

Like a Seal on Your Arm: The Tradition of Tattooing among Jerusalem Pilgrims

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Jean de Thévenot is satisfied. He has just been knighted as a chevalier in the Canons Regular of the Holy Sepulchre, who are the guardians of the Holy Places. This should help him on the journey back to “Christendom.” We are in April 1658, the Franco-Spanish War is still raging but, according to rumor, the Spanish do not imprison knights even if they are French. Now he is leaving the Holy Land, but his record does not include the traditional paper document certifying pilgrimage. Thévenot took care of this omission four days earlier; by “getting marks put upon our arms, as all pilgrims commonly do.”

The description he gives of how this operation is done – the first we have – leaves no doubt that indeed Jean de Thévenot had his arm tattooed (figure 1). By 1658, it was already more than two hundred years since western Christians had adopted the oriental tradition of being tattooed as proof of their pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The first written record of a tattoo on the skin of a western Christian dates back to 1484. In the diary of his pilgrimage, Jan van Aest de Mâlines mentions a knight who has just died. Undressing the body in preparation for the burial revealed that it was tattooed with

two complete circular shapes interspersed with palms and crosses, as was the custom of knights. One circular shape was on his torso, the other on his back; a cross on his left shoulder, a second on his right shoulder. Neither his first nor his second wife, or his father, or mother, nor anyone else, knew anything about it.

*Translated from the original French
by Carol Khoury.*

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, accounts by pilgrims mention this tradition. The “tattoo artists”¹ who served the westerners were the dragomans (interpreters) of the Franciscans. According to Jean de Thévenot, they are themselves Latin, that is, Roman Catholic.²

The English Protestant Fynes Morisson explains how, in 1596, he cautiously avoided attending masses of the Latin, so as not to be tattooed and dubbed a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre. William Lithgow, who visited Jerusalem in 1612, also recounts that he refused chivalry because he was a Protestant, but he accepted to be tattooed like his travelling companions. This is how Lithgow relates the facts in his diary:

Meanewhile, the last day of our staying there, we went all of us Friers and Pilgrimes in againe to the Holy Grave, where we remained al night. Earely on the morrow there came a fellow to us, one Elias Areacheros, a Christian inhabitour at Beth-leem, and purveier for the Friers; who did ingrave on our severall Armes upon Christs Sepulchre the name of Jesus, and the Holy Crosse; beeing our owne option, and desire: and heere is the Modell thereof. [figure 1] But I, decyphered, and subjoynd below mine, the four incorporate Crowns of King James, with this Inscription, in the lower circle of the Crowne, Vivat Jacobus Rex [meaning, long live King James]: returning to the fellow two Piasters for his reward [. . .]

Which when the Guardian understood, what I had done in memory of my Prince upon that Sacred Tombe, hee was greatly offended with me, that I should have polluted that Holy place, with the name of such an Arch-enemy to the Romane Church. But not knowing how to mend himselfe, and hearing me to recite of the Heroick Vertues of our matchlesse Monarch: who for Bounty, Wisedome, and Learning, was not paragonized among all the Princes of the earth: His fury fell; and begun to intreate me, to make it knowne to his Majesty.³

Is there a connection between the Franciscans and the tradition of “marking” among western pilgrims, especially the tradition of being “engraved” with the Jerusalem Cross? We know for sure that this cross was already part of the traits of the Franciscans of the Holy Land and that it was affixed on the mantles of pilgrims adorned as knights since 1480 and Jean de Pérusse.⁴



Figure 1. Lithgow’s model of his original tattoo, as detailed in his diary. *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures*. Online at archive.org/details/totalldiscourse00lithuoft/page/252 (accessed 12 May 2019).

Franciscan Benevolence?

It appears that “tattoo artists” were employees of the Custody.⁵ “But that does not mean that the Franciscans directly encouraged the practice. The ancient and medieval ecclesiastical institutions have never encouraged tattooing. Even among the Copts – the Christians who have used the practice the longest – the priests have issued admonitions against the practice of tattooing among Christians since the Byzantine period. In Nubia, Christian Abyssinia, where Christians tattooed themselves, tattooing has never been incorporated into the sacraments. The priest is never the one who tattoos. All of this is logical: the sacerdotal elite knew very well that tattooing was formally forbidden by the Old Testament. Christianity affirms the superiority of a different form of marking received at baptism: the sign of the cross made by the hand of the bishop. Saint Augustine explicitly says, in a sermon, that this mark is more durable than the tattoo that marked the Roman soldiers in his day: “An invisible and indelible mark which makes any form of body marking pointless.”⁶ Yet, it is folk religion and devotion that seem to have led Christians to be marked. This same proscription is also found in Islam.⁷

To Unite with the Sufferings of Christ

Although there is no formal proof, the pain caused when tattooed seems to fulfill a desire to identify with the sufferings of Christ: the seal of Jerusalem remaining in the skin of the pilgrim as the wounds of the Passion on the body of the risen Christ. This would also explain the special attraction for the tattooing of the Cross of Jerusalem among the Latin, and the benevolence of the Franciscans to see the faithful marked with the five crosses by which they identify with the five wounds of Christ, as well as with the stigmata of Saint Francis of Assisi, their founder, and the founder of the Custody of the Holy Land.

