

# THE WOOD OF THE CROSS

According to early church historians, Empress Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, travelled to the Holy Land in 326–328, founding churches and establishing relief agencies for the poor. They claimed that she discovered the hiding place of three crosses that were believed to have been used at the crucifixion of Jesus and of two thieves, St Dismas and St Gestas, executed with him; to one cross was affixed a sign bearing Jesus' name, but Helena was not sure until a miracle revealed that this was the True Cross.

In the Latin-speaking traditions of Western Europe, the story of the pre-Christian origins of the True Cross was well established by the 13th century when, in 1260, it was recorded by Jacopo de Voragine, Bishop of Genoa, in the *Golden Legend*. It was believed that the True Cross came from a tree that grew from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, or the tree that Adam ate of, that Seth planted on Adam's grave where it 'endured there unto the time of Solomon'.



After many centuries, the tree was cut down and the wood used to build a bridge over which the Queen of Sheba passed, on her journey to meet King Solomon. So struck was she by the portent contained in the timber of the bridge that she fell on her knees and revered it. On her visit to Solomon, she told him that a piece of wood from the bridge would bring about the replacement of God's covenant with the Jewish people by a new order. Solomon, fearing the eventual destruction of his people,

had the timber buried. After fourteen generations, the wood taken from the bridge was fashioned into the Cross used to crucify Christ.

According to the sacred tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church the True Cross was made from three different types of wood: cedar, pine and cypress. This is an allusion to Isaiah 60:13 'The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box [cypress] together to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious'. The link between this verse and the Crucifixion lies in the words 'the place of my feet', which is interpreted as referring to the *suppedāneum* (foot rest) on which Jesus' feet were nailed.

A traditional Orthodox icon depicts Lot, the nephew of Abraham, watering the trees. According to tradition, these trees were used to construct the Temple in Jerusalem - 'to beautify the place of my sanctuary'. Later, during Herod's reconstruction of the Temple, the wood from these trees was removed from the Temple and discarded, eventually being used to construct the cross on which Jesus was crucified - 'and I will make the place of my feet glorious'.

