



[Ambrose of Milan, Oration on the Death of Theodosius 48](#)

The relics of Christ's cross as vehicles of Roman power

Name of the author: Ambrose of Milan

Date: 395 CE

Place: Milan

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Funeral Oration

Title of work: Oration on the Death of Theodosius

Reference: 48

Commentary:

For an introduction to Ambrose, see the commentary on [Letter XXI](#).

Ambrose of Milan's *Oration on the Death of Theodosius* (*De obitu Theodosii*) was delivered on the 25th of February 395 CE in the cathedral in Milan, forty days after the emperor Theodosius I had died, at the emperor's memorial service. In his funeral oration, Ambrose essentially offers a panegyric to the emperor, intertwined with spiritual messages for those who listened to it in the basilica. Among those present were the new emperor in the West, Honorius (reigned 393-423 CE), Theodosius's son who was only ten years of age at the time, his regent and guardian Stilicho, members of the Roman army, court officials, and residents of Milan. The oration betrays the concern that Ambrose has for the Christian empire now that its faithful guardian was dead. The empire was now in the hands of two very young rulers, with a boy of ten in the West and Arcadius (reigned 383-408 CE), Theodosius's eldest son, yet only eighteen himself, in the East. Theodosius's virtues—notably piety, clemency, humility—are expounded upon at length, and he is presented as the archetypal Christian ruler and custodian of the Church, the message being that his successors ought to aspire to the same (on Theodosius's virtues in the oration and the way Ambrose presents them as central to his rulership, see Giacomo Raspanti, "*Clementissimus Imperator*"). A significant part of Ambrose's rhetoric involves asserting that Theodosius has inherited the legacy of the first Christian emperor Constantine, whom chapter 40 claims he will embrace now that the two are united in heaven. The "heritage of faith" (*hereditas fidei*) which Ambrose describes as being left for future emperors by Constantine is then the focus of several chapters of the *Oration*, including that quoted above, with significant space dedicated to the role played by Constantine's mother, the empress Helena. The present passage illustrates just how important the Christian legacy of Roman emperors since Constantine was for Ambrose, and makes significant statements about the way in which he thought Roman power ought to be wielded.

Helena, known as Flavia Julia Helena Augusta, was credited after her death with the discovery of fragments of the "true cross" which Christ had been crucified upon, as well as the tomb where he had been buried. Various Christian historians record that Helena went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land between 326 and 328 CE. In the present *Oration*, Ambrose begins his praise of Helena at chapter XL, when he states that owing to his mother's efforts, inspired by God, Constantine had fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah 14:20: "On that day there shall be inscribed on the bells of the horses 'Holy to the Lord'" (NRSV). Ambrose narrates that Helena went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem (chapter 41), and after arriving at the site of Golgotha, could not find the relics of the crucifixion due to it being covered over by earth. She persisted in searching, however, and uncovered the crosses of Christ and the two criminals crucified on either side of him, as well as the inscription which had been above Christ's cross (see John 19:22) (chapters 43-45). Helen proceeds to discover the nails which Christ was crucified with, and orders a bridle to be made incorporating one nail, and a jewelled diadem to be made incorporating the other. She then sent these items to Constantine in Constantinople, both of which he used, and passed down to future emperors. Ambrose states that the bridle in particular "transmitted his faith" to future Roman emperors (chapter 47). Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine* III.28 claims that the site of the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb where Christ was buried, had been covered over with earth and a temple to Venus built over it. However, he does not discuss the relics of the cross or connect Helena with this information, but rather claims that Constantine himself ordered for the area to be excavated. The tradition can be seen to develop in subsequent years, however. Like Ambrose, Rufinus of Aquileia, writing just two years later, records in his *Ecclesiastical History* a similar narrative, and



Socrates Scholasticus in his fifth-century *Ecclesiastical History* I.17 (later drawn upon by Sozomen and Theodoret) argued like Eusebius that the holy site was covered by a pagan temple, and that it was Helena who instructed it to be destroyed, uncovering the relics there along with the inscription that was hung above Christ's cross. Socrates claims that the nails from the cross were sent by Helena to Constantinople and crafted into the emperor Constantine's helmet and his horse's bridle.