The Italian professor Guido Guerzoni writes that a tattoo performed during a Christian pilgrimage is “a small martyrdom – a public effusion of blood” of one’s faith.

Some pilgrims would like to put as many marks as possible on their bodies. Hence this particular Catholic, of which the Swedish theologian Michael Eneman speaks in 1711, reported that he had the twelve apostles tattooed on his body, reserving his posterior for Judas Iscariot. But the lack of the hygienic conditions of the time took this Catholic badly, resulting in a terrible fever, which drew him close to death. Moreover, as Count Francois de Volney writes about the procedure, it could be perilous: “I saw a pilgrim who had lost his arm because his ulnar nerve was injured.”⁸

The tattoo technique eventually took a better route. By the mid-nineteenth century, tattoo artists promised painless tattoos.

Demise of the Tradition among Westerners

For centuries, it had been certain that the tattoo would be the only memory that, on the way back, would not fall into the hands of the Ottoman authorities or thieves. Even in the case of sinking, at least this corporal mark would be saved. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the increase in pilgrimages, the safer roads, the development of the tourism industry, and religious souvenirs seemed about to put an end to the practice. Especially in Europe, the social meanings attached to tattooing evolved: beginning in the late eighteenth century, people perceived by many Christians to be of low moral virtue – sailors, bandits, prisoners, and prostitutes – increasingly adopted the use of tattoos, eventually resulting in Christians being discouraged from the practice.

The Example of the Princes Will Serve for Nothing

This is perhaps why Gabriel Charmes, in 1882, was not persuaded:

I was stopped, one day, in a street by a man with an attractive figure who wanted, at all costs, to make a tattoo on my arm to mark that I was a *hajj*, a pilgrim, and that I had been to Jerusalem. He showed me various models. I could choose between a Greek cross, a Latin cross, a fleur-de-lis, a fer-de-Lance [the iron of the lance or spearhead], a star, or a thousand other emblems. The operation will do no harm: I would not feel it; while being tattooed I would smoke a *narghile* and have a coffee while chatting with the operator's wife and daughter, whom were addressing to me from a window the most seductive signs. The girl, I must say, was still young and had eyes of a charming glow. I realize that in the presence of such a fire coming out from her eyes, we could forget the pain of a little less metaphorical burn. Besides, the most prestigious persona had given themselves to the test that was proposed to me. There were twenty authentic certificates. But I knew how to resist such noble examples; I did not get tattooed, but I copied one of the certificates.

It shows very clearly that the Prince of Wales has been weaker than me and that he has let himself be taken by the beautiful eyes of the tattooist's daughter. Here is the text; I think that no one will be sceptical enough to doubt its indisputable authenticity: "This is the certificate that Francis Souwan engraved the cross of Jerusalem on the arm of His Majesty the Prince of Wales. His Majesty's satisfaction with this operation proves that it can be recommended. Signed: VANNE, courier of the suite of His Highness the Prince of Wales. Jerusalem, April 2, 1862."

I do not know what the Prince of Wales has paid for, but mere mortals can obtain, for five or ten francs, the pleasure of wearing, on one arm or on any part of the body, a Jerusalem cross, a Greek cross, a fer-de-Lance, a fleur-de-lis, etc. It's really for nothing.⁹

Will Fashion Revive Tradition?

The Prince of Wales, Albert Edward of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, who ascended the throne as Edward VII, had the cross of Jerusalem tattooed on him. His son, Edward Windsor, future George V, did the same in 1882. It is he who reports in his letters: “I was tattooed by the same man who tattooed Papa.”¹⁰ At the end of the nineteenth century, they were among the last westerners to follow the tradition. During his visit to Jerusalem in 2018, Prince William, although the press reminded him of the tradition, did not fancy getting tattooed.

Abandoned during most of the twentieth century, the tradition has known an exceptional renewal since the publication of an article in 2012.¹¹ Tattooing is fashionable in the West. But even among refractory fashionable people, the “Seal of Jerusalem” has a special status. Pilgrims who for nothing in the world would have been tattooed, come to Jerusalem to receive this mark – not to follow fashion but to declare their love to the city, to its history, and to the One God who makes its holiness.

Of the Way of Making What Marks Men Please Upon Their Arms¹²

Here is de Thévenot’s explanation of the seventeenth-century tattooing procedure:

We spent all of Tuesday, the nine and twentieth of April [1658], in getting Marks put upon our arms, as commonly all pilgrims do; the Christians of Bethlehem (who are of the Latin Church) do that. They have several wooden moulds, of which you may choose that which pleases you best, then they will fill it with coal-dust, and apply it to your arm, so that they leave upon the same, the mark of what is cut in the mould. After that, with the left hand they take hold of your arm and stretch the skin of it, and in the right hand they have a small cane with two needles fastened in it, which from time to time they dip into ink, mingled with Ox’s gall, and prick your arm all along the lines that are marked by the wooden mould. This without doubt is painful, and commonly causes a slight fever, which is soon over; the arm in the mean time for two or three days, continues swelled three times as big as it ordinarily is. After they have pricked all along the said lines, they wash the arm, and observe if there be any thing

DE LA MANIERE DE MARQVER

ce qu'on veust sur les bras.

