King Abgar and the Origins of the Legend

It is important to start from a preliminary fact: the legend of the image of Edessa which has prevailed in the tradition is only the culmination of a gradual reworking of previous legends, sometimes very different from each other, of which the genesis and development can be reconstructed to some extent. All, however, agree on the figure of Abgar V Ukkāmā, who, in the same years in which Jesus of Nazareth was alive, ruled over Osroene from the city of Edessa.

The first evidence of the legendary story about him is contained in the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius of Caesarea, written between 311 and 325:

King Abgar, who most outstandingly ruled over the peoples beyond the Euphrates, being his body consumed by a disease that was dreadful and incurable by human power, having heard of the great name of Jesus and of his powers, unanimously attested by all, became His suppliant, sending a letter-bearer entreating a deliverance from his disease. But, though He did not heed the suppliant at the time, He at least deemed him worthy of a personal letter, promising him that He would have sent one of his disciples for the cure of his disease and, at the same time, for the salvation of himself and all his kin [...]. You have also, of this things, written testimony taken from the archives of Edessa, which was at that time a royal city; there indeed, in the public documents, are contained the antiquities and the deeds of Abgar, and these things are found preserved from that time to this day.1

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Eusebius reports a Greek translation of both the letter of Abgar to Jesus and of the answer; both delivered by a courier (ταχυδρόμος) named Ananias. The letters are followed by the story, translated from Syriac, of what happened next: Judas Thomas the apostle sent to Abgar one of the Seventy, Thaddaeus, who healed the king and brought Christianity to Osroene.

It is difficult to determine Eusebius’ source: a Syriac text that he actually had in his hands? Or perhaps, as Eduard Schwartz hypothesized, a fraudulent Greek translation of a supposed original Syriac, a “sketchy political-ecclesiastical fake that makes up a direct relationship between Jesus and Edessa in order to claim an independent status for the Edessean Church?” A more important quest is to establish, as a starting point, the source that dates from the beginning of the fourth century and refers to a legend regarding an alleged correspondence between Abgar and Jesus. In this legend, however, there is no mention whatsoever of any image of Christ.

When the pilgrim Egeria arrived in Edessa from the West, probably in April 384, she could see the aforementioned letters and received, as a gift, a copy of their contents; the allegedly original letters, at that time, were still preserved, not in the archives of the city of which Eusebius spoke, but in the tomb of the Apostle Thomas. Egeria noticed that the text of Jesus’ letter was different from the one she knew: in Edessa there was in fact a newer and more verbose version. In this new version there was a part, absent in the text known by Eusebius, in which Jesus promised that the city of Edessa was to be unconquerable. The letter had therefore gained a prophylactic value: to prove this, Egeria recalls an occasion in which simply exhibiting the relic at the city gate caused the Persians to flee and saved the city from invasion. The apotropaic function of the letter explains the existence and the discovery, in the modern era, of inscriptions and epigraphs that reproduced the text, which were displayed as amulets. The legendary role assumed by the relic is similar, in some respects, to that of the ancient pagan “Ancile of Numa,” a bronze shield said to have


3 It is utterly false that “Eusebius reported in his history of the early church that an object, presumably a cloth with an image, was taken to king Abgar by one of Jesus’ disciples in AD 30” (M. and A. Whanger, The Shroud Of Turin. An Adventure of Discovery, Franklin, Providence, 1998, p. 5. The same mistake is found in R. Hoare, The Turin Shroud is Genuine, Channel Islands, Guernsey, 1994, p. 34).