

## Edessan sources for the legend of the Holy Grail

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### Abstract

*Second-century Edessan King Abgar VIII is shown to be the originator of the account of the apostolic conversion of Abgar V. After Edessa's flood in 201, he built a new royal complex on high ground, thence known in Syriac as the BIRTHA. Documents attest that BIRTHA became Britium in Latin. The Easter display of Edessa's Christ-image as changing its appearance from Child to Crucified became the secret of the Grail in its legends. Glastonbury later usurped the name Abgar as the fictitious king who brought the Faith to Britain, inventing Joseph of Arimathea as Britain's apostle.*

**Keywords:** Lucius Abgar VIII, BIRTHA, Eleutherus, melismos

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In Edessa, a cloth bearing a faint life-sized image made directly from the face of Jesus is reported in the sixth-century Greek apocryphon called the *Acts of Thaddaeus (AT)* [1] and with different details in the earlier fourth-century Syriac *Doctrine of Addai (DA)* [2]. Sculpted renderings of Jesus' bearded face began in the fourth century, and copies of Edessa's image exist from the sixth century on. So it seems to have been a real and impressive image. Its arrival in Edessa is contained in the legends surrounding the healing of Edessan King Abgar V Ukkama, a contemporary of Jesus who ruled from 4 BCE to 50 CE.

In 1978 Ian Wilson's brilliant research first drew our attention to Edessa and its Abgar V legend [3]. Wilson's Edessa insight continues to be the only plausible early historical venue—after the New Testament—of the elusive Shroud. This fact obviously precludes the Shroud's presence anywhere else during the years immediately after the Resurrection, especially since none of the claimed venues mentions a shroud or even an image of Jesus. The rule remains: history proceeds from documents.

The writer of the Syriac *DA* said he found the Abgar V story in the city's archives already in Syriac [4]. J. B. Segal, the major historian of Edessa [5], has already concluded that this archival original contained a reference to the correspondence between Abgar and Jesus as well as a reference to a remarkable image of Jesus, one which refused to be described simply as a Byzantine icon. He writes that the story must have arisen during the monarchy at Edessa, i.e., before its subordination by Rome in 242. Thus this record in Edessa's Syriac archives antedated and was indeed the direct source of the *DA* and other versions of Edessa's conversion.

I have turned up evidence that points directly to the late-second-century Edessan king Lucius Abgar VIII Megas

(Abgar the Great, 177-212 CE) as the originator of the legend of Abgar V's apostolic conversion. It was he who inserted the Abgar V story—as we have it—in the royal archives. This king was concerned to provide his lands with a conversion by a direct disciple of Jesus. In fact, we now have evidence that Abgar VIII himself was converted to the orthodox Faith—and at a time when all manner of Christian teachings were competing for the minds and hearts of the people of Edessa.

The writer of the *DA* thus will have found in the archives that Abgar V, who suffered a crippling ailment, sent his agents on a mission to the Roman governor at Eleutheropolis. We know this information can only have come from Abgar VIII's time, since it was only about 200 that Roman emperor Lucius Septimius Severus renamed the town of Beth Gubrin as Eleutheropolis, to celebrate his granting of municipal status to its people.

There is more: significantly, according to Rome's sixth-century *Liber Pontificalis*, King Lucius Abgar VIII—who took his nomenclature to honor his Roman conqueror, the same Lucius Septimius Severus—sent a letter to Pope Eleutherus (175-189) asking for missionaries to come and preach the Faith in his city [6]. We also know from the important Roman historian Dio Cassius (150-235) [7] that this Abgar, now friend of the Roman Empire, paid a celebrated state visit to Rome in the time of Pope Eleutherus. The coincidence of Abgar's letter to the pope and his presence in Rome argue strongly for Abgar VIII's studied acceptance of orthodox Christianity. It speaks to the determined efforts of this king to combat paganism (as his contemporary Bardaisan wrote in his *Dialogus de Fato*).

