracle. A few months earlier, the German knight Boldensele shows a very different attitude towards the columns. He not only denies that the phenomenon might be considered miraculous, but also goes into scientific explanations about the nature of the stone. He claims also to have encountered a similar situation in an ancient building in Constantinople («ego hoc videns naturam lapidis consideravi, circumstantiam loci adverti»), to have examined the stone, and having referred its findings to the admiral.

Circa hunc locum sunt quedam columpne marmoree aquam continue distillantes, et simplices dicunt, quod plangent et defleant morte Christi, quod verum non est, quia ubi natura sufficit non est ad miraculum recurrendum. Est autem certa species lapidis in genere

18 Jacobus a Verona, *Liber Peregrinationis* (1335), in Monneret de Villard 1950, p. 29.

marmorum que enidros appellatur, cujus natura per magistros mineralia conscribentes talis asseritur quod ex frigidissima naturali ejus complexione aerem circumstantem ingrossando trasmutat in aquam [...]. Unde in Constantinopoli in veteri pallatio imperiali sub terra quasdam conchas marmoreas vidi de simili lapide, que plene existentes aqua evacuabantur aliquotiens, et revoluto anno sine omni humano studio plene inveniuntur aqua, ita ut undique effluent, quod a vulgaribus maximum miraculum reputatur. Sed ego hoc videns naturam lapidis consideravi, circumstantiam loci adverti, amirato domini imperatoris causam naturalem hujus facti exposui cui plurimum placuit, et me ex tunc in singularem amorem et honoris gratitudinem recollegit.¹⁹

In the Seventeenth century, the friar Faostino da Toscolano liquidates the miracle as a quite natural phenomenon, but attests the longevity of the belief, which maintains its hold over the faithful.²⁰

Another miracle that was popular for centuries is that of the chickpea field. According to a legend, Jesus asked a farmer what he was sowing, and with a joke in bad taste, the farmer replied «I sow stones». Jesus is said to have concluded «and let you gather stones». Immediately, the chickpeas turned into stones, and since then no plants could grow in the field:

Inde venimus ad Campum cicerum ubi nihil nascitur nec fit, nisi lapilli parvuli ad modum cicerum; dicunt quod dum Christus transiret inde et quereret a laboratore seminante cicera dicens «quid seminas?», ille ex derisione respondit «semino lapides», et Christus dixit «et lapides recolliges». Ex tunc, ut dicunt, nichil nascitur.²¹

Prope sepulchrum Rachelis ad medium miliare est unus campus in quo, tempore quo Christus ibat predicando, quidam rusticus seminabat legumen et Christus dixit: «Quid seminas, fili?» Et ille mendaciter

19 Boldensele, *Liber de Quibusdam Ultramarinis partibus* (1334-1335), in Deluz 1972, pp. 263-264.

20 «Alla sinistra resta una ben lavorata sedia di finissimo marmore, et è stabilita nel proprio luogo ove la santa imperadrice sedeva assistendo a quelli che cavavano la santa croce. Ma non già che in detta sedia vi sedesse, ne meno che le sodette colonne misteriosamente piangano la morte de Christo, come molti affermano, ma [...] gocciolino le colonne per le soprane piogge e continua homidità»: Faostino da Toscolano, *Itinerario* (1633-1653), in Bianchini 1992, p. 418.

21 Ricoldus de Monte Crucis, *Liber Peregrinationis* (1288), in Kappler 1997, p. 58.

respondit: «Domine, semino lapides» et Christus respondit: «Et lapides sint». Tunc legumina conversa sunt in cetera lapidea et usque hodie in illo campo multa inveniuntur: et ego ivi et inveni et mecum portavi.²²

Ivi presso era uno che seminava ceci, e nostra Donna il domandò: «Che semini tu?». Ed e' rispose: «Seminò sassi». Ed ella disse: «Ed e' sassi sieno»: e di subito diventarono sassi; ed ancora al dì d'oggi vi se ne trova a similitudine di ceci.²³

Au chemin l'on trouve [...] en ung champ auquel on trouve tout temps (mesmement quand il a pleu) pierres que l'on jugeroit estre pois bons pour faire potaige qui là surcreurent premierement, par ce que ung laboureur qui semoit du fourment, interrogué de Nostre Seigneur ce qu'il semoit, respondit en se mocquant: «sont pois»; auquel Nostre Seigneur dist: «pois doncques soyent!» Et tout son fourment fut converty en telles pierres.²⁴

