

125// HERE FOLLOWETH THE DECOLLATION OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST

It is read that the decollation of St. John Baptist was established for four causes, like as it is found in the Book of Office. First, for his decollation; secondly, for the burning and gathering together of his bones; thirdly, for the invention and finding of his head; and fourthly, for the translation of his finger and dedication of the Church. And after some people this feast is named diversely, that is to say, decollation, collection, invention, and dedication.

HOW THE DECOLLATION WAS MADE

First, this feast is hallowed for his decollation which was made in this manner. For, as it is had in *Historia Scholastica*, Herod Antipas, son of the great Herod, went to Rome and passed by the house of Philip his brother, and began to love the wife of his brother, which was named Herodias, wife of the same Philip, his brother. After that Josephus saith, she was sister of Herod Agrippa. And when he returned, he refused and repudiated his own wife, and secretly wedded her to his wife, the which thing his wife knew well, that he had wedded his brother's wife. And this first wife of Herod was daughter of Areth, king of Damascus, and therefore she abode not the coming home of her husband, but went to her father as soon as she might.

And when Herod returned, he took away the wife of Philip his brother, and wedded her, and left his own. And there moved against him therefore Herod Agrippa, and the king Areth and Philip became his enemies. And St. John said to him that he had not done well to do so, because after the law it appertained not to him [was improper for him] to have and hold the wife of his brother living. And Herod saw that John reprovod him of this thing so cruelly, as Josephus saith, because he reprovod him of blame. He assembled great people for to please his wife, and did do bind and put St. John in prison, but he would not slay him for doubt of the people, which much loved John, and followed him for his predication.

And Herod and Herodias, coveting occasion against St. John how they might make him die, ordained between them secretly that, when Herod should make the feast of his nativity the daughter of Herodias should demand a gift of Herod for dancing and springing at the feast tofore the principal princes of his realm, and he should swear to her by his oath that he shall grant it her. And she should ask the head of St. John, and he would give it to her for keeping of his oath, but he should feign as he were angry because of making of the oath.

And it is read in the History Scholastic that he had this treachery and great fantasy in him where it is said thus: It is to be believed that Herod treated first secretly with his wife of the death of St. John.

And under this occasion saith Jerome in the gloss: And therefore he sware for to find occasion to slay him, for if she had required the death of his father or mother, he had not given it to her ne consented it.

And when the feast was assembled, the maid was there springing and dancing tofore them all, in such wise that it pleased much to all. And then sware the king that he would give to her whatsoever she required, though she demanded half his kingdom. And then she, warned by her mother, demanded the head of St. John Baptist. Nevertheless, Herod by evil courage [heart] feigned that he was angry because of his oath, and as Rabanus saith: “That he had sworn follily, that he must needs do.” But he made no sign of sorrow save in the visage, for he was joyous in his heart; he excused the felony of his oath, showing that he did it under the occasion of pity.

Then the hangman came and smote off his head and delivered it to the maid, the which she laid in a platter and presented it at the dinner to her mischievous mother. And then Herod was much abashed when he saw it.

And St. Austin rehearseth in a sermon that he made on the occasion of the decollation, by way of example, that there was an innocent man and a true which had lent certain money to another man which denied it him when he asked it. And the good man was moved, and constrained him by his oath to swear whether he owed him or no, and he sware that he owed him nought, and so the creditor lost that he had lent. And then he saith that, in the next day following the creditor was ravished and brought tofore the judgment, and it was asked him, “Why calledst thou that man for to be believed by his oath?” And he said, “Because he denied my debt.” And the judge said, “It had been better to thee to lose thy debt than he should lose his soul by making of a false oath as he did.” And then this man was taken and grievously beaten, so that when he awoke the tokens of his wounds appeared on his back, but he was pardoned and forgiven.

And after this Austin saith that St. John was not beheaded on this day when the feast of his decollation is hallowed, but the year tofore, about the feast of Easter, and because of the passion of Jesu Christ and of the sacrament of our Lord it is deferred unto this day, for the less ought to give place to the more and greater.

And of that, St. John Chrysostom saith: John the Baptist beheaded is become master of the school of virtues and of life, the form of holiness, the rule of justice, the mirror of virginity, the ensample of chastity, the way of penance, pardon of sin, and discipline of faith. John is greater than man, peer unto the angels, sovereign holiness of the law of the gospel, the voice of the apostles, the silence of the prophets, the lantern of the world, the foregoer of the Judge, and moyen of all the Trinity. And this so great a man was put to martyrdom, and gave his head to the adulterer, and was delivered to the springing maid.

Herod then went not away all unpunished, but he was damned into exile. For as it is contained in the *History Scholastic*, Herod Agrippa was a noble man but he was poor, and for his overmuch poverty he was in despair, and entered into a certain tower for to suffer death there by famine and hunger. But when Herodias, his sister, heard thereof, she prayed Herod Tetrarch that

he would bring him thence and minister to him. And when he had done so they dined together, and Herod Tetrarch began to chauffe him by the wine which he had drunk, and began to reprove Herod Agrippa of the benefits that he had done to him. And that other sorrowed sore, and went to Rome and was received into the grace of Gaius the emperor, and he gave to him two lordships, that is to say of Lisania and Abilina, and crowned him, and sent him king into the Jewry.