In the pre-Nicene setting of Abgar VIII, still a time of multiple Christian sects, we may surmise that this Christian king wisely saw the value of his city's conversion by an immediate colleague of Jesus, one who would surely be in a position to teach the most orthodox form of Christian beliefs, as received from an intimacy

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with Jesus himself. Hence, we find the story of Abgar V's first-century conversion and the roles of Thomas and Thaddaeus/Addai inserted in the archives. There we read that on the return of Abgar V's delegation from Eleutheropolis, they reported seeing Jesus healing the sick in Jerusalem. This led to Abgar's letter to Jesus asking him to come and heal him. Jesus then appointed Thomas to bring or send a reply. Thomas sent Addai (Syriac for Thaddaeus) who, ironically and pointedly, spoke to Abgar the famous words of Jesus to Thomas drawn from John's Gospel (20:29): "Blessed are those who believe though they have not seen". Addai then adds Jesus' praise of Abgar: "Because you have believed in me, may the city in which you dwell be blessed and may the enemy never prevail over it" [8]. It was Abgar VIII who stood to gain by permitting the story of Jesus' epistolary promise to protect Edessa to be published in the city's archives. Under Abgar VIII, Edessa's defenses were in good hands.

This does not mean that Abgar V never became a Christian or that he never obtained the Shroud, but only that the famous legend of his conversion contained some key elements that could only have been written 150 years later, in the time of Abgar VIII. Besides the Eleutherus connections, let us notice that, in the name of orthodoxy, several other second-century figures populate the account of Abgar V's conversion in the first century: Palut, Edessa's bishop, next named in the existing account after the first-century Bishop Aggai, went to Antioch around 200 CE to receive ordination from Bishop Serapion (190-203), who had taken his own office at the hand of Zephyrinus, bishop of Rome (199-217) [9].

Segal, in his great book in 1970, has called the legend a successful "pious hoax"—as it stands—but he had no doubts about a first-century conversion of Edessa. I submit that by "hoax", Segal means to say that he has also noticed these anachronistic elements, i.e., so many second-century elements in a first-century setting [10].

We can, I think, all agree that there never was a Mandylion (meaning the image of Jesus' face on cloth associated with his ministry). We may also agree that Edessa's imaged cloth was always the Shroud, folded and framed to expose only the face.

I would argue that the writers of both the fourth-century *DA* and the sixth-century *AT* were eyewitnesses of Edessa's cloth image, for they actually try to describe it and their descriptions are plausible. The *DA* called it a face of Jesus made with "choice pigments", which may hint at the very faint dilute appearance of the image of the Turin Shroud [11]. Otherwise, "choice pigments" would be an entirely gratuitous and virtually meaningless expression. In the *AT*, Abgar's agent was unable to capture the appearance of Jesus when he tried to make the portrait which Abgar had requested. "Knowing this, Jesus asked for a towel, on which he wiped his face, leaving his image miraculously on the cloth". It was afterwards described as *acheiropoietos*, or image "not made by human hands". Describing the towel, this author called it

a *sinдон tetrádiplon* [12]. Given that these words can be translated as a "burial wrap folded in eight" and given the obvious faintness of an image formed by the mere wiping of Jesus' face, we may accept that our anonymous author had seen the folded Shroud in Edessa and has given us a version of the legend that virtually defines the faint image on the Turin Shroud.

## 2. ON ABGAR VIII

A short digression on the character and mind of Lucius Abgar VIII will reveal him as a man who truly deserves the epithet "the Great". The "Chronicle of Edessa", dated about 540, contains a chronological account of the city's history in 106 entries [13]. The entries are short, most of them needing only one or two lines. Entry 8, on the great flood of 201, is unique in its great length and in the clear signs that it was originally composed by Abgar VIII himself. Edessan scholar Andrew Palmer has noted: "This report, though it is one of the most famous texts in the Syriac language, has never been studied closely". I will paraphrase most of it, keeping with the general tone of Palmer's translation. The scribes have properly placed Abgar in the third person, but his reactions and motivations seem surely to have been dictated by the king himself:

"In the year 201, in the reigns of Severus and of King Abgar VIII, the water of the Daisan River spilled over the battlements, devastating the splendid palace of our Lord the King and all the city's fine buildings in its path. King Abgar retreated to the safety of the acropolis above his palace. The water also ruined the nave of the church of the Christians. This catastrophe cost more than two thousand people their lives, and the city was filled with the sound of screaming.