Ben che apocriфа e fabula, voglio raccontare una cosa redicola che li semplici affermano esser successo nel seguente luogo. all'incontro della torre di Giacob, alla sinistra della strada verso Betleme, si vede un piccolo circoito, quasi tutto di naturale pietra lastricato, con poca terra in esso, ma assai pietre arenose e picciole, fra le quali si trovano sassetti della forma e grandezza de biselli, ceci, lentichie et altri simili legumi, dalla madre natura così prodotti fra quelle pietre, e dicono li paesani che ciò fosse per un prodigio della beata Vergene, la quale di questo luogo passando, disse a quello che seminava simili legumi che cosa seminasse, e quello burlandola gli rispose: «Seminò pietre». E la beata Vergene sogione: «Pietre raccoglierai». E che per ciò sempre si trovino simili sodetti legumi.²⁵

Some pilgrims relate the miracle to the Virgin; whatever the case, it remains almost unchanged over the centuries. Faostino defines ridiculous also this miracle.

22 Jacobus de Verona, *Liber Peregrinationis* (1335), in Monneret de Villard 1950, p. 63.

23 Frescobaldi, *Viaggio in Terrasanta* (1384-1385), in Bartolini-Cardini 1991², p. 166.

24 Jehan Thenaud, *Le voyage d'Outremer* (1512), in Schefer 1884, p. 93.

25 Faostino da Toscolano, *Itinerario* (1633-1653), in Bianchini 1992, p. 478.

4. First-hand testimonies of miracles are a very sensitive subject. It is well known that from the Thirteenth century, in Europe, the canonization dossiers, which contained testimonies of miracles, were no longer left to the local communities of faithful, but became a monopoly of special papal consistories.²⁶ The believer was therefore unable to decide about miracles, which became the exclusive preserve of cardinals and high prelates. However, at least for the Christians of the Middle Ages, the fact that Jesus' holiness had permeated the whole Holy Land, was objective and undeniable. The pilgrims could thus experience without filters the holy places' miraculous essence.

In their account, pilgrims, with more or less transportation, merely repeat legends about the chickpeas field, the weeping column or the potter's field. However, those who show skepticism about a miracle, like Boldensele, are very rare; not to mention the miracles of their own religion. Perhaps during their quests, the pilgrims verbally expressed freer opinions, and therefore more critical or even irreverent ones; but of those, no trace remains. Almost only the Friars Minor, guides of the European pilgrims and the only members (and representatives) of the Latin Church in the Holy Land, vigorously assert the falsity of some miracles.

Essentially which ones are, for medieval Franciscans, the false miracles? Of course all the 'non Latin' miracles: these are deemed completely natural phenomena. The Holy Fire is common fire, that the Greeks pretend comes from heaven in order to get offers and privileges. Other miracles are attributed to divine intervention due to a lack of rationality, such as the weeping columns or the stone on which you would listen to the straightening of the nails of the Holy Cross. In short, the false miracles we encountered are either the result of superstition, or the result of malice. The Latin Christians, at worst, err out of ignorance, or lack of rationality. Among the five miracles discussed above the Islamic one appears even less defensible, because there is no visible relationship between the beatings and the liberation from the devil. A glaring omission in this overview is the devil, which in Europe instead performs supernatural manifestations in order to distract Christians from the true faith. One explanation could be that the blood of Jesus has redeemed the Holy Land by his presence: in the pilgrims' accounts, I never came across him. It is understandable that the friars affirm the truth of their faith with respect to the others. Other dynamics are, however, less obvious. «Le miracle décline puis disparaît à partir du moment où on ne

26 Paciocco 2006.

peut plus y croire», Le Goff writes. But why does Faostino da Toscolano believe that women cannot live in the house where the Virgin was born, lest they die immediately, while he finds it ridiculous that chickpeas have been turned into stones by Jesus? I do not know the answer. Each epoch corresponds to a peculiar set of sensitivity and tolerance. Until a pontiff intervened by establishing a dogma, denials of miraculous events occurred even within Catholic Christianity (the immaculate conception of Mary or the stigmata of Catherine of Siena, to name only the most striking cases). The miracles of the Holy Land, fully attributable to the special nature of the region resulting from constant contact with Jesus, apostles and numerous saints, are not subject to doubts as to the possibility of their occurrence. In this perspective these miracles, even if considered false, in the eyes of pilgrims could not in any case diminish the sanctity of the place and the truth of the evangelical events. For this reason they constitute an extremely useful object of reflection for investigating both an everyday aspect of the history of scientific thought, as well as the margins and distinctions developed within popular devotion in the centuries between the late Middle and the modern Ages.

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