And when Herodias saw her brother have the name of a king, she prayed her husband with great weepings that he should go to Rome and buy him the name of a king. He abounded greatly in riches, and entended not to her desire, for he had liefer be idle in rest than to have honour laborious. But at the last he was overcome by her busy prayers and went to Rome with her.

And when Herod Agrippa knew it, he sent letters to the Cæsar, that Herod Antipas, or the Tetrarch, had made friendship with the king of Persia and alliance, and that he would rebel against the empire of Rome. And in token of this thing he signified to him that he had in his garrisons armours enough for to garnish [equip] with seven thousand men. And when the emperor had read these letters he was much glad, and began to speak of other things first, afar from his purpose, and among other things he demanded him if he had in his cities great abundance of armours as he heard say, and he denied it not to him. Then the emperor believed well that which Herod had sent him in writing, and was angry toward him, and sent him into exile.

And because his wife was sister to Herod Agrippa, whom he much loved, he gave to her leave to return to her country, but she would go with her husband into exile, and said that he that had been in great prosperity, she should not leave him in his adversity. And then were they brought to Lyons, and there ended their lives miserably. This is in the *History Scholastic*.

THE BURNING AND GATHERING TOGETHER OF HIS BONES

Secondly, this feast was established and hallowed for the burning of his bones and gathering together on this day, like as some say they were burnt, and were gathered up of good Christian men. And then suffered he the second martyrdom when his bones were burnt, and therefore the church halloweth this feast also as his second martyrdom, as it is read in the *History Scholastic*.

For when his disciples had borne his body in to the city Sebasten of Palestine, they buried it between Elisæum and Abdias, and at his tomb many miracles were showed. Then Julian the apostate commanded that his bones should be burnt, and [if] they ceased not to do their woodness [madness] then; they took them and burnt them into powder and winnowed them in the fields.

And Bede saith in his Chronicles that when they had gathered his bones they drew them afar that one from that other, and by this wise he suffered the second martyrdom. But they say that know it not, that the day of his nativity his bones were gathered all about and were burnt. And whiles they were ingathering, as it is said in *Scholastica Historia*, there came monks from Jerusalem which covertly put them among the gatherers, and took a great part of them and bare

them to Philip, bishop of Jerusalem. And he sent them afterwards to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, and long time after Theophilus, bishop of the same city, laid them in the temple of Serapis, when he had hallowed and purged it from filth, and sacred [consecrated] it a church in the honour of St. John Baptist, and this is that the *History Scholastic* saith. But now they be worshipped devoutly at Genoa, like as Alexander the third, and Innocent the fourth, witnesseth for truth, and approve it by their privileges. And like as Herod which beheaded him was punished for his trespass, so Julian the apostate was smitten with divine vengeance of God, whose persecution is contained in the history of St. Julian tofore rehearsed after the Conversion of St. Paul. Of this Julian the apostate, of his nativity, of his empire, of his cruelty and of his death, is said plainly in *Historia Tripartita*.

THE FINDING OF JOHN'S HEAD

Thirdly, this feast is hallowed for the invention of his head or finding thereof. For, as some say, his head was found on this day. And, as it is read in the *History Scholastic*: John was bound and imprisoned, and had his head smitten off within the castle of Arabia that is named Macheronta. And Herodias did do bear the head in to Jerusalem, and did do bury it secretly thereby whereas Herod dwelled, for she doubted that the prophet should rise again if his head were buried with the body.

And as it is had in the *History Scholastic*: In the time of Marcian the prince, which was the year of our Lord three hundred and fifty-three, John showed his head to two monks that were come to Jerusalem. And then they went to the palace which was longing to Herod and found the head of St. John wrapped in an hair [a haircloth], and as I suppose, they were of the vestments that he ware in desert.

And then they went with the head toward their proper places. And as they went on their way a poor man which was of the city of Emissene came and fellowshipped with them, and they delivered him the bag in which was the holy head. Then this man was warned [advised] in the night that he should go his way and flee from them with the head, and so he went with the head, and brought it into the city of Emissene.

And there as long as he lived he worshipped the head in a cave, and had always good prosperity. And when he should die he told and showed it to his sister, charging her to tell it to nobody by her faith, and she kept it all her life, as he had done tofore long time.

After that, long time, the blessed John Baptist made revelation of his head to St. Marcellus, monk, that dwelled in that cave, in this manner. Him seemed, in his sleeping, that many companies singing went thither, and said: "Lo! here is St. John Baptist." Whom one led on the right side and another on the left side, and blessed all them that went with him. To whom when Marcellus came, he raised him up and took him by the chin, and kissed him. And Marcellus demanded him and said, "My lord, from whence art thou come to us?" And he said, "I am come from Sebasten."

And then when Marcell was awaked, he marvelled much of this vision. And the night following, as he slept, there came a man to him which awoke him, and when he was awaked he

saw a right fair star which shone amidst of the cell through the house. And he arose and would have touched it, and it turned suddenly on that other side. And he began to run after it till that the star abode in the place where the head of St. John was, and there he dalf [dug] and found a pot, and the holy head therein.

