

MAGDALENE CHRISTIANITY

*Journeys,
Sacred Places,
Remembrances
and Bones*

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JOURNEYS, SACRED PLACES, REMEMBRANCES & BONES

Mary Magdalene's legends take hold

Despite her downgrading by church fathers, Mary Magdalene has lived on in the imagination as a powerful figure. Memories of her journeys accompanied the spread of Christianity. Numerous churches were dedicated to the Magdalene. And her legends grew up beyond the churches in those sacred places that revered the ancient feminine – and there are many different stories about her travels and sojourns in such places. They are a continuing motivation for pilgrimages – to sacred sites still resonating with the power of the old goddesses.

Our modern wish to 'prove' the facts about everything has no place here. Legends have an inner verity and the potency of those sacred places endures and resonates with the love of countless pilgrims.

A journey to Ephesus

In the Eastern Orthodox church there is a tradition that Lazarus and Mary Magdalene were the couple being married at Cana where Jesus performed his first miracle. Later they travelled to Ephesus with Mary the mother of Jesus. Lazarus, the beloved disciple, wrote his gospel there as 'John' and formed a community known as Johannine.

In my imagination I can see how Mary Magdalene might have left Jerusalem with the man who believed in her inner authority when she was rejected by the rule-maker James and the opinionated Peter.

When Christianity was beginning, Ephesus was a grand city built in graceful Ionian style. It had the second most important philosophical school in the Aegean region. Its enormous theatre carved into the slopes of Mount Pion held twenty-four thousand people. A wide street paved with marble and lined with colonnades led south from there to the busy commercial agora with an amazing water clock at its centre.

Northward outside the city wall on the plain beyond Mount Pion you would encounter the wonder of Asia, the Artemision, temple to the Ephesian goddess. It was twice the size of any other Greek temple. The Greeks called this goddess after their own Artemis, protector of wild creatures and women, especially during childbirth. Really, the Ephesian mother goddess goes way back, and her holy sanctuary long predated the Greek temple.

The apostle Paul got into trouble for declaring that gods made with human hands were not gods at all, a threat to the nearby silversmiths who made little Artemis idols for purchase as souvenirs by eager pilgrims.

Overall, though, it would have been a cosmopolitan, multi-cultural city and a place where two women who suffered much could find a place to retreat. Other legends suggest that the Magdalene did not 'retire' at all but worked in the community and helped John to write his gospel. In his old age John was exiled to Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation – you can visit his cave on the island.

The tradition says that Mary Magdalene died in Ephesus and was buried there. Long after the temple of Ephesian Artemis fell into ruin, the Magdalene's tomb was a site of pilgrimage – as if this woman, a tower of wisdom and bountiful love, had filled the place of the old goddess. Unlike in France, the story of the Magdalene in Ephesus didn't retain its momentum into the modern era, although people still visit Mother Mary's house among the ruins where it's said she spent her last days. Perhaps the Magdalene lived there as well. Two such holy women living together would be a double blessing for future pilgrims. There's an atmosphere still in Ephesus and the ruins are still a major stop on the tourist trail.



The virgin Mary's house in Ephesus

There's another version that Mary Magdalene settled first in Rome – perhaps because in Paul's letter to the Romans he includes a Mary in his greetings (Romans 16:6). Mary worked hard for the community in Rome while spreading the word. She was already 'bent with age' when she travelled to Ephesus to participate in the Johannine work until her death there.

In the Eastern Orthodox church legends were not fostered and promoted as they were under Roman Catholicism. I think in part because a need was satisfied by the east's inwardly focused mysticism and private contemplation of holy figures in icons – artworks created by the faithful.

The business of relics

But relics were good business throughout Christendom. By the Middle Ages pieces of clothing, uncorrupted body parts and bones of the saints and apostles, even small slithers, were housed in gorgeous reliquaries. Pilgrims came in their thousands to bask in the holy atmosphere. Any news of resulting miraculous healings spread as quickly as men on horseback could carry it and was certainly welcomed by the church authorities.

One story says that in the ninth century Mary Magdalene's bones were transferred from Ephesus to Constantinople and housed in the Monastery Church of St Lazarus. And during the Crusades they were transferred to Rome and placed under the altar of the St John Lateran Archbasilica.

