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Jerusalem and Other Holy Places As Represented by Jheronimus Bosch

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Various works painted by Jheronimus Bosch refer to specific locations, to places in which particular events have to be situated: these are chiefly scenes from the life of Christ. In a more general sense, Bosch also gave a particular character to the environment in which he painted his saints. It is remarkable that, on the one hand, Jheronimus Bosch drew and painted with the utmost precision the animals, people and objects that he observed, while, on the other, he was totally unconcerned about realistic topographical representation. Even more remarkably, he depicted the holy places using urban architecture that was either a general reference to his own surroundings, or else was composed of bizarre buildings. At the same time, it appears from the socio-cultural context that Bosch must have had some idea from others, and undoubtedly also from the visual material of his time, of the buildings and urban structure of Jerusalem and other places in the Holy Land. Nevertheless, he consciously chose not to localize these settings, but to depict buildings that were scarcely or completely indefinable and to present unrecognizable views.

Sacred Topography

Scenes from the life of Christ form a relatively large group in the painted oeuvre of Jheronimus Bosch: the Adoration of the Magi in the Prado and the panel of the same subject in New York, Christ Crowned with Thorns in London and on the exterior of the Last Judgement in Bruges, the Ecce Homo in Frankfurt and the version in Boston of the same subject from Bosch’s studio, Christ Carrying the Cross in Vienna and in the Escorial, and the Calvary in Brussels. Moreover Bosch painted a full Passion cycle in two of his works, on the grisaille side of the St John on Patmos and on the exterior of the Adoration Triptych in the Prado. With the exception of both versions of the Christ Crowned with Thorns and the model drawing of the Entombment (British Museum), all the Passion scenes by Bosch are set in a landscape and are given an architectural context. The staging of the landscape of St John on Patmos and John the Baptist, as well as that of Sts Jerome and Anthony, deliberately suggests a non-realistic representation of the topography.

Knowledge of the Near East

When we take into consideration Jheronimus Bosch’s socio-cultural context we must assume that he would have been acquainted, to a certain extent, with exotic buildings in the Near East. Bernhard von Breydenbach’s Peregrinatio in terram sanctam, illustrated with woodcuts and published in Mainz in 1486, was most probably known in ’s-Hertogenbosch. In addition to the Latin edition, it also appeared in French, German, Spanish, and in 1483-84 in Dutch. Erhard Reuwich from Utrecht, had travelled to Jerusalem with Von Breydenbach in 1483-84 and made drawings during the journey, drawings which were probably the basis for the woodcuts in the book, which he also printed. It is conceivable that Bosch based a number of the exotic animals to be found in the Paradise wing of the ‘Garden of Earthly Delights’ on the illustrations in Von Breydenbach, while he ignored the architecture almost entirely. He is likely also to have drawn inspiration for the buildings of the Holy Land from the illustrations of Hartmann Schedel’s Weltchronik, first published in Nuremberg in 1493 in both Latin and German editions. It is highly probable that this printed book was used by Bosch, in particular as a source for the left wing of the Garden of Earthly Delights. God the Father with the accompanying text on the exterior and the exotic trees on the Paradise side appear to be based directly on the woodcuts in Schedel’s book.

Distant lands were known in ’s-Hertogenbosch, and not only at second hand or from lit-
erature imported from elsewhere. In the second half of the fourteenth century a Franciscan friar from ’s-Hertogenbosch set out on a journey round the world, travelling to the north as well as to Asia and Africa. His account of his journey has been lost, but parts were known from indirect sources. When in 1569 Gerardus Mercator published his renowned map of the world, innovative because the curved form was shown on a flat surface, he justified his knowledge of the area round the North Pole by referring to the *Itinerario*, the journey of a certain Jacob Cnoyen from ’s-Hertogenbosch. Mercator had probably borrowed the account of the journey from his friend Abraham Ortelius, the Antwerp cartographer. Indeed, when in 1577 the English mathematician and astronomer John Dee asked Mercator about the manuscript and the latter asked Ortelius for another chance to see it, the manuscript was not to be found. Thanks to the notes made by Mercator, which he passed on to John Dee, we know something of the contents. Whether friar Jacob Cnoyen’s text was known in ’s-Hertogenbosch in Jheronimus Bosch’s time, is unknown. A transcription of this travel book was stored in the library of the Church of St Gudula in Brussels under the title ‘account of a traveller from ’s-Hertogenbosch of what he heard and saw in the lands of the unbelievers’.

