

expressed idea.' Meanwhile, as Mr Buchanan says: 'Religion is waiting to be properly interpreted and expressed in film'.

Unless Christians will conquer their suspicions of the cinema as a medium, and will get inside and crusade as craftsmen, the only function left to Christian film criticism will be the defensive, negative, necessary but defeatist, one of censorship.

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## THE TRADITION OF THE MARIES IN PROVENCE

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**F**EW local traditions of evangelisation have been maintained with as much tenacity and defended with as much passion as that of the Bethany household and the Maries in Provence. Among Catholics of the modern dioceses of Marseilles, Aix, Avignon and Fréjus, which have succeeded the medieval dioceses of the same churches and those of Orange, Carpentras, Apt, Arles and Toulon, now divided between the four survivors, the belief that their province was christianised by these Gospel figures is held with conviction and is still a source of devotion. Whereas elsewhere the name and legend of the first bishop are only matters of archaeology, in Provence the memory of Lazarus and his sisters, of Mary Salome and Mary the mother of James, is a living one, honoured by novena, procession and pilgrimage in the crypt of St Victor's abbey in Marseilles and in those of the churches of Tarascon, Saint-Maximin and Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, and in the cave sanctuary known as the Sainte-Baume.

The knowledge of this tradition comes generally as a surprise to English Catholics. Nevertheless, at least one episode of the series—that of Mary Magdalen's penance in the Sainte-Baume—has been frequently reproduced in works of art and provides, indeed the usual setting for fifteenth to nineteenth century paintings of the saint. For the rocky background against which so many pictures of her are placed is that of the cave near Marseilles where she is alleged to have dwelt for thirty years, expiating her early life of sin.

One's first movement on hearing of these legends is to shrug

one's shoulders at what one supposes to be yet another medieval fabrication, especially when one learns that their chief opponents in modern times have been Mgr Duchesne and Abbé Vacandard, and that among their defenders no scholar of equal repute is to be found. But the matter is not as simple as that. The evidence put forward by the defenders is worthy of consideration and there is, to say the least, room for much doubt. While certainty in such matters can never be reached, it seems as temerarious to deny the facts alleged by the tradition as to accept them. Moreover, one of the saints involved, St Mary Magdalen, is still the object of so much devotion throughout the Church that a tradition concerning her can claim to be of more than local interest.

The Provençal traditions declare that the regions south-east of the Rhone, whose main cities are Marseilles, Aix, Arles and Avignon, first heard the Christian message preached to them, half a generation after Christ's Ascension, by a group of people, the chief of whom all figure in the Gospel story. These are: the Bethany household of Lazarus, Martha and Mary (Mary in Provence always means Mary Magdalen); the two other Mariés, Salome and the mother of James; Maximinus, one of the seventy-two disciples; and Sidonius, the man born blind whose cure by Jesus is recorded in John IX. In their most credible form, the traditions assert that these people landed either at Marseilles or a little further west, near the mouth of the Rhone, on the site of the present Saintes Maries de la Mer, and, dividing up the field of their labours, scattered to various points. Lazarus went to Marseilles, of which city he became bishop and where he was martyred, Martha to Avignon, and Maximinus and Mary Magdalen to Aix and *Castrum Rhodonas*, the modern Saint-Maximin, where they died and were buried.

The more legendary episodes in the story are: the boat without oars or sails in which these personages were set adrift by the Jews; the dragon which Martha destroyed on the site of the future Tarascon; the thirty years penance of Mary Magdalen or, rather, certain circumstances attending that penance. Of these, the boat occurs only in quite late versions.

There is not, of course, and almost certainly never will be, any contemporary evidence of the presence of this group in Gaul. The field on which defenders and attackers wage war is the antiquity of

the belief. The former claim that its existence is proved from the seventh century at the latest; the latter date the invention of the story from the mid-eleventh century. The datable direct evidence does not, indeed, go back earlier than this century; other evidence, in the shape of lives of saints, may be earlier but cannot be dated with a degree of certainty that everyone will accept. The evidence that carries us back furthest is indirect; under this heading I am classing the 'discoveries' of 1187, 1279 and 1448.

Let us take first the items of direct evidence.

The earliest dated mention of part of the tradition is contained in a bull of Benedict IX of 1040. The original is lost but it is preserved in a charter of the same century. It refers to the consecration of the abbey church of St Victor in Marseilles and tells us that, once the Saracens had been driven out, the ancient abbey was restored from its ruins and its crypts were enriched with the bodies, 'passiones', of the martyrs Victor and his companions and of St Lazarus 'raised from the dead by Jesus Christ'. This is a proof of the cult of Lazarus in Marseilles in 1040 and of the belief that his body was preserved there.

