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Columns of Ordeal

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COLUMNS OF ORDEAL.¹

No self-respecting Cairene dragoman omits to point out to his clients among the curiosities of the mosque of Amr at Fostat two columns near the South door, which are endowed, according to popular superstition, with the miraculous power of discriminating between true Moslems and Unbelievers.² Placed at such a short distance apart (some ten inches) that the passage between them can with difficulty be negotiated by a man of average build, the columns none the less allow a true Moslem, however stout, to pass between them, while an Unbeliever, however slim, finds passage impossible. In other words, the space is supernaturally widened if necessary to accommodate the former and contracted to exclude the latter class.

The columns actually used for this purpose at Cairo do not seem long to have been associated with the superstition. Visitors to the mosque in the 'sixties do not mention it, though they refer to the companion marvel of the column miraculously transported from Mecca.³ The superstition itself, however, is of great antiquity and relatively well documented. The purpose of the rite, a spiritual test, distinguishes it sharply from the many similar 'passing through' rituals universally current and generally considered 'lucky' acts practised with a view to the healing of disease, etc.⁴ Its symbolism, as we shall see, suggests a Christian origin. A study of its developments or ramifications into various parts both of the Christian and Mahommedan worlds may

¹ This paper was among the completed work left by Mr. F. W. Hasluck, and, by permission of his wife, is now published to complete the series of studies on religious transferences which he had contributed to the *Annual*.—ED.

² Murray, *Egypt* (1900), 380-1; Sladen, *Orient. Cairo*, 183, and *Queer Things about Egypt*, 198; Goldziher, *Culte des Saints* . . . *Musulmans in Rev. Hist. Relig.* ii. (1880), 345.

³ See, e. g., Petermann, *Reisen*, ii. 384.

⁴ See my article in *B.S.A.* xxi. (1914-16), 64 ff.

therefore be attempted with more than usual accuracy, and is thus of considerable interest and value for the study of kindred phenomena.

A more appropriate place of origin for a superstition so distinctly theological in character and shared by the two great religions of the eastern Mediterranean could not be found than Jerusalem; and we shall not go far astray if we accept it hypothetically as such. Certainly it is from Jerusalem that the earliest record comes to us of the ordeal of passage, and at Jerusalem that the rite continued to be practised, though on varying holy sites, almost to our own day.

In 723 S. Willibald, on pilgrimage to the Holy City, visited on his round the church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. Here, he says, stood two columns 'within the church, against the north wall and the south wall, in memory of the two men who said, "Men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?"'¹ And the man who can creep between the wall and the columns will have remission of his sins.'²

It does not seem possible with the knowledge at our disposal to refine on Willibald's account as to the position of the columns. The point of the ordeal was certainly, as at Cairo, that the aperture, here between the columns and the wall, was narrow, and we may perhaps assume from this the fairly usual Byzantine arrangement of a column facing an anti-pilaster in the adjoining wall. The symbolism of the 'Men of Galilee' seems certainly no more than an ingenuity; that of the rite itself seems to depend on the texts of S. Matthew, which use the image of a narrow passage to illustrate the difficulty of salvation.³

At the same time, we may bear in mind the special significance in the church of the Ascension, marking the spot where Christ entered into heaven, of two texts frequently displayed in Greek churches. These are

¹ Acts i. 11.

² Ed. Wright, p. 19. The original text runs:—*illa ecclesia est desuper patula et sine tecto: et ibi stant duae columnae intus in Ecclesia contra parietem Aquilonis, et contra parietem meridionalis plagae. Illae sunt ibi in memoriam et in signum duorum virorum qui dixerunt: Viri Galilaei, quid statis adspicientes in coelum? Et ille homo, qui ibi potest inter parietem et columnas repere, liber est a peccatis suis* (Willibaldus, *Vita seu Hodoeporicon*, p. 376, in Mabillon, *Acta SS. Ord. Bened., Saec. III. pt. ii. pp. 365 ff.*: also in *Camisii Thesaurus*, ed. Basnage, ii. 111-12, quoted by Tobler, *Siloahq. u. Oelberg*, 94-5.