In the extract above, the relics which Helena had made into the diadem and bridle are connected with imperial piety, which despite having been a long-respected virtue within Roman tradition, was now focused on the Christian God. Diadems and crowns were a symbol of rulership within Roman culture, and so we see here the Christian appropriation not only of piety, but also of a very visual element of governance and power. Moreover, the relics are linked with the very nature of Roman power and rulership. In Jan Drijvers's words, for Ambrose "the discovery of the Cross and especially that of the nails made possible the establishment of hereditary Christian rule, because with this event the prophecy of Zechariah 14:20, predicting the Christian reign, had been fulfilled" (Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*, p. 110). The bridle and diadem are passed down to Constantine's successors, thereby reinforcing the *hereditas fidei* in a period marked by religious schism. While Ambrose's version of the story of the relics' discovery differs quite substantially from that in other accounts (for instance, he omits any reference to a pagan temple covering the site), his inclusion of it works to a very specific end, supporting Ambrose's argument about the strength and importance of the continuation of Christian rulership of the empire (on Ambrose's particular account of the story, see M. Sordi, "La tradizione dell'inventio crucis"). Ambrose's utilisation of the relics here, must be understood within the context of his "political-religious objectives, of care for the future" (Barbara Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood*, p. 29).

Ambrose seems to figuratively fuse together the wood and the nail of the cross, stating that Helena "placed the cross on the head of sovereigns" (see Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood*, p. 28 n. 67). His meaning seems clear, however, that the incorporation of parts of the cross of Christ into the diadem/crown which has sat upon the head of emperors since Constantine has sanctified their rule, and ensured the salvation of their people who follow their religious example. The slightly odd statement that "Good is the nail (*clavus*) of the Roman empire" essentially alludes to the presence of the nail which pierced Christ's hand having been crafted into the diadem. This now adorns the head of those who rule the "whole world," and who have been converted from persecutors of Christianity to devout followers of it. Furthermore, Ambrose argues that the presence of the nail on the head of the emperor is significant because it sits "where the intelligence is" (i.e. close to the brain). The sacred relic of Christ, therefore, acts as a protective force, with the implication being that the emperor's decisions can be positively influenced through the close proximity of the brain and a holy item. As has been previously stated, the *Oration* acted in part to compel Theodosius's heirs towards just and pious rulership. In this regard, David Hunt correctly argues that the nails are effectively "transformed into sacred symbols of empire," with one (in the diadem) acting as a visible display of imperial faith, while the other (in the bridle) steers "the just exercise of power in [the emperor's] hands." This has the effect of demonstrating the restraint which is required of Theodosius's young successors, who literally must be 'reigned in' from the temptation to rule with tyranny like certain previous emperors (Hunt, "Theodosius I and the Holy Land," p. 56; on this theme, see the commentary on the *Oration on the Death of Theodosius* 12). The relics, therefore, are understood to encourage in Rome's emperors justice in legislative matters, and governance which always seeks to imitate Christ's example.

Keywords in the original language:

- [caput](#)
- [Christus](#)
- [clavus](#)
- [corona](#)
- [crux](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [habena](#)
- [Helena](#)
- [imitatio](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [imperium Romanum](#)
- [iniustus](#)



- [iustus](#)
- [liberalitas](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [persecutor](#)
- [pietas](#)
- [potestas](#)
- [princeps](#)
- [redemptio](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [rex](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [sacer](#)
- [sapienter](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [bridle](#)
- [Constantine](#)
- [cross](#)
- [crown](#)
- [Helena](#)
- [injustice](#)
- [justice](#)
- [king](#)
- [nail](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [piety](#)
- [prince](#)
- [reigns](#)
- [relic](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Theodosius I](#)

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