"When King Abgar saw what devastation had been caused, he commanded that the width of the river bed should be enlarged as determined by experts in land surveying. King Abgar commanded, moreover, that a winter palace be built in the high ground [*Birtha*] for the dwelling of his majesty.

"In order to restore the stability of the city, King Abgar commanded that the taxes of its citizens should be remitted for five years, to give the population time to recover its strength and to restore the buildings of the city.

"This event was recorded *according to the directions of King Abgar*. And it was received and entered into the archives by the Keepers of the Archive". (Italics added.)

We should note the entirely rational tone and modern "ring" of this text, without any expected religious nuance. Notice Abgar's (i.e., the government's) socio-economic "stimulus" solutions in the form of taxation relief for the citizens after that crippling disaster. This is the character of one of the truly great rulers of the ancient world.

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## 3. EDESSA'S EASTER RITUAL [14]

My next and extremely important notice is the Easter ritual involving Edessa's famous *shroud*. Every Easter the cloth was exposed for the public in a most remarkable manner: at the first hour (6 a.m.) Jesus' image was displayed as an infant, at the third hour (9 a.m.) as a child, at the sixth hour (noon) as a youth, and at the ninth hour (3 p.m.) as the crucified Jesus. How this "polymorphic Jesus" display was achieved remains a matter of conjecture.

Sometime after the cloth was sent to Constantinople in 944, a new Eucharistic service called *melismos* (fraction of the bread) began to be practiced [15]. During the Byzantine liturgy (or Mass) the loaf of leavened bread was carried to the altar on a *kylix* (a shallow chalice) or on a *diskos* (paten) covered by a cloth image of the infant Jesus. The cloth was removed, and the bread was cut into communion morsels with a *longche* (miniature lance). As the bread was taken in communion, the child Jesus changed symbolically into the adult Jesus of the Last Supper and Crucifixion. One cannot easily guess why the Child should have a place in this commemoration of the Last Supper, unless it was inspired by the polymorphic or changing Jesus of the Shroud's Easter display celebrated for centuries in Edessa [16]. The *melismos* service would have been one of the experiences that crusader knights brought home in the very period when the Grail romances were being developed in the fertile minds of French poets.

My project is to show that Edessa's history and legends were fictitiously replayed in Britain. In this way, the Shroud helped to define the legend of the Holy Grail.

## 4. THE HOLY GRAIL

All of the above existed in the world centuries before the Holy Grail ever saw the light of day. Though the word *grail*, or its French variants, described an ordinary table dish or bowl [17], our object, the *Holy Grail*, was invented between 1180 and 1200 by a French poet named Chrétien de Troyes. Chrétien described it as a large platter holding only a single communion host. It was carried in procession to a crippled king (remember crippled Abgar V). The theme of his poem was the quest for the Holy Grail by Perceval, a knight of King Arthur. More importantly, soon after Chrétien, and certainly before 1191, another French writer, Robert de Boron, provided a *history* for the Holy Grail, which he said—for the first time in all literature—was the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Strangely, then, two French poets set their magnificent story of the Holy Grail in Britain [18]. Fortunately, how and why this began can now be revealed.

In the eighth century, Venerable Bede, writing his *Ecclesiastical History of Britain* [19], tells us that his friend Nothelm, working in papal files in Rome, found a

stunning item in the *Liber Pontificalis*, which contained the important events under each pope to that time. Under late-second-century Pope Eleutherus he read: "This pope received a letter from *Lucio Britannio rege* [which he interpreted to be a British King Lucius] asking for assistance in converting his lands to the Faith" [20].