³ Matth. vii. 13-14 ('Enter ye in at the strait gate . . . strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life'), and xix. 24 ('It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God'). Cf. Mark, x. 25; Luke, xviii. 25.

(1) 'this is none other than the House of God, *this is the gate of heaven*,'¹ and (2) 'this is the *gate of the Lord: the righteous shall enter into it*.'² And it is not impossible that these were written over, or in close proximity to, the two narrow openings through which it was customary in Willibald's time for pilgrims to pass as a test of grace.³

As to the exact meaning of Willibald's *liber est a peccatis suis*, it is perhaps impossible to dogmatise, but some light may be thrown on the subject by the parallel of Mount Sinai. Here the ascent of the holy mountain was restricted to pilgrims who had been duly confessed, and a certificate of confession was required of them at the beginning of the ascent, which was marked by a gateway. The restriction was justified by the text, 'Who shall go up to the holy hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.'⁴ Felix Faber informs us⁵ that Jews, who according to mediaeval ideas were vicariously guilty of Christ's blood and therefore could not have ritually clean hands, were supernaturally prevented from passing the gate.⁶ It may have been the custom to confess pilgrims before admitting them to the sanctuary of the holy hill of Olivet.⁷

What appears to be a variant of the same rite in the church of the Ascension, due probably to structural alterations involving the removal

¹ Gen. xxviii. 17.

² Ps. cxviii. 20: Burckhardt notes the presence of this text over a door in the village of Shmerrin (*Travels in Syria*, 105).

³ Similarly, on the way from Mecca to Arafat there are two pillars of whitewashed stones called el Aalameyn, about 80-100 paces apart: pilgrims must pass between them on their way to and—still more—from Arafat (Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia*, i. 113).

⁴ Ps. xxiv. 3-4. My authority is E. H. Palmer, *Desert of the Exodus*, 105, quoting R. Clayton's *Journey to Mt. Sinai by the Prefetto of Egypt* (1722). According to G. Ebers (*Durch Gosen zum Sinai*, 313 f.) a second paper was also given to them at the convent to be given up at the second gate.

⁵ *Evagat.* ed. Hassler, ii. 455.

⁶ Similar cases of supernatural intervention for religious reasons are given by Petachia, *Tour du Monde*, in *Nouv. Jour. Asiat.*, viii. (1831), 296-300 (tomb of Ezechiel surrounded by a wall without a gate and with only a hole, through which Jews crawl: on the Feast of Tabernacles, however, it enlarges so that a man on a camel may pass through), and by Mandeville, ed. Wright, 199 (Mahommed's entry into a small, low hermit's chapel in the desert of Arabia caused the low entrance to become 'so great, and so large, and so high, as though it had been of a great minster, or the gate of a palace').

⁷ Near the tombs of Hillel and Shammai at Meron there was a stone basin found full of water by pious persons but empty by the impious, though the basin had no outlet (Petachia, *loc. cit.* 392, quoted by Carmoly, *Itinéraires*, 311). The pious could pass under the suspended coffin of Daniel at Susa but not the impious (Petachia, *loc. cit.* 366).

or modification of the original passages,¹ is described by Felix Faber as practised in his time by oriental Christians. This rite consisted in embracing a certain column of the church. If the pilgrim could span it so as to make his fingers touch, it was welcomed as a happy omen,² but *of what* Faber does not know or contemptuously declines to state. We shall see, however, that the ritual has a place in the story of the 'Columns of Ordeal.'

In the crypt containing the tomb of S. Pelagia,³ which is in the immediate vicinity of the church of the Ascension, the rite described by Willibald seems to have survived in a slightly modified form. It is described by two Greek pilgrims of (approximately) 1185 and 1250,⁴ and again by Felix Faber⁵ in 1489. All the accounts are substantially in accord. It was customary for penitents to squeeze through the narrow passage between the tomb and the wall of the crypt, their ability to do this being considered as proof that they were in a state of grace: if their previous confession had been defective, they were unable to pass. Here again the reminiscence of Sinai is strong. It is curious to note that S. Pelagia is known to Mahommedans as the daughter of Hassan el Basri,⁶ and that the tomb of the latter has a similar peculiarity.⁷

The seventeenth century sees a reappearance of the same superstition, again in a slightly modified form, in yet another Christian building, the church of the Holy Sepulchre. It seems indeed as if Moslem encroachments were continually driving it to new surroundings.

