And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull [...]\(^1\)

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of the skull).\(^2\)

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there.\(^3\)

So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha).\(^4\)

The motif of Adam’s skull at the foot of the Cross as a symbol of the accomplishment of the Redemption of the human race has an indirect origin in the writings of the four Evangelists, all of whom were consistent in saying that the place where Christ was brought for crucifixion was known as ‘skull’: Golghota in Hebrew, locus Calvariae in Latin. My paper has two aims: firstly, to understand how, and on what textual grounds, the legend of Adam’s skull as we know it from late medieval iconography was created; and secondly, to try to ascertain the possible reasons for its success.

The first written source to link Calvary to Adam is Origen’s Commentary on St. Matthew. He writes that the Jews transmitted the information that Adam’s body was buried under the Calvary because ‘For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive’ (1 Corinthians 15: 22).\(^5\) As Origen mentions a Hebrew tradition, it is worth trying to determine what sources he may have had in mind. There are no known written texts from which he might have taken this legend, presuming of course that his knowledge did not come from oral sources. Nonetheless, a series of apocryphal texts dating to between the fourth and fifth centuries offer some indication of

---

1 ‘Et venerunt in locum qui dicitur Golghota quod est Calvariae locus’ (Matthew 27: 33).
2 ‘Et perducunt illum in Golghotha locum quod est interpretatum Calvariae locum’ (Mark 15: 22).
3 ‘Et postquam venerunt in locum qui vocatur Calvariae ibi crucifixerunt eum’ (Luke 23: 33).
4 ‘Susceperunt autem Iesum et eduxerunt et baiulans sibi crucem exivit in eum qui dicitur Calvariae locum hebraice Golghota ubi eum crucifixerunt’ (John 19: 16–18).
the environment that might have produced this piece of information. I am referring here to the various texts that describe the life of Adam and Eve after they were expelled from Paradise. The most useful for our purpose is the Syriac book known as Meʿârath Gazzê, ‘The Cave of Treasures’. It is attributed to Ephrem Syrus, a fourth-century author, even though the version we have is probably not the original, but a later one from the sixth century. It relates how, at the age of 930, Adam, sensing that death was approaching, asked his son Seth to place him in the so-called cave of treasures, and to embalm him with myrrh, cassia and stacte (or nataph: a kind of resin) – three substances with both Biblical and Egyptian resonances that were used to embalm bodies. At any rate, all three substances are from the East, and Pliny and his Greek sources list them among the exotic trees.

Adam demands that later generations of kin, when moving from the place where they had been living, should take his body with them and place him at the centre of the earth, because it is there that he and his sons and daughters would be redeemed:

And the departure of Adam from this world took place in the nine hundred and thirtieth year – according to the reckoning from the beginning – on the fourteenth day of the moon, on the sixth day of the month of Nîsân [April], at the ninth hour, on the day of the Eve of the Sabbath [i.e., Friday]. At the same hour in which the Son of Man delivered up his soul to His Father on the Cross, did our father Adam deliver up his soul to Him that fashioned him; and he departed from this world.

Later on we read more of a parallel between the final events in the life of Christ and Adam’s life:

Know also that Christ was like unto Adam in everything, even as it is written. In that very place where Melchisedek ministered as a priest, and where Abraham offered up his son Isaac as an offering, the wood of the Cross was set up, and that self-same place is the centre of the earth, and there the Four Quarters of the earth meet each other. For when God made the earth His mighty power was running before it, and the earth was running after it,

---


7 Pliny, Naturalis Historia, XII, 33–35; he also adds: ‘Nihilque eius rei causa in Italia victrice omnium, in Europa vero tota praeter irim Illyricam et nardum Gallicum gignitur’; ibidem, XIII, 2.

8 The Book of the Cave 72.