Another part of her skeleton, her hand, is on Mount Athos in Greece in the Simonopetra Monastery. Her relics are certainly widespread, although France became the main dwelling place of Mary Magdalene's bones.

Wonderful Vezelay

I visited the hilltop town of Vezelay in Burgundy in 2016. The town is famous for its Basilica of Mary Magdalene, a majestic Romanesque church and a major starting point on pilgrimage trails like the Camino de Santiago. A piece of the Magdalene's thigh bone is allegedly embedded in a statue and more of her bones are encased in a golden reliquary in the brooding Carolingian crypt.

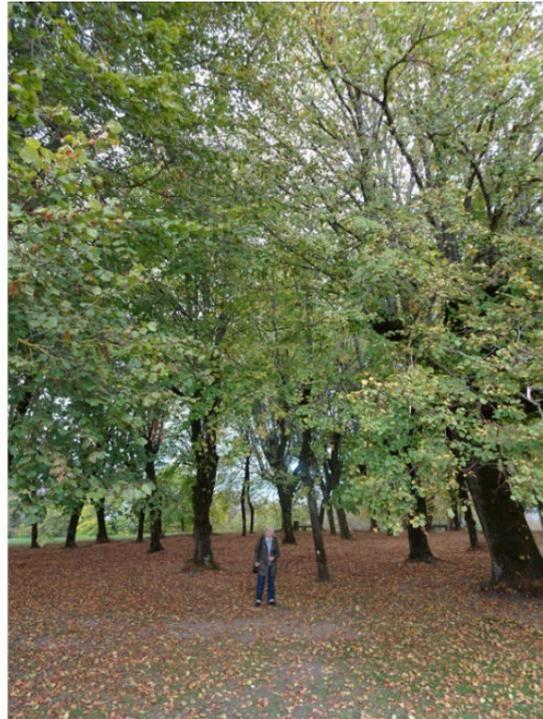
Around 1050 it was claimed that her bones had been brought from the Holy Land by the Abbey's ninth century founder, a Benedictine monk called Badilo.



Bones of Mary Magdalene in her golden reliquary in the Carolingian crypt of the Basilica at Vézelay

Vézelay became a major pilgrimage site and very wealthy. That prestige would decline, but the basilica is still standing atop the hill town, a beautiful example of high Romanesque architecture.

Did I experience Mary Magdalene there? Well, I immersed myself in the cathedral and stayed a long time in the deep crypt. And I know it wasn't the bones creating such a gently harmonious yet powerful mood. Perhaps it was the remembrance of all the honour given and love devoted to this beautiful Christed initiate. Outside in the wooded gardens the mood endured as I wandered on a carpet of fallen leaves among the late summer trees and gazed over the surrounding land from the summit of Vézelay's sacred hill.



The Magdalene remains found in southern France

In 1279 excavations in the crypt of the little church of St Maxim in St. Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume unearthed first century tombs, including a marble sarcophagus. When opened in the presence of various bishops, there was dust and a partial skeleton, and it exuded a beautiful perfume. A papyrus text placed in the coffin stated that this was the body of Mary Magdalene, which was hidden there in 710 to save it from Saracen invaders. That's the story told by the bishops who were the only people present. Their status and prestige were meant to guarantee the truth of the story.

The bones were authenticated by the pope in Rome and the Magdalene cult was assiduously promoted by Charles II of Anjou, King of Naples who built a grand Basilica over the old church and dedicated it to Mary Magdalene. The wonderful find filled local lord's coffers (probably to the chagrin of the authorities at Vezelay which up to then was the leading site of Magdalene relics).

In 1295 the Dominicans adopted the reformed and penitent Mary Magdalene as their patron saint and were granted the supervision of her important sites. Her bones were encased in elaborate reliquaries and distributed to churches around France. The skull relic is still in the Basilica.



The skull of Mary Magdalene framed in gold

Today we don't have the same need for bones. But stories of events imbued with wonder still have a powerful resonance and we do have a need for them, especially in this age when the sacred feminine is struggling to re-emerge. And there are many more stories about Mary Magdalene's adventures.