¹ In the interval between the two accounts the church had been rebuilt by the Crusaders and destroyed by Saladin (Tobler, *Siloahq.* 97).

² 'Putant autem illi superstitiosi orientales, quod ille, qui id facere potest, sit magis fortunatus, et quod sit signum cujusdam magni boni' (*Evagat.* ed. Hassler, ii. 134).

³ Her cell and tomb are traceable back to A.D. 600 (Antoninus of Piacenza) according to Tobler, *Siloahq.* 126.

⁴ *Anon. Allatii*, p. 87, *de locis Hierosol.* (in L. Allatius, *Συμμικτά*, c. 1185 (Tobler, *Siloahq.* 130, puts the *Anon.* c. 1400), and Perdicas in L. Allatius, *Συμμικτά*, *Col. Agr.* 1653, 72, c. 1250.

⁵ *Evagat.* ed. Hassler, i. 398: cf. Grethenius in Khitrovo, *Itin. Russes*, 180.

⁶ Rabahet Bent Hassan el Masri (Tobler, *Siloahq.* 126).

⁷ Niebuhr, *Voy. en Arabie*, ii. 181 (Old Basra). His *kubbe* fell twice and he appeared and said he wished no *kubbe* but a tower, his tomb to be against the wall to prevent circumambulation. Pelagia's tomb was sometimes confounded with S. Mary of Egypt (el Masri), Pelagia's history being similar to the Magdalene's (Tobler, *Siloahq.* 133). It became difficult of access for Christians about 1500, according to Tobler, *Siloahq.* 131, when a mosque was built over it. Medjir-ed-Din (p. 132) at this date says it was much visited by pilgrims, but he does not mention the tomb.

Near the chapel of Christ's Prison Doubdan ¹ in 1652 notices two small columns between which and the wall pilgrims squeezed their way, confident that a successful passage was an index, not of remission of sins, but of legitimacy. The same superstition is described by Nau ² in 1674, who, however, makes the passage between the two columns themselves. To the complete change in the object of the ritual we shall return in the discussion of the Moslem variants. Side by side with it was current, as we see from Le Bruyn's account,³ the idea of proving that the penitent was in a state of grace.

Of the chapel of S. Longinus in the Sepulchre church Kelly says: ⁴ 'Beneath one of the altars lies a stone having a hole through it, and placed in a short trough, so that it seems impossible for anything but a spectre to pass through the hole. Nevertheless the achievement was a customary penance among the Greeks, and called by them "Purgatory"; until a lady, *enceinte*, in labouring to drag herself through it, came to some mischief; and ever since that accident, the Turks have in mercy guarded the stone by an iron grating.'

This concludes the record of the columns of ordeal in Christian sanctuaries at Jerusalem, unless we include as such the unsatisfactory mention of a similar rite, of which the purpose is not stated, practised in the church of Mount Zion in Crusading times.

Ante Chorum quaedam pretiosi marmoris
columna juxta murum posita est, quam
simplices homines circummigrare solent.⁵

Summing up, we may distinguish two modifications of the oldest form of the rite (passing between column and wall) and a complete bifurcation of its purpose:—

(a) At S. Pelagia's passage is not between column and wall but between tomb and wall.

(b) In the Holy Sepulchre church passage is between column and wall or between two columns.

¹ *Voyage de la Terre Sainte* 1651–2, Paris, 1657, p. 75.

² M. Nau, *Voy. Nouv. de la Terre Sainte*, Paris, 1679, p. 193 f.

³ *Voyage* (1683), ii. 258 ff.

⁴ Kelly, *Syria and the Holy Land*, 367, quoting Vere Monro, *Summer Ramble in Syria*, 1835, 216–17. A similar story is cited from d'Estournel, *Journal*, ii. 93, 1832, by Tobler (*Golgotha*, 1851, 337) in whose time the tradition seems to have been forgotten.

⁵ Theodericus, *De Locis Sanctis* (c. 1172), ed. Tobler, 56.

