The name, True Cross, was given to the wooden cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified and which was discovered by the Empress Helena in Jerusalem, or so it was thought. The story of the True Cross is fascinating, but most of it is myth and legend. Parts of the story are not fictional, and it is interesting to consider some related numismatic items.

Let’s begin at the beginning, in the Garden of Eden (Figure 1). According to one account in The Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine, who was archbishop of Genoa in the 13th century, the wood of the True Cross came from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which grew in the middle of the Garden. Another more detailed account in the book describes how Adam, after being banished from the Garden of Eden and facing death, asked his son, Seth, to go to the Garden and ask for a balm to save him from death. When Seth approached the gate of the Garden he saw the great ‘flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the Tree of Life.’ (Genesis 3: 24b) According to Jacobus, the sword was in the hand of an archangel whose wings spread out to block the entrance, and the archangel told Seth that the time of pardon had not yet come. He said he would give Seth seeds from the Tree of Life, which he should put in the mouth of Adam when he died. He should then bury Adam in the earth.

So Seth did this and out of Adam’s grave a tree grew. King Solomon wanted the wood for the building of his palace but the tree would not cooperate and eventually its trunk was buried in Jerusalem where the Pool of Bethesda would later be situated. That is why the pool had miraculous healing powers. Disabled people would wait till the water was agitated before immersing themselves. (John 5: 2-7)

Just before the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Figure 2) the trunk rose to the surface of the pool. It was brought out of the water and when it had dried it was used to make the cross. After the crucifixion it was buried near the hill of Calvary where it was to remain for three hundred years. The hill was called Calvary, which means ‘skull’, not because it was skull-shaped, but because Adam’s skull was buried there, or so the people believed. In Orthodox iconography Adam’s skull is always shown in the earth below the cross. (Figures 3 and 4)

In a legend popular in the Middle Ages the cross on which Jesus was crucified was identified with the World Tree, which stood at the centre of the cosmos and

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**Figure 1** – Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Obverse of a gilded silver cast medal by Nickel Milicz (1544 – 70). The Latin inscription is SICVT PER ADAM PECCATVM EST PROPAGATVM IN OMNES HOMINE (As through Adam sin is extended to all men). (Image courtesy of Chaponnier & Firminich SA. The medal was Lot 409 in Auction 4.)

**Fresco by Piero della Francesca (1415 – 1492) showing Helena finding the True Cross. (W ikimedia Commons)**
stretched from earth to heaven. Whatever the origin of the wood in the cross, Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, was credited with the discovery of the True Cross that had been buried at Calvary (Figure 5). Constantine was the first Roman emperor to be a Christian, and Helena was also a Christian. In 326 AD she travelled to the Holy Land and in a dream she was directed to where the cross was buried.

The story goes that she unearthed three wooden crosses and the problem was, which was the cross on which Christ was crucified? To solve the problem each cross was tested to see if it had miraculous powers. The True Cross was revealed when a crippled woman was stretched out on it and was healed. In another version the True Cross was held over a dead man who came alive.

Surprisingly, although Helena’s portrait appears on coins issued after 326 and before her death in 329 (Figure 6) the cross does not appear on them nor on any of the coins issued by Constantine and his family. In fact it was not till the reign of Arcadius (383 – 408) that the cross appears on coins as a symbol of Christianity (Figure 7). This raises doubt whether it was really Helena who discovered the cross. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote in 346, “The saving wood of the Cross was found at Jerusalem in the time of Constantine and it was disturbed fragment by fragment from this spot.” He does not mention Helena. Similarly, Eusebius in his Life of Constantine, which was unfinished at his death in 339, makes no mention of Helena having found the True Cross. Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall, in their commentary on Eusebius’ Life of Constantine (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, 280) conclude: “While later generations universally ascribed the supposed discovery of the True Cross to Helena, her name was attached to the story only later, whether in Jerusalem itself or by Ambrose in his funeral oration for Theodosius I in 395.” Arcadius was the son of Theodosius I and it seems that by this time he and everyone else believed that Helena had discovered the True Cross. Helena is still venerated as a saint today. On a religious medal made in Germany in 1933 she stands holding the Cross (Figure 8).

The largest part of the Cross was deposited in a church built on the site of the discovery. One piece was sent to Constantinople, and according to the 5th century historian, Socrates, it was placed inside a statue of Constantine that stood on a column in the Forum. Some pieces including the titulus (headboard) were sent to Rome to a church especially built for it and called Santa Croce (Holy Cross).

