

## ABSTRACT

### **“*Gerusalemme storiata*: The Holy Land among the Antiquarians”**

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Though sixteenth-century antiquarians often used their methodological savvy to aid and abet the wishful thinking of forgers like Annius of Viterbo, ideally they aspired to cleanse sacred as well as secular history of misleading medieval accretions. In many cases, this pursuit of a more historicized vision of the past led them to dispense with the collective memory of pilgrims, whose quest for immanence dictated an essentially ahistorical approach to relics and ruins. In Rome, for example, Poggio Bracciolini and his intellectual heirs arrayed themselves self-consciously against the myths and misattributions attached to ancient ruins by medieval pilgrimage guides like the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*.

There was one place, however, that proved particularly vexing to the antiquarian project: the Christian Holy Land. As Maurice Halbwachs first signaled in his 1941 study of *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte*, the Holy Land owes its very existence to the fictitious, ahistorical imagination of late antique and medieval pilgrimage guides; strip away the legends, and nothing remains to historicize. As any good reader of Josephus knew, the Jerusalem of the Passion simply ceased to exist in 70 AD, when Titus and Vespasian destroyed the Second Temple and razed the city. The Holy Places known to sixteenth-century travelers were by and large untrustworthy fourth- and twelfth-century localizations, the fruits of Constantine’s and the Crusaders’ efforts to recreate the Holy Land according to contemporary tastes. For this reason, some sixteenth-century antiquarians came to distrust the Holy Land, leveraging eyewitness accounts of the Levant to question the traditional site of the Holy Sepulcher or the biblical description of arid Palestine as a “Promised Land.” (Such doubts appear in the writings of Erasmus, Miguel Servet, Sebastian Münster, and Christiaan van Adrichem, to name but a few.)

Most antiquarians, however, were loathe to raise such radical doubts about the traditional Christian cult of the Holy Land, and many continued to sustain a conventional, and highly ‘textual,’ vision of the biblical Levant in spite of their fellow antiquarians’ respect for the importance of eyewitness observation. In some cases, their support of traditional legend stemmed from their engagement with the humanist project of biblical exegesis. Guided not only by the recent example of Nicholas of Lyra, but also by their reading of Eusebius and Jerome, Renaissance exegetes argued that proper understanding of the sacred texts was inextricably bound up with an intimate and accurate knowledge of biblical topography—which could in turn be garnered from the etymological dissection of the biblical text. Other scholars, meanwhile, may have been reluctant to part with the conventional view of the Holy Land largely because of the institutional environments in which they worked. Many of the best early students of the historical Holy Land were members of the Franciscan Order, whose *Custodia Terrae Sanctae* was responsible for the upkeep of the Holy Places, the guardianship of Holy Land pilgrims, and the general promotion of the traditional cult of the Holy Land.

In my contribution, I will look at how antiquarians wrestled with the challenge posed by rewriting the history of a landscape that not only had ceased to be, as Leonard Barkan has

put it, but that had never existed in the first place. I will focus particularly on the interaction between pilgrims' and antiquarians' dissonant ways of seeing and authenticating biblical ruins, in an effort to gain greater insight into the relationship between Christian antiquity and historical method in the Renaissance.