*Pilgrimages*

Jheronimus Bosch would have had more direct information from speaking to the successful merchant Lodewijk Beys or Buys, who lived near him on the genteel north side of the Market in ’s-Hertogenbosch. Jan Goessens van Aken, woodcarver and painter, and a cousin of Jheronimus Bosch, was married to the illegitimate daughter of the merchant. In 1500 Lodewijk Beys undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He returned safely, and set off for the same destination again in 1504 and yet again in 1513. Lodewijk Beys died in 1516 or 1517, not only a pilgrim who had reached Jerusalem, but also a Knight of the Holy Sepulchre. According to his wish, he was buried ‘in Sint Jans kercke voor theylich graft’ (in St John’s before the Holy Sepulchre). Nothing remains of this ‘Holy Sepulchre’ in St John’s Cathedral in ’s-Hertogenbosch [Den Bosch] except a sculptured late Gothic head of Christ, of exceptionally quality. During the Second World War this head of Christ was still exhibited in Den Bosch with St John’s noted as the place it was found. Later, having passed through the hands of various art dealers, it came to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The foundation of this Holy Sepulchre and the presence of this sculpture can probably be attributed to the wealthy Lodewijk Beys. Considering his three trips to Jerusalem and the status being a Knight of the Sepulchre gave him, he certainly had both the interest and the motivation. Beys emphasized this status in the records of the magistrates in Den Bosch by having *eques auratus terrae sanctae* [golden knight of the Holy Land] set by his name. Lodewijk Beys’s life style was in accordance with the quality of the sculptured head: his residence on the Market, ‘De Leeuwenburg’, was extremely genteel. When Archduke Maximilian and his son Philip the Fair spent the winter of 1504-05 in ’s-Hertogenbosch his ‘new wife, the Empress called Maria Bianca (Sforza), the daughter of the Duke of Milan, was lodged on the Market and then in the house of Lodewijk Beys’ (nieuwe huysvrou, die keyserinne genaemt vrou Blancke Maria, des hartogen dochter van Milanen [...] gelogeert aen die Merct [...] te weten in Loey Beys huys). Maximilian himself and his son found lodging in the nearby Dominican monastery, from where they conducted the war against Guelders. The mansion of Lodewijk Beys was only a few houses away from the considerably smaller house in which Jheronimus Bosch lived after his marriage to Aleid van de Meervenne. Aleid had inherited the house from her grandfather, and after the death of Jheronimus – the couple remained childless – it reverted to her family. Lodewijk Beys was certainly not the only citizen of Den Bosch who went to the Holy Land in Jheronimus Bosch’s day. The archives of the city give a number of names of those who made the journey to Jerusalem. In 1462 Jan Ghyselen departed (returned in 1464?). Willem van Brakel was in the Holy Land in 1467, in
1470 the son of the goldsmith Henrick Pelgrom and Willem Henricx van Herlaer set out. Dirk Dirksz de Bever left in 1483. In 1489 Dirk van Meerlaer and Dirk Peter Pels promised to travel to Jerusalem, but it is unclear whether they actually went. Gerit van Wijck left in 1490 and returned safely. In 1495 Jan Alarts together with Ricald van den Broeck set out. Sworn brother of the Brotherhood of Our Lady, and thus of the same fraternity as Bosch, the priest Henricus van der Loo from Oisterwijk left in the jubileum year of 1500; he died on the road and so did not return. In 1506-07 a certain Faes was in Jerusalem, possibly accompanying Lodewijk Beys. Henrick Prouninck van Deventer and his wife Catharina van der Staeck were in Jerusalem before 1511. And undoubtedly there were other fellow citizens and contemporaries of Bosch who undertook this long and dangerous pilgrimage. Before setting out they would have found out what they could about the journey, and on their return would have told of their experiences. Because of the great distance involved and the sea voyage from Venice, the trip to Jerusalem was relatively expensive. Generally speaking, the pilgrims who set out for the Holy Land were wealthier, better situated and more cultured than those who followed the other two peregrinations maiores, the journeys to Rome or Santiago de Compostela. For that reason, relatively speaking there are many travel accounts that have been preserved. The illustrated and frequently reprinted Perigrinatio in terram sanctam by Bernhard von Breydenbach from 1486 would also have available in ’s-Hertogenbosch and possibly Bosch would have seen it. On other grounds already mentioned, we can assume that Bosch was acquainted with Hartmann Schedel’s Weltchronik, in which Jerusalem and other cities of the Near East are depicted, partly inspired by the book by Von Breydenbach. These woodcuts – or other types of illustrations that would have been in circulation – must have suggested a great degree of accuracy to Bosch’s contemporaries. Jheronimus Bosch did not imitate these; at most they were a scarcely recognizable starting point for the worlds in which he set his Christian protagonists.