The next is a letter written towards 1070 by Rostang de Fos, archbishop of Aix. In it he begs for alms in order to enlarge an oratory, founded at Aix in honour of the Saviour by Maximinus and now much too small for the number of the faithful. Rostang refers to the mission in Provence of Maximinus, one of the seventy-two, of Lazarus and Mary Magdalen; to Lazarus' sojourn in that city and his position as bishop there; to that of Maximinus and Mary Magdalen in Aix, of which Maximinus became the first bishop (or rather, archbishop, for Rostang reads back into the first century the hierarchical distinction between the two sees which existed until 1948), and to the fact that both of them were buried 'apud nos'.

To the same century belongs the appearance of Mary Magdalen's cult in Vézelay. The well-known abbey on the confines of Burgundy and the Auxerrois, which had been founded in the late ninth century, declared towards the middle of the eleventh century that it possessed the body of the saint. It was under the abbacy of Geoffrey, installed in 1037, that it first claimed to own this treasure. The earliest account of her cult in Vézelay does not say how her body got there. Later, the monks asserted that it had been brought from Saint-Maximin. Two different versions were

put out. In the earlier, the bodies of both Mary Magdalen and Maximinus were removed by a certain knight called Adelelm, whose brother Odo was abbot of Vézelay. In the later, only Mary Magdalen's remains were secured, not by a knight but by the founder of the abbey, the half-legendary Gerard of Roussillon, and a monk called Badilo. This second account is preceded by the relation of Mary Magdalen's arrival in Gaul and of her burial in a place called Saint-Maximin. We shall revert to the Vézelay version later since its existence has been used both for and against the Provençal tradition.

Direct evidence of a sanctuary at the Sainte-Baume is not older than the beginning of the twelfth century, when the place is called Sancta Maria de Balma,<sup>1</sup> which suggests a shrine of our Lady rather than of Mary Magdalen.

The earliest mention of what is now known as Les Saintes Maries de la Mer also calls the place Sancta Maria, adding the mysterious word *de Ratis*. This word is generally translated as 'of the boat', the preposition *de* being presumably followed by the genitive. The name first appears in the sixth century when St Cesarius of Arles, who died in 543, bequeathed to the convent which he had founded in that city an 'agellum sylvanicum in quo est sita ecclesia Sanctae Mariae de Ratis'. When Count William I had driven the Saracens out of Provence in 975 he restored Sancta Maria de Ratis to the convent. The church is mentioned in several charters of the eleventh century. The change from *de Ratis* to *de Mare* took place early in the twelfth century and, later still, the plural was substituted. Here, too, we seem to have a shrine of our Lady that has been diverted from its original consecration.

Other pieces of evidence which may be called direct are not easy to date. The bulkiest and most impressive is a life of St Mary Magdalen published by Faillon<sup>2</sup> and attributed by this scholar to Rabanus Maurus, archbishop of Mainz, who died in 856. It is agreed today that Faillon's attribution, on the strength of a fourteenth-century manuscript in Magdalen College, Oxford, is wrong, and it is customary to refer to the unknown author as the pseudo-Rabanus Maurus, but Faillon's date of the ninth century is

<sup>1</sup> *Balma* means 'cave'.

<sup>2</sup> *Monuments inédits sur l'apostolat de Marie-Madeleine en Provence*, two vols., Paris, 1848.

supported by Fathers Van Haeke and Benjamin Bossue<sup>3</sup> on the grounds that he refers to heretical tendencies concerning the cult of images and auricular confession that belong to this century, and that his enumeration of the provinces of Gaul also corresponds to the situation at that period. To this one may add that there is no mention of Vézelay, and that Spain is said to have been evangelised by seven disciples, among whom St James does not figure. This would make it earlier than the tenth century. The life is preserved in several manuscripts, the oldest of which dates from the twelfth century, whilst the latest is the Oxford one whence Faillon derived his knowledge of the work. As this life contains the greater part of the tradition, if this date is correct the existence of the beliefs is carried back two hundred years earlier than the letter of Rostang de Fos.

This life contains the part of the tradition that speaks of the presence in Provence of Mary Magdalen, Martha and Maximinus. At the scattering of the Apostles in the fourteenth year after the Ascension, Peter sent to Gaul and to Spain twenty-four 'elders', at the head of whom was Maximinus, one of our Lord's seventy-two disciples. They were accompanied by a number of holy women, Mary Magdalen, Martha 'who wished to walk in her sister's steps', Marcella, Martha's servant, and others who are not named. The party landed near Marseilles, 'at the place where the Rhone flows into the Gallic sea'. Maximinus and Mary Magdalen went to Aquae Sextii (Aix), the capital of the Narbonnensis Secunda, Martha to Avignon, the others to their allotted posts. Mary Magdalen sojourned with Maximinus and the company of faithful whom her preaching had converted, dividing her time between contemplation and evangelisation. Martha christianised the land along the lower Rhone between Avignon and Arles. It was in the course of her mission that she tamed and destroyed the dragon, called the Tarasque, which was harrying the district and whose lair was a desert spot called Nerluc, or the black wood. After its extermination the place took the name of Tarascon and Martha settled there. Here she died and received burial. Mary Magdalen had died a few days before her sister and was buried, not at Aix, but at the place which was eventually to be called

<sup>3</sup> *Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 8, Oct., p. 29, T.LVI and vol. 9, Oct., p. 452, T.LVII; quoted by J. Escudier, *L'Évangélisation primitive de la Provence*, Toulon, 1929; p. 54.