The next chapter in the story of the True Cross occurs during the reign of the Byzantine emperor, Heraclius, 610 – 641 AD. (Figure 9). By this time the story has a firm historical basis. The Persian king, Khozros II (Figure 10), invaded the Byzantine Empire and in 614 after a siege of about three weeks his army smashed into Jerusalem. The Church of
the Holy Sepulchre, built by Constantine the Great, was destroyed by fire and the True Cross was carried off to Ctesiphon, the Persian capital. In 628 Heraclius finally defeated the Persians, and Khosrow was killed by his son, who returned the True Cross. Heraclius entered Constantinople with the True Cross, but in 630 he returned it to Jerusalem to the rebuilt Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He personally carried it along the Via Dolorosa.

The only coin ever to bear the mint name, Jerusalem (ΙΕΠΟΧΛΥΜΑ in Greek), is a bronze follis with the bust and name of Heraclius on the obverse. On the reverse there is a large M (for 40) flanked by ANNO 1111 (year 4) and in the exergue there is the mint name (Figure 11). A similar coin (Sear Byz. 852c) has XC NIKA (Christ conquers) in the exergue. Both coins are very rare. Because the 4th year of Heraclius’ reign was 614 it was thought that these coins must have been minted during the siege of Jerusalem. However, this has recently been questioned because three weeks would have been too short a time to prepare the dies and mint the coins. The image of the emperor on a coin bearing the name, Jerusalem, or the words, ‘Christ conquers’, would have encouraged the Christians in the besieged city, but it is much more likely that ‘year 4’ refers to the year of indiction, which was a fiscal period of 15 years instituted by Constantine the Great for tax purposes and reckoned from 312 AD. During the reign of Heraclius, the 4th year of indiction was 630 AD, which is when he returned the True Cross to Jerusalem. In this case these folles were minted to celebrate that event.

Also to celebrate the event, and to make some money, it seems that small clay tokens were issued (Figure 12). As the only known hoard of these tokens was found in Turkey, Michael Mitchiner in Medieval Pilgrim & Secular Badges (London: 1986, 274) suggested, “These pieces may well have been officially produced for distribution to those who attended the True Cross on its journey.” Presumably this journey was from Constantinople to Jerusalem. The tokens show the Cross with two, sometimes three, figures at its base. They are very crude. Why would anybody want one of these little baked-clay lumps unless there was something special about them? The answer is probably because it was believed that they were made of clay mixed with the ash of burnt splinters from the True Cross.

In the midst of all the turmoil of the 7th century there was a saint who is now largely forgotten. He was a young soldier in the Persian army in 614 AD when it captured Jerusalem. In the city he became a Christian. His name was Magundat, but he was renamed Anastasius (Resurrection) because he believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He became a monk, but some years later when he preached to the Persian garrison in Caesarea he was arrested, flogged and punished with hard labour. Because he refused to renounce his faith he was taken in chains to the Euphrates region where he was tortured and eventually strangled in 628 AD. His face appears on an old religious medal. When the medal is laid back he seems to be dead (Figure 13) but when it is stood up vertically, his eyes are wide open (Figure 14). This is in keeping with his name, which literally means, ‘stand again’. In 640 AD his relics were deposited in the Church of St Vincent and St Anastasius in Rome.
While the Byzantine and the Persian empires were being exhausted by war a new power was moving out of Arabia. In 636 the Byzantine army was defeated by an Arab one and in 638 Caliph Omar rode into Jerusalem. Heraclius, however, had removed the True Cross from Jerusalem and taken it again to Constantinople. Part of it remained in Jerusalem and when the crusaders captured the city in 1099 the Orthodox priests there were tortured until they revealed its hiding place. Subsequently the crusaders took the True Cross with them whenever they went into battle. When they were finally defeated by Saladin in 1187 he allowed pilgrims to Jerusalem to see it. After this it was lost and never seen again.

The True Cross that was taken to Constantinople remained there until the city was sacked by the Fourth Crusade in 1204. It had been decorated with gold and jewels, and the Latin bishops who now controlled the churches in Constantinople carved it up and distributed the pieces to the crusaders. When these knights returned to Western Europe many of them donated their pieces to local churches and monasteries. Fragments of the wood of the Cross became precious relics, much sort after by wealthy Christians. They were often encased in gold reliquaries covered with jewels (Figure 15). There was such a demand for these relics that, in order to explain how the supply increased to meet the demand, the miracle of multiplication (like the loaves and the fishes) was promulgated. By the time of the Reformation in the 16th century so many churches claimed to have pieces of the True Cross that the reformer, Jean Calvin, sarcastically remarked that there were enough pieces of the True Cross to fill a ship.