(c) In the later ritual of the Ascension church passage of any sort is abandoned in favour of embracing the single column used for the rite. The original symbolism is lost, but it must be noted that the object of the later rite is not stated.

The first record of the practice by Moslems of the Column ordeal is no earlier than the middle of the seventeenth century. The place is Jerusalem and the building the Dome of the Rock. It is, of course, unsafe to infer that the practice is not earlier, particularly as the whole Haram area, and especially the interior of the Dome of the Rock, was rigorously forbidden to non-Moslems down to our own time. But the silence of both Crusaders and Moslem writers on the subject, and the warning of one of the latter (Medjir-ed-Din) ¹ against the superstitious practice of the Christians on the Mount of Olives, make it likely that the Column ordeal in the Dome of the Rock is not much more ancient than our first records.

It will be further noted that the Dome of the Rock, whence Mahomet took his miraculous flight to heaven, makes the rite appropriate in the same sense as it is appropriate for Christians in the church of the Ascension; and that the traditional identification of the Rock as Bethel,² the scene of Jacob's vision,³ makes it a second time a symbolical entry to heaven. Further, that the text, Matthew xix. 24, is familiar to Moslems from its adaptation in the Koran,⁴ which says that unbelievers shall not 'enter into paradise, until a camel pass through the eye of a needle.'⁵

Finally, we must point out as at least an extraordinary series of coincidences that the crypt of the Dome of the Rock passed for the place where Christ forgave the adulterous woman and was thence known in Frankish times as *confessio*,⁶ exactly as the cave below the church of the Ascension in which the ex-harlot Pelagia passed her days of penitence was known as *ἀγία ὁμολόγησις*.

The two accounts of the Column ordeal, as practised in the middle seventeenth century by Moslems in the Dome of the Rock, refer to an

¹ A.D. 1495, quoted by Tobler, *Siloahq.* 124. Cf. the long and explicit description of the building given by Frater Philippus de Aversa, for which see *Zeit. D. Pal. Ver.*, i. 211.

² Lubomirski, *Jerus.* 272.

³ Gen. xxviii. 17.

⁴ vii. 38 (Sale's ed. p. 108).

⁵ Tobler, *Jerusalem*, i. 544; cf. Theodericus, *De Locis Sanctis*, 43, 123.

⁶ Tobler, *Siloahq.* 127 f.

identical pair of columns, distinct from those of the structure itself, and placed near the western entrance. Brother Eugene Roger (1653) says that it was commonly said of them that any one who could pass easily between them was predestined for the Moslem paradise, and that if a Christian made the attempt he would inevitably be crushed by them.¹ D'Arvieux (1660), our second authority, says that they were used as an oracle of *legitimacy* and that bastards were unable to make the passage, at least not without great difficulty.² The practice of the ordeal on the Dome of the Rock is not cited by any subsequent writer.

The association of the two ideas, (1) fitness for heaven and (2) legitimacy, has already met us at the Holy Sepulchre and will meet us again later. What is the point of contact between the two ideas?

A possible answer may be found in the fact that in Moslem, and to a certain extent also in Jewish theology, the relation of the soul to the Creator is habitually figured as that of a wife to her husband. As the chief virtue of a man is faithfulness to God, so that of a woman is faithfulness to her husband: infidelity is in either case the cardinal sin.³ On the fidelity of the wife depends the legitimacy of her offspring, and both would be satisfactorily tested if a pregnant woman passed successfully between the miraculous columns. The passage of pregnant women is indeed several times mentioned, though it is obvious that the rite was shared by others (possibly at first babies) with the object of proving their own legitimacy.⁴

The ordeal of the columns is found a second time under Moslem auspices in Jerusalem at the mosque El Aksa in the Haram. Here it is mentioned by numerous authors of the 'seventies,⁵ and Conder tells us

¹ Chateaubriand, *Itin.* ii. 376.

² *Mémoires*, ii. 210 f. retailing information gathered from monks employed in repairing the windows of the mosque.

³ For the same collocation of ideas note that in judging the markings of Arab horses a star on the shank is held to presage that the animal's owner will be of doubtful orthodoxy as a Musulman, and that his wife will be unfaithful (Kelly, *Syria and the Holy Land*, 446).