Saint-Maximin. Maximinus ordered that he should lie in the same sepulchre.

The oldest martyrologies, the *Parvum Romanum* and those of Adon (858) and Usuardus (875), mention a feast of St Lazarus and St Martha on December 17th. Now the pseudo-Rabanus tells us that this was the date on which Martha consecrated her house at Tarascon as an oratory in honour of the Saviour. If this life really dates from the ninth century, it would seem that the existence of her cult and that of her brother in Tarascon can be dated back to the time of the earliest of these martyrologies. Moreover, this cult was well enough known for the church of Rome to take from it the date of celebration of the feast of these saints in the Eternal City. December 17th is still the day on which the feast of St Lazarus is kept in several dioceses of France.

The life contains only one other reference to Lazarus. Among the illustrious women who wished to accompany the westward-bound missionaries was, we are told,

‘Martha, whose brother Lazarus was bishop in Cyprus’. The pseudo-Rabanus shows no knowledge of Lazarus’ mission in Marseilles.

There is no mention of the Sainte-Baume by name, but a long allusion to something resembling the saint’s life there must be quoted:

‘That after Our Saviour’s Ascension she should have fled at once into the Arabian desert, should have lived there unknown to all, without clothing, in a cave, and that she should have seen no one; that, visited by a priest, she should have asked him for his garments, and suchlike details, are as many false stories, borrowed by fable-mongers from the story of the Egyptian penitent’.

At first sight, it seems impossible to point out and condemn more precisely the legend that was to become localised at the Sainte-Baume. Faillon, however, reminds us that the legend of St Mary of Egypt never asserted that the penitent dwelt in a cave; that detail belongs only to the story of the Magdalen. The pseudo-Rabanus’ strictures, therefore, however severe, are a proof that this element of her tradition was already in existence in the ninth century (always assuming that the dating of his life is correct).

Finally, the life contains a description of the church that was built over her tomb and that of Maximinus. It belonged to an abbey so holy that no warrior dared enter it without first doffing his armour, and no woman ever crossed its threshold. The saint's tomb, it says, is made of white marble and bears carved upon it the scene in the house of Simon the Pharisee. These details are found also in a much shorter life of the saint which reads like an extract from a lost life of Maximinus. Faillon, who first published it, thought it older, though the earliest manuscripts date also from the twelfth century. They were also repeated by the Vézelay monk in the second of the two explanations of how his abbey came to possess the saint's body.

The supporters of the tradition have made use of an English martyrology preserved in an early twelfth-century manuscript which Father Thurston<sup>4</sup> thought might date from the ninth century and has been called Alfred's martyrology. Under July 22nd, it gives the story of Mary Magdalen and relates how, after our Lord's Ascension,

'she was so much afflicted by his absence that she would see no man any more and withdrew into the desert where she lived unknown for thirty years. She neither ate nor drank, but at each hour of prayer the angels of God came down from Heaven and raised her into the air, and she heard heavenly music, after which they took her down to her cave in the rock. For this reason, she felt neither hunger nor thirst. After thirty years, a priest met her in the desert and led her to his church and gave her Holy Communion, and she gave up the ghost to God and the priest buried her, and many wonders were wrought by her grave.'

Neither the Sainte-Baume nor the Arabian desert is named, but it is clear that we have here the kind of legend, partly borrowed from the story of Mary of Egypt, which the pseudo-Rabanus attacked so scathingly. It carries back the date at which apocryphal additions were made to the body of the tradition but also the time at which the detail of the saint's life 'in a cave' was accepted. This is probably the oldest mention of that part of the Provençal tradition centred in the Sainte-Baume.

4 *Month*, Vol. XCII (1899), p. 75; cf. Escudier, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

The traditionalists allege also in their favour that no other traditions have ever existed to explain the founding of the churches of Marsilles, Aix and Avignon. If the traditions are inventions of the ninth to eleventh centuries or, at any rate, if they are groundless, these churches are exceptional in Gaul, if not unique, in that they have kept no memory of their foundation. This is not a proof; nevertheless the absence of any alternative account of founders is a fact favourable to the Bethany-Maximinus tradition.

*(to be continued in the October number)*

#### NOTICE

The October number of BLACKFRIARS will contain 'Broadcasting and Spoken English' by David Lloyd James, 'Saunders Lewis' by Professor Idris Foster, 'A Vernacular Faith' by Renée Haynes, 'Language and Metaphysics' by Columba Ryan, O.P., and the conclusion of Professor Girdlestone's study of 'The Tradition of the Maries in Provence'.