Bosch’s Topography

When we analyse Bosch’s buildings and views we have to conclude that, while he painted exotic and even irrational structures and architectural forms, the landscapes and buildings, although not realistic, were actually inspired by his own immediate surroundings. The panel of St John on Patmos shows the apostle and evangelist sitting in a mountainous scene, which, strangely enough, is not recognizable as an island (Fig. 1). The high rocks stand out clearly against the panoramic view that depicts a practically flat river landscape, and, in the distance, a town such as would have been common in the Low Countries. The evangelist has with-
drawn to surroundings that have already been Christianized to write his Apocalypse: a distant wooden roadside cross on the path behind him makes this clear. The almost-grisaille on the reverse side shows the same alien contrast: the scenes of the Passion are played out in a rocky landscape behind which a perfectly flat view unfolds. Here, too, we can distinguish a similar view of a town. This pattern is repeated again, round and behind the steep rocks in the central tondo above which a pelican tears at its breast to save its young with its own blood. The Passion cycle on the closed Adoration Triptych in the Prado is all set on a gigantic rock with buildings only sketchily indicated. Other than the fact that the crucifixion takes place on the top of this somewhat inhospitable pile of rock that stand against a darkening sky, there is no topological reference point.

A similar urban view is found in Bosch’s depiction of the Calvary in Brussels, the Adoration of the Magi in New York and Philadelphia and in Christ Carrying the Cross in the Escorial.

As we noted with the St John on Patmos, we find that, in the eyes of Bosch, events of the New Testament take place in a world already Christianized, something that he shows by the church towers in his towns or a roadside cross placed in the landscape. This is apparent in both the centre panel and the left wing of the Adoration Triptych in the Prado where monumental crosses can be discerned (Colour Plate iv), and in background of the Calvary in Brussels (Fig. 2).

The sinful world in which St Anthony finds himself (left wing of the Lisbon triptych) and that of the martyr Wilgefortis (right wing of the Venice triptych) are shown to be Christian by the crosses that have been erected there (Colour Plate iv). In these last two cases the cross emphasizes the sinfulness and unbelief in the Christian community. That Bosch regarded the erection of a monumental cross as having such meaning can be concluded from a remarkable difference between the underdrawing and the painted surface in the landscape behind the vagabond on the exterior of the Haywain Triptych in the Prado. In the preparatory sketch the wandering man comes walking along a path beside which a great wooden cross has been set up – it is the dominant Christian world. In the painting

Fig. 2. Jheronimus Bosch, Calvary with a Donor (detail), c. 1490–1500, oil on oak panel, 74.8 × 61.0 cm, Brussels: Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, inv. no. 6639. Klein Gotink and Erdmann for BRCP.
Bosch omitted both the clearly given path and the cross. The choice between good and evil facing the man is not really determined, and is not offered by Christendom as simply as that. The world behind him is shown as sinful, people are dancing to the music of the bagpipes, and a messenger is being robbed of all his possessions. Nevertheless it is a Christian world in which the vagabond must make his choices, as is shown by the tiny chapel, painted but not present in the underdrawing, and the minute crucifix that hangs on a tree in the background.

It is remarkable that the cities of the Near East that are depicted by Bosch, and which must represent Jerusalem, regularly and emphatically appear to be situated in the Low Countries, with white sailed windmills standing a little way outside the city walls. For example the imagined Jerusalem in the background of the Calvary scene in Brussels is in fact a large western city enclosed by a crenellated wall with watch towers (Fig. 2). In order to catch the most wind, the city mill is set on a constructed rise, well outside the built-up area. We see this again in the two cities in the Adoration Triptych in the Prado and the one in grisaille in the St Anthony Triptych in Lisbon, in the town in the Christ Carrying the Cross in the Escorial, and even in the west European city in the wooded background of the Wilgefortis Triptych in Venice (Colour Plate va–e) and the eastern city on the right wing of the St Anthony Triptych (Colour Plate vi). In front of the two unplaceable towns in the distance in Cutting the Stone (Jheronimus Bosch’s workshop), we see, on the left and right, two windmills outside the town walls (Colour Plate vi). The mills on the Adoration Triptych in the Prado and the Calvary in Brussels are shown in detail as trestle or post mills, the type of corn mills that were very common in Brabant and the Low Countries and characteristic of north-western Europe. To be more precise, these are open trestle mills; that is, the rotatable body of the mill rests on a support in which construction beams are wholly visible. Another typical north-western European element that recurs again and again in Bosch’s urban views is the square church tower with a high spire, and the church or chapel without a tower but with a ridge turret. From its spires it appears that a church with a two tower facade is even depicted in the background of Christ Carrying the Cross in the Escorial (Colour Plate vd).