⁴ Predestination includes a wide range of ideas, among which are (1) virtue, (2) freedom from mortal sin, (3) state of grace, (4) belief (for Moslems), the central idea being fitness for heaven.

⁵ Conder, *City of Jerusalem*, 232; Lady Burton, *Inner Life of Syria*, 379; J. A. Bost, *Souvenirs d'Orient* (1874); Pierotti, *Légendes racontées*, 33 f. (he says they are *verdantique* in colour and taper); Lubormirski, *Jerus.* (1878), 277. De Vogüé, *Syrie, Palestine, Mont Athos*, 1876, 202 f. gives an amusing description of the ceremony. Tobler in his *Jerusalem* (1853) does not mention the superstition; it will be remembered that access to the Haram was still in his time almost impossible.

that it was forbidden in 1881, when the space between the columns was blocked by an iron bar to prevent the passage. The purpose of the rite seems to have been exclusively to test the suppliant's fitness for heaven.

Outside Jerusalem the rite has been copied (apparently) at Urfa (Edessa) in the Jacobite crypt of S. Ephraem under the Armenian monastery of S. Sergius, though no definite purpose is attributed to it by our single authority,¹ who says, 'Before the grave is a rock-hewn column near the wall, between which and the wall every one tries to pass.'

What seems a certain case of plagiarism from the rite of S. Pelagia's church is found at Hassa Keui in Cappadocia, the alleged place of burial of S. Macrina, sister of S. Gregory. Pilgrims to the tomb ordinarily circumambulate it, but if they have made a vow to the saint which they have failed to fulfil, they are arrested by a supernatural force at a place where a corner of the sarcophagus approaches to within a few inches of the wall.²

Another derivative from the original rite of the Ascension church, very possibly dating from the Crusades,³ is at Nivelles in Belgium, where, in the church of S. Gertrude, 'dans une chapelle . . . un pilier monolithe de 1^m30 de hauteur et de 24 c. de diamètre environ, sans utilité spéciale dans la bâtisse, est appuyé sur une base reliée au mur et distancée du sol par deux marches. Le peuple prétend que toute personne qui n'est pas en état de grâce ne peut passer entre le mur et le pilier : l'espacement est environ de 30 centimètres.'⁴

¹ H. Petermann, *Reisen*, ii. 354 (Leipzig, 1865).

² Carnoy et Nicolaïdes, *Trad. de l'Asie Mineure*, 206. For analogies see above, p. 70, n. 6.

³ Similarly, the legend of S. Hubert spread from Rome to Belgium because many relics had been carried there, see my forthcoming *Transferences*. Secular counterparts of the dispersion of stories of the saints are found in two legends related by Baring Gould (*Curious Myths*, 2nd series, 206 ff., 314 ff.). The first is the legend of Melusine, the fairy ancestress of the Lusignans of Poitou, the second tells how an ancestor of the Belgian Godefroi de Bouillon met Beatrice, a mysterious woman, near a fountain, and eventually married her. That is, two Persian-coloured tales of fairy ancestors were told in Poitou and Belgium of noble houses which became conspicuously famous in the Crusades. Troubadours were the main agents in the circulation of such stories, but another important factor was the settlement of Crusaders in their newly-conquered lands in the East. The first generation of settlers, whether mixed in race or not, were naturally bilingual and thus ideal transmuters of Arabic originals into French, reacting first on pilgrims but ultimately on the Europe these represented and their own European homes.

⁴ Sebillot, *Folklore de France*, iv. 157, quoting O. Colson, *Wallonia*, iii. 15. Sebillot's very thorough work gives no parallel in the French area. S. Gertrude's is a Benedictine abbey church founded by S. Gertrude in 645.

On the Moslem side, the three examples from Northern Africa which follow are quite clearly derivatives from the Jerusalem prototypes, all having in common both the form of the rite, passage between columns, and its main object, proof of orthodox religious sentiments.

