A Provençal holy Land. Re-reading the Legend and the sites of Mary Magdalene in southern France

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Sammendrag

This paper examines the pilgrimage experience of pilgrims to Mary Magdalene’s and her companions’ sites in Provence during the Middle Ages. The author analyses the creation of the cult and the elaboration of a ‘holy geography’ in Provence based on medieval vitae about the legend of the saints. Sites associated with the saints became part of a wider narrative in which the topography was constructed to ‘ventriloque’ Palestine. This development led to similarities in the pilgrimage experience in both regions. Through an analysis of pilgrimage accounts, the author argues that pilgrims in both Provence and the Holy Land interpreted the topography through the prism of the texits that they were reading, the vitae for the former and the Bible for the latter. This shared scriptural basis established certain parallels in the pilgrimage experience at each destination and, as will be examined, contributed to constructing Provence as a post-biblical holy land where the life of Mary Magdalene and her companions could be tangibly experienced.

But while nature and history have done much for Provence, perhaps religion has done even more. There are places blessed from the beginning of time which are lost in the mists of time. Egypt saw the birth of Moses; Arabia still burns with lightning from Sinai, and the sand of its deserts has retained the footprints of the people of God, the Jordan divided before this same people and, from the cedars of Lebanon to the palm trees of Jericho, Palestine would hear and see things that would be the eternal preoccupation of humanity. The Son of God was born on these sea shores; there his Word instructed the entire world, and his blood flowed so as to save it. Rome, in its turn, Rome, the heir of everything, received into its walls the legacy of Christ, and its amazed Capitol lent itself to the chaste ceremonies of victorious love, after having for a long period served the bloody triumph of war. There, above all, are the places religion has consecrated, the holy places, those one could believe belonged to heaven rather than to earth. And yet a part was reserved to Provence in this distribution of divine graces attached to the earth, a unique part, and one like the last imprint of the life of Jesus Christ among us.

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When Mary Magdalene fled the Holy Land, legend says she took refuge in a cave there. This mountaintop cave is now a hidden monastery called the Sanctuary of Mary Magdalene, and it is located 25 kilometers outside of St. Maximin, at the top of a 90-minute hike through an ancient forest. On the edge of the forest is a modest restaurant and a hotel which is run by the Benedictine Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Montmartre. As you go down the stairs to an empty crypt, you stand in a pool of water beneath an alabaster statue of Mary Magdalene in Rapture, lit by candles. Even it has its own history, as during the French Revolution the statue was hidden in the nearby town of Plan d’Aups to protect it from looting during the French Revolution. The relics of Mary Magdalene. She is a figure shrouded in mystery, portrayed for more than 2,000 years as a prostitute, an adulteress, an object of veneration and even as Christ’s wife, but the most enduring detail is always her sin. Yet there is no reference to Mary Magdalene being a prostitute or a sinner in any of the New Testament gospels. Why, then, has the notion of Mary as a fallen woman proved to be so popular, and who was she really? Mary Magdalene might be buried in Southern France where she died in 75 A.D./C.E. 44 years after Jesus ascended into heaven in the year 31 A.D./C.E. Mary would have... Mary’s began the moment the High Priest Jesus Christ...