One panel by Bosch, the Ecce Homo in Frankfurt, and its immediate copy from Bosch’s workshop, the Ecce Homo Triptych in Boston, places this particular scene of the Passion in a fairly enclosed urban environment (Colour Plate vii–b). Both the courts of justice, in front of which Christ is displayed to the turbulent crowd, and the urban view with the broad square, are once again north-western European and from Jheronimus Bosch’s own time. In the original by Bosch in Frankfurt, the urban view is characterized by the red pennant with the white crescent that hangs above the steps of what is probably the town hall: it is an eastern, but above all a hostile, environment. This detail was also reproduced in the Boston painting, although this part is mostly reconstructed and the light red pennant is painted almost completely over the craquelé. In a very accurate sixteenth-century copy in a private collection in France, the red pennant with a minute crescent is also shown (Colour Plate vic), from which it would seem that this was also the case in the centre panel in Boston. In contrast to the largely deserted square in the Frankfurt version, in the Boston panel a second scene, that of Christ carrying the cross, is shown. This too is also faithfully reproduced in the sixteenth-century copy: moreover in this copy there is a double pointed red pennant with the crescent to be seen on one of the long lances carried by the soldiers escorting Christ. On the Boston panel this has been almost completely, and probably deliberately, deleted. During restoration, the traces of this pennant appear not to have been recognized as such and have been made invisible by retouching. The result is that the urban view with Christ carrying the cross is both more western and less hostile.

The small but important background scene of Christ carrying the cross is also one of the arguments to attribute the Ecce Homo Triptych to Bosch’s workshop. In general, this scene is very similar to that on the grisaille side of the St John on Patmos panel and there are other details that we find in paintings from Bosch’s own hand. An example of the minute detail is the two
nail-studded wooden blocks that make Christ’s progress even more difficult and painful and are shown in a larger format in the Vienna and Escorial versions of *Christ Carrying the Cross*. The sharply slanted cross that Christ bears gives extra dynamic to this version, an effect that is also found in the versions in the Escorial and, if to a lesser degree, on the reverse of *St John on Patmos*, and just as dramatically in the Passion cycle on the exterior of the *Adoration* in the Prado. It is surprising that Bosch himself did not personally appear in this *Ecce Homo Triptych* in which Petrus van Os and Franco van Langhel are portrayed along with their wives and children. Not only were both men, like Bosch, sworn members of the Brotherhood of Our Lady and lived close to each other in the centre of ’s-Hertogenbosch, but we know that Franco van Langhel, as notary, drew up deeds in which Jheronimus Bosch was concerned.23

*St Jerome and St Anthony*

Among the saints painted by Bosch, Jerome and Anthony have a notable place. According to their *vitae*, both withdrew in solitude to dedicate themselves to their belief and to focus on prayer, Anthony to the Egyptian desert, Jerome to Bethlehem. Bosch painted both saints more than once and he always placed them in a very detailed setting, without the geographical or architectural surroundings giving any clue that could identify the place or region. It is the hostile desolation of the places chosen by the saints that he emphasizes. Moreover, he gives an extra layer of meaning to the scenes by adding all kinds of symbolic details. Bosch might have been particularly inspired by the figures of Jerome and Anthony because he bore the name of one and his father, Anthonius van Aken, the name of the other. The centre panel of the *Hermit Saints Triptych* in Venice and that of the *St Anthony Triptych* in Lisbon, showing Jerome and Anthony respectively, display some similarity in the ruins in which each saint, turned to the right, is placed. Both saints are facing a more or less semi-circular structure that is decorated with figurative reliefs (Colour Plate viii). These scenes have carefully thought-out symbolism and cohesion. In St Anthony’s case they deal with victory over evil, the devil and heathenism, as well as the revelation of the divine message. Anthony himself indicates the altar, deep in the ruin, where we share his vision of Christ pointing to a crucifix; Christ is referring to his death on the cross whereby mankind was redeemed from original sin. Three reliefs put this further in perspective. The largest, uppermost scene shows dancing around the Golden Calf while Moses receives the tablets of law from Jehovah. Under the dancers, who surround the image of a heathen god, is another idol that is worshipped by a group of people who come bearing offerings. From a split, an owl peers out balefully. Under this we see scouts returning from the promised land of Israel with an enormous bunch of grapes, thereby giving hope for the future and renewed trust in God to the Jewish people wandering in the desert. Further into the background in this centre panel there are scenes that refer to the *vita* of St Anthony. In the central panel of the *Hermit Saints Triptych* Jerome kneels before a crucifix while, in order to purify himself and overcome all evil, he castigates himself with a rock he holds in his right hand. The crucifix is in a structure with three scenes that also show evil being defeated. The centre shows the Old Testament story of the Jewish woman, Judith, who saved her people by beheading Holofernes, the leader of the enemy Philistines. Immediately by Jerome’s left hand there is a relief that appears to come from Classical Antiquity: this shows a man who has managed to capture the untameable unicorn. The third scene in the foreground, and close to the ground, shows a figure who has crawled into a basket. Sitting on a staff that sticks out of his backside is an owl acting as a lure for the other birds that swarm around it. Here the owl represents the bird of darkness defeated. Bosch flanked this victory over evil by Jerome, the church father who translated the Old and New Testaments, with additional depictions from Classical Antiquity, the Old Testament and folk traditions.