This was welcome news to Bede. *Up until this moment nobody had ever heard of a King Lucius in Britain*. Here, he thought, was evidence that Britain had become Christian already in the second century. Of course, he was wrong. The problem is that there were no national kings in Britain in the second century, when it was still a province of Rome. Moreover, Adolph Harnack, the great German scholar of the Church, wrote in 1904 that there was only one King Lucius who converted to the Faith in the second century: Lucius Abgar VIII of Edessa—the same who visited Rome in the time of Pope Eleutherus. Rome was then, in a fashion, Eleutheropolis, the "city of Eleutherus" [21].

But every British historian and clergyman read Bede. His non-existent King Lucius of Britain thus became an important "reality" as the king who brought the Faith to Britain in the second century, as Lucius Abgar VIII had done in Edessa. In fact, the story of Edessa's conversion under Abgar V had long been available in Latin Europe for later British writers to exploit. The fourth-century pilgrim Egeria knew it [22], Pope Stephen III knew it in 769 [23], and medieval British writers Ordericus Vitalis ca. 1131-1141 [24] and Gervase of Tilbury ca. 1211 knew it. Gervase actually gives two versions of the faint image of Jesus' whole body on his burial sheet [25]. We will see that virtually everything in the conversion stories of Britain was drawn from the story of Abgar V in Edessa.

The plot is about to thicken. About 1136 British historian Geoffrey of Monmouth [26], unconcerned about Bede's British King Lucius, discovered a first-century British king named Arviragus in the pages of the Roman satirist Juvenal (fl. 98-128) [27]. Poking fun at a street-corner poet, Juvenal wrote: "Veiento blurts out flimsy sycophantic prophecies to an emperor: 'You will capture some king—perhaps Arviragus will tumble out of his British wagon'". Juvenal must have drawn the name of this king from Edessa's King Abgar VII (109-116), pronounced "Avgarus" and prominent in Rome, since he had then been causing trouble in the East.

Again, as in the case of "British King Lucius", there never was a King Arviragus in Britain. Juvenal's Arviragus was a satirical joke. Since the legendary letter of "British King Lucius" to Pope Eleutherus reflects a real second-century event, but in Edessa and not Britain [28], in another study [29] I asked if an earlier—apostolic—conversion of Britain might also have a parallel in Edessa.

I found that the name of Arviragus, placed by Geoffrey between 44 and 54 CE, may indeed be the mirror of Edessa's Abgar V of the same period [30]. The very names of these kings are virtual homophones for each other, especially when the Greek "Avgaros" and Latin

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“Avgarus” are seen against the frequent scribal variant “Arvigarus” in Geoffrey’s *History of the Kings of Britain*.

When Geoffrey resurrected the name of Arviragus from five lines in Juvenal’s *Satire IV* after his 1000-year absence from all known records and embellished him in seven pages as a major enemy of the Romans in Britain, he did not know what he was hatching. On the subject of British religious history, Geoffrey knew only what Bede had provided about British King Lucius. And Bede himself knew no Arviragus.

A full two hundred years after Geoffrey, Glastonbury’s monks, concerned to enhance their abbey as the birthplace of Christianity in Britain, adopted Arviragus as an enabler of British Christianity, as Bede had done with Lucius. But unlike Bede’s rather innocent mistake, the reinvention of Arviragus in Glastonbury in the first century was a deliberate fabrication taken directly from Geoffrey.

Here is the evidence. About 1125 William of Malmesbury had written a definitive *History of the Church in Glastonbury* [31]. The name of Arviragus was absent. In 1342 John of Glastonbury updated William’s book. In his *Chronicle*, taking a cue from Glastonbury monk Adam of Domerham (*fl.* 1290), John inserted Geoffrey’s Arviragus into this history as the king who provided Glastonbury land for Jesus’ disciple Joseph of Arimathea to build the first Christian church [32]. Why Joseph? Known in the New Testament mainly for providing Jesus’ shroud, Joseph had entered Edessa’s story quietly when, whether already in Edessa or later in Constantinople, their imaged cloth came to be recognized as Jesus’ burial shroud.