And a monk that would not believe that it was the head of St. John, laid his hand upon the pot, and forthwith his hand burned and cleaved so to the pot, that he could not withdraw it there from in no manner, and his fellows prayed for him. And then he drew off his hand, but it was not whole. And St. John appeared to him and said: When my head shall be set in the church, touch thou then the pot and thou shalt be whole.

And so he did and received his health, and was whole as it was before.

Then Marcellus showed this to Julian, bishop of the same city, and they bare it reverently into the city and showed it honourably. And from that time forth the feast of his decollation was there hallowed, for it was found the same day.

And after this it was transported into the city of Constantinople. And as it is said in the *History Tripartita*, that Valens the emperor commended that it should be laid in a chariot for to be brought to Constantinople. And when it came to Chalcedon, the chariot would go no farther, how well that they set in more beasts to draw it, wherefore they must leave it there. But afterwards Theodosius would bring it thence, and found a noble woman set for to keep it, and he prayed her that she would suffer him to bear away the head. And she consented because that she supposed that like as Valens might not have it thence, that in like wise he should not conne [be able to] have it thence. Then the emperor took it and embraced in his arms much sweetly the holy head, and laid it within his purple, and bare it in to the city of Constantinople and edified there a right fair church and set it therein. This saith the *History Tripartita*.

After this, in the time that king Pepin reigned, it was transported in France in Poictou, and there by his merits many dead men were raised to life.

And in like wise as Herod was punished that beheaded St. John, and Julian the apostate that burnt his bones, so was Herodias which counselled her daughter to demand the head of St. John. And the maid that required it died right ungraciously and evil, and some say that Herodias was condemned in exile, but she was not, ne she died not there, but when she held the head between her hands she was much joyful, but by the will of God the head blew in her visage, and she died forthwith. This is said of some, but that which is said tofore, that she was sent in exile with Herod, and miserably ended her life, thus say saints in their chronicles and it is to be holden.

And as her daughter went upon the water she was drowned anon, and it is said in another chronicle that the earth swallowed her in, all quick, and may be understood as of the Egyptians that were drowned in the Red Sea, so the earth devoured her.

THE TRANSLATION OF HIS FINGER

Fourthly, this feast was hallowed for the translation of his finger and the dedication of his church. For his finger with which he showed our Lord, as it is said, might not be burnt. And this said finger was found of the said monks, which afterwards as it is had in *Historia Scholastica*, St. Thecla brought it over the mountains, and set it in the church of St. Martin, and this witnesseth Master John Beleth, saying that the said St. Thecla brought the same finger from beyond the sea into Normandy and there builded a church in the honour of St. John, which church, as it is said, was dedicated and hallowed this same day, wherefore it was stablished of our holy father the pope, that this day should be hallowed through the world.

And Gobert saith that a much devout lady towards St. John was in France, which much prayed to our Lord that he should give to her some relics of the said St. John, and when she saw that it profited not in praying to God, she began to take affiance in God, and avowed that she would fast and never eat meat [food] till she had of him some relic. And when she had fasted certain days she saw upon the table tofore her a finger of marvellous whiteness, and she received with great joy that gift of God. Then after, came thither three bishops, and each of them would have part of the finger. Then by the grace of God the finger dropped three drops of blood upon a cloth by which they knew that each of them had deserved to have a drop. And then Theodolina, queen of the Lombards, founded at Modena, beside Milan, a noble church in the honour of St. John Baptist.

And like as Paul witnesseth in the history of Lombards: And the time passed unto Constance the emperor which would have taken Italy from the Lombards, and he demanded of a holy man which had a spirit of prophecy, how he should do with the battle which he had enterprised. And that man was all night in prayer and came to the emperor and answered to him and said: The queen hath do made a church of St. John Baptist and prayeth continually for the Lombards, and therefore thou mayst not surmount them, but the time shall come that that place shall be despised, and then they shall be overcome. Which was accomplished in the time of Charlemagne.

On a time came a man of great virtue, as St. Gregory saith in his dialogue, whose name was Sanctilus and had received in his keeping a deacon that was taken of the Lombards by such a condition that if he fled he should have his head smitten off. The said Sanctilus constrained the deacon to flee, and delivered him, and when the deacon was gone they took the same Sanctilus and led him forth to be beheaded. And they chose a strong tyrant to do it, and he had no doubt to smite off his head at one stroke. And then the said Sanctilus stretched forth his neck, and the strong butcher lifted up his arm with the sword, and Sanctilus cried, "St. John receive my soul," and then anon the arm of the butcher was so stiff that he could not bring it down again, ne bow it in no manner. And then that butcher made his oath that he would never after in his life smite no Christian man. And the good man Sanctilus prayed for him and anon the arm came down and was all whole.

Then let us pray unto this holy saint John Baptist, to be a moyen between God and us, that we may so live virtuously in this life that when we shall depart, we may come to everlasting life in heaven. Amen.

The [iconography of this saint](#) is available at the [Christian iconography website](#).

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