The ultimate symbolic thematic idea is to be found in the surroundings of the church father in the panel *St Jerome in Prayer* in the Fine Arts museum in Ghent (Fig. 3). In the foreground of
Fig. 3. Jheronimus Bosch, *St Jerome at Prayer*, c. 1485–95, oil on oak, 80.0 × 60.7 cm, Ghent: Museum van Schone Kunsten, inv. no. 1908–H. Klein Gotink and Erdmann for BRCP.
a peaceful landscape with mountains, a farm, a church and a stretch of water, the saint lies prostrate in front of an ominous pile of rock. His red soutane, cardinal’s hat and Bible lie behind him; on the other side of the panel stands the lion as constant companion, rendering Jerome immediately identifiable. In the midst of this hostile environment, full of vermin and prickly vegetation, Jerome embraces a crucifix intimately. The piece of stone with which he beat his breast to purge himself of impure thoughts lies next to him. The gravestone above him refers to the passage in his *vita* that reports his promptly digging a grave near the place he had withdrawn to in solitude. The cock, half consumed by the sleeping fox – left in the foreground – the remnants of which can still be seen, is another indicator of mortality, as is the anthropomorphic pile of rock that dominates the whole and stares out at us like a skull with dark hollow eyes. Below, there is the saint, clad only in his under tunic and immersed in prayer. The spotless white garment must refer to the purity of body and soul that Jerome fought to achieve, as well as the purity of Holy Scripture. It makes a visual sequence with the white loin cloth of the crucified Christ, and its significance is emphasized by the tiny little woman in the distance above him who is washing white linen at the edge of a lake. The clean washing lies in the field behind, bleaching in the sun to become as white as possible. The pious viewer of this panel deciphering and considering all this, is not only fixed by the staring skull-like rock but also by the baleful glare of the owl on the desiccated tree trunk. The penetrating gaze of this bird of the night seems to tell the viewer that they, too, belong to the sinful world from which Jerome has set himself apart. This owl, in its turn, is spied upon by a second owl peering out from a dark hole in the exact centre of the painting. This central position cannot be accidental and this owl emphasizes the game of seeing and being seen, on which the whole thing turns, quite literally. The viewer sees how Jerome with closed eyes concentrates in prayer. He has purged himself of sin and sees Christ with his ‘inner eye’. Bosch added the crucifix only when the figure of Jerome was already complete – an addition by which we are enabled to see what Jerome is seeing in prayer. Meanwhile, from the darkness the small owl regards the large owl and sees us too, and our sinfulness.

*Bosch’s Holy Places*

In conclusion, we can state that with Bosch there is an essential difference between the background of the New Testament scenes and those of the lives of saints. The youth and Passion of Christ were placed in landscapes that were familiar to his contemporaries and patrons and with architecture that emphasizes this. The events of the New Testament were brought closer to the viewer, not only geographically but also chronologically: as Bosch depicted them, these events were taking place in the here and now. Jerusalem is not presented as a distant city of the past. The story of redemption is brought up to date and made very immediate. But the scenes from the lives of the saints are a different case. In these, the landscape in which they are set has the sole purpose of giving greater significance to the chief personage – to illustrate more details of his life, but above all, to provide greater depth.

*Notes*

1 For the works of Jheronimus Bosch mentioned in this article we refer the reader to the recent surveys in which references to the older literature have been included: Stephan Fischer, *Jheronimus Bosch: The Complete Works* (Cologne: Taschen, 2013); exh. cat. ’s-Hertogenbosch: Noordbrabants Museum, *Jheronimus Bosch, Painter and Draughtsman: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. by Matthijs Ilsink and others (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2016); Luuk Hoogstede and others, *Jheronimus Bosch, Painter and Draughtsman: Technical Studies* (Brussels: Mercator Fonds, 2016); Pilar Silva Maroto and others, *Bosch: The 5th Centenary Exhibition* (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2016).


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