The hypothesis that the history and legends of Edessa’s conversion were transported to Britain continues to be reinforced. The role of both Arviragus in Britain and Abgar V in Edessa was to preempt their respective second-century counterparts (both named Lucius) by introducing Christianity into their lands at the hands of a direct disciple of Jesus (Joseph of Arimathea and Thaddaeus). In both accounts, the purpose of this was to elevate their kingdoms to leading places in the hierarchy of neighboring national churches.

We return now to the question as to why the two French creators of the Holy Grail legends located their stories not in France but in England. Recall that after the flood of 201 Abgar VIII built a new royal precinct on the high hill above the city and that their word for this was the *Birtha*. Both Thaddaeus and Thomas, the apostolic missionaries identified with Edessa, were buried with honor in the *Birtha*, among the graves of Edessa’s kings.

The next point is very important: in the time of Abgar VIII, Clement of Alexandria, one of the Fathers of the early Church, wrote that “Thaddaeus and Thomas were buried in *Britium Edessenorum*”, clearly signifying “in the *Birtha* of the Edessenes” [33]. So we may now urge with textual evidence that the word *Birtha* came over into Latin as “Britium” and that the “British King Lucius” found by Bede in the *Liber Pontificalis* was indeed Lucius Abgar

VIII of Britium (Edessa)—as Harnack already attested—and not some non-existent King Lucius of Britannia.

The quest for the Holy Grail rarely found success. Only the best knight could achieve (comprehend) it. At least two Grail romances deal with the achievement of the Grail by the greatest knight. In the prose romance called the *Perlesvaus* (which followed and used Robert’s proto-history of the Grail), Sir Gawain achieved the secret of the Grail [34]. What is the Grail’s ultimate secret that only the greatest knight may experience? In the Grail, Gawain first sees the infant Jesus. Then the Grail is removed. When it next comes before Gawain, he sees in it the crucified Jesus. The Christ Child has changed mystically into the adult Christ. The secret of the Holy Grail was to experience Christ born and Christ crucified.

In the romance called the *Vulgate Queste*, constructed upon the themes of Robert de Boron, the hero is the perfect knight Galahad. He also sees in the Grail the same “polymorphic” (changing) Jesus. After that, he dies, having achieved all he had ever wished for in life. Here is the scene in which the best knight achieves the secret of the Holy Grail: [35]

“Next Josephus [invented son of Joseph of Arimathea, not found in Robert] entered upon the consecration of the Mass. . . . He took from the vessel a host made in the likeness of bread. As he raised it aloft, there descended from above a figure like to a child, and he entered into the bread, which took on human form before the eyes of those assembled there. . . . Then raising his eyes, he saw the figure of a man appear from out of the Holy Vessel, unclothed and bleeding from his hands and feet and side”.

We have already seen how the Byzantine *melismos* Eucharistic practice strangely involved the Christ Child’s image placed over the communion bread to then “become” the body of the adult Jesus of the Last Supper and Crucifixion. This was derived from Edessa’s Easter exposition of its famous image, appearing to change from Child to Crucified throughout the day. The Shroud was not the Grail, but given the numerous Edessan parallels, we must accept that the romances surrounding the very secrets of the Grail have also been drawn from the legends and history of the Shroud in its Edessan period.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The links are too many to be simply coincidental: we meet with a confusion caused by similarity of lands (Britain; Britium), royal names (British kings Lucius and Arviragus/Arvigarus and Edessan kings Lucius Abgar VIII and Abgar V/Avgarus), dates (late second century), accidentals (Eleutherus; Eleutheropolis), and identical story functions (to invite missionaries and introduce Christianity to their respective lands). All of this, and the secret of the Grail too, may now be traced to Edessa.

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