To the Columns of Ordeal in the mosque of Amr at Fostat (Old Cairo) we have already referred. Though the main purpose of the ordeal here is as above stated, Douglas Sladen in his *Queer Things about Egypt*¹ hints that they are also used as a test of women's chastity. We have already remarked that the practice does not seem here to be ancient, probably deriving directly from the Aksa mosque at Jerusalem.

Similar Columns of Ordeal are mentioned as existing in the mosque of Amr at Damietta. The space between them may be traversed only by 'the virtuous,' presumably, here as elsewhere, persons in a state of grace or believers.²

At the mosque of Sidi Okba in the holy city of Kairouan in Tunisia are likewise a pair of such columns;³ they are of red porphyry and are used as a test of Moslem orthodoxy or as a cure for rheumatism! Like those of El Aksa they taper towards the top, so that with a little chicanery a tall man stands a better chance of passing than a shorter patient of like build.

Vaujany speaks of the Columns of Ordeal as a not infrequent feature in Egyptian mosques. Considering the importance of the mosques of Amr and Sidi Okba it would not be surprising to find them widely distributed in North Africa.

Two cases of an ordeal involving passage between natural rocks as a test of spiritual acceptability may be here cited. (1) At Hadji Bektash, the chief seat of the (*Shia*) Bektashi sect, pilgrims make the passage of a natural rock tunnel with a view to proving their sincerity of purpose. The aperture is narrow, and it is customary for the pilgrim to remove his arms before making the attempt; with arms passage is reputed impossible, though, according to my informants, a certain Albanian *bey*, who refused to conform to the rule, passed successfully; he was rewarded for his presumption by an early death.⁴ (2) Of a closely similar rite in

¹ P. 198; cf. his *Oriental Cairo*, p. 183.

² Vaujany, *Alexandrie*, 205. For another column of predestination, this time at Bethlehem, see Tobler, *Bethlehem*, 90.

³ Poiré, *La Tunisie Française*, Paris, 1892, 187-8.

⁴ From Kemal Bey Klissoura, and his brother, Fadil Bey.

Morocco I am informed by a friend long resident in Fez, whose words I quote. 'An eyewitness here, credible, informs me that there is at a mountain sanctuary called Mulaï Abdslam bel Meshish, a well-known place in the mountains South of Tetuan, just outside the shrine, a sort of cave, with a narrow entrance between two rocks. Only one who is "murda" can pass in. If not "murda," the rocks would crush you. "Murda" is a technical word meaning "acceptable," with special reference to God and your parents. The local tradition in this place seems to know nothing of bastardy: it is morals of which it is the touchstone.' ¹

The close resemblance of these two instances may be merely fortuitous, or both may alike depend on a prototype unknown to us, possibly in the *Shia* holy places. Their ultimate relation with the Jerusalem group must be regarded as 'not proven' pending further evidence or indication.

Two instances of embracing a column for oracular purposes, as in the second phase of the Ascension church ritual, may or may not be connected with our series. The embracing ritual in itself is early and obviously derives from the enthusiastic salutation of the venerated object by pilgrims. It is mentioned in connexion with the Column of Flagellation on Mount Zion by Antoninus of Piacenza.²

The first of these instances is at Meshed Ali, one of the great holy places of *Shia* Islam, where there is a piece of a column, reputed brought thither by Ali himself. This is used as an oracle of legitimacy, bastards being unable to make their fingers meet round it.³

The second is at Alexandrowo in Serbian Macedonia, where a *tekke* of the Bektashi (a *Shia* sect) contains a miraculous square pillar, which, supposedly brought there by a Bosnian saint, is embraced by pilgrims. If they can make the fingers of their two hands meet round the pillar, their prayer is granted.⁴

The connexion of the two *Shia* rites seems obvious, the generalisation of the purpose of the ordeal in the derivative at Alexandrowo being characteristic. It would be dangerous without further evidence to connect them with the second ritual of the Ascension church, though it will be remarked that the purpose of the latter has not come down to us.

F. W. HASLUCK.

¹ From Mr. J. M. Dawkins.

² Ed. Tobler, xxii. p. 24; Kelly, *Syria*, 366.

³ Niebuhr, *Voy. en Arabie*, ii. 216.

⁴ Evans in *J.H.S.*, xxi. 203.