CHAPITRE XLVI.

Nous employasmes tout le Mardy 29. Aupil à nous faire ^{pelerins de} marquer les bras, comme font ordinairement tous les ^{terrafalem} Pelerins, ce font des Chrestiens de Bethlehem suivant le ^{marquer} rite Latin qui font cela. Ils ont plusieurs moules de bois, ^{aux bras.} desquels vous choisissez ceux qui vous plaisent le plus, alors ils les emplissent de poudre de charbon, puis vous les appliquent, de sorte qu'ils y laissent la marque de ce qui est graué, apres cela ils vous tiennent de la main gauche le bras

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dont la peau est tendué, & dans la droite ils ont vne petite canne où font deux aiguilles, qu'ils trempent de temps en temps dans de l'encre mesle avec du fiel de bœuf, & vous en piquent suiuan les lignes marquées par le moule de bois: cela fait sans doute mal, & ordinairement il en vient vne petite fièvre qui dure fort peu, & les bras en restent enflés trois fois plus qu'à l'ordinaire durant deux ou trois jours: apres qu'ils ont piqué tout du long de toutes ces lignes, ils lauent le bras, & regardent s'il y a quelque faute, alors ils recommencent, & quelquefois ils y retournent iusqu'à trois fois. Quand ils ont fait, ils vous enuveloppent le bras bien ferré, & il se fait vne crouste qui tombe deux ou trois jours apres, & les marques restent bleués, & ne s'effacent iamais, parce que le sang se mellant avec cette teinture d'encre & de fiel de bœuf, se marque encor en dedans sous la peau.

Figure 2. Jean de Thévenot, *Relation d'un voyage fait au Levant* [Relating a Trip to the Levant], (Paris: chez Lovis Bilaine, 1664), Chapter XLVI, online at gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k106525z.pdf (accessed 12 May 2019).

wanting, then they begin again, and sometimes do it three times over. When they have done, they wrap up your arm very straight, and there grows a crust upon it, which falls off two or three days later. The marks remain blue and never wear out, because the blood mingling with that tincture of ink and ox's gall, retains the mark under the skin.

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Endnotes

- 1 The word tattoo appeared in the eighteenth century, imported from the Polynesian word *tatau*, by the English traveller James Cook. The translator of Cook's second voyage to Tahiti in 1772, Dr. Berchon, was the first to use the word tattoo. It first appeared in the dictionary of the French Academy in 1798. In 1858, the word, officially Frenchified as *tatouage*, appeared in the French language dictionary.
- 2 For a detailed description of dragomans, see Jacob Norris, "Dragomans, Tattooists, Artisans: Palestinian Christians and their Encounters with Catholic Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Global History*, 14, 1 (2019): 68–86 [note by translator].
- 3 William Lithgow, *The Totall Discourse of the Rare Adventures & Painefull Peregrinations of Long Nineteene Years Travayles form Scotland to the Most Famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Attrica* (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1906) [originally London, 1632], 253–254, online at archive.org/details/totalldiscourseo00lithuoft/page/252 (accessed 12 May 2019).
- 4 On the role of Jean de Pérusse in the beginning of the Order, see Jean Pierre de Gennes, *Les Chevaliers du Saint Sépulcre de Jérusalem* [The Knights of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem], editions Hérault, 338.
- 5 The Custody of the Holy Land is a custodian priory of the Franciscan order in Jerusalem, founded in 1217 by Saint Francis of Assisi, who also founded the Franciscan Order. Its mission is to guard "the grace of the Holy Places" of the Holy Land and the rest of the Middle East, as well as pilgrims visiting them, on behalf of the Catholic Church.
- 6 Private correspondence with Luc Renault, author of a 813-page thesis entitled *Marquage corporel et signation religieuse dans l'Antiquité* [Body Marking and Religious Sign in Antiquity].
- 7 See Göran Larsson, "Islam and Tattooing: an Old Question, a New Research Topic," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67390>.
- 8 "Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte: Pendant les Années 1783, 1784, & 1785," [Travel to Syria and to Egypt during the Years 1782, 1784, & 1785], *Revue des Deux mondes*, 45 (1881): 771.
- 9 "Voyage en Syrie," 771.
- 10 Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jérusalem, biographie*, (éditions Calmann-Lévy), 436.
- 11 Several pieces on the matter were published in *La Terre Sainte*, No. 621 appearing in September/October 2012, published semi-annually from Jerusalem by La Custodie franciscaine de Terre Sainte.
- 12 A nineteenth-century English translation of the diary was used for this extended quotation: Jean de Thévenot, *The Travels of Monfieur de Thevenot into the Levant, 1633–1687*, trans. Archibald Lovell (London : H. Clark, for H. Faithorne, J. Adamson, C. Skegnes, and T. Newborough, 1867), online at archive.org/details/travelsofmonsieu00thev/page/n245 (accessed 12 May 2019).