

### *The Shroud of Turin— Holy Hoax?*

**I**N THE ANNALS of iconography, the Shroud of Turin is unique. If it is authentic, it is not only a self-portrait of unparalleled verisimilitude, its “brush” or instrument of execution was the creator’s entire physical person, or more correctly, the force exerted by the vital body in a kind of corporeal sunburst when it dispersed in the equivalent of an atomic fissioning. The materials of the Shroud’s composition would be elements of the creator’s very body and blood, making it at once relic, icon, holy grail, and even permanent eucharist, containing both the flesh and blood of the One it images. Unique indeed! Assuming it is the burial cloth of Christ Jesus.

The Shroud is named after the French town where it was verifiably deposited and publically proclaimed in 1528. But reference to it is first made in John’s Gospel where Peter and the Evangelist see it in the empty sepulcher on Resurrection Sunday. It was secreted away and then appeared (436) in the basilica of St. Mary of the Blachernae in Constantinople. A French bishop (Arcelphus), in his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 640, mentions kissing the *sudarium Domini* (the Lord’s burial cloth). Venerable Bede refers to the Shroud in the eighth century. By 1204 it was back in Constantinople and seen by the Crusader Robert de Clari at the Blachernae. It was subsequently stolen and later appears in the Cathedral of St. Etienne where it was venerated until 1349, at which time a fire broke out and the Shroud disappeared, to reappear in the hands of Count Geoffroy de Charny, who deposited it in Lirey and then reclaimed it when allegations of its spurious nature were made, the claim being that it was a painter’s



*Positive of the negative image of a man’s head enigmatically projected on the Shroud of Turin. The horizontal slashes through the lower chin and top of the head are creases in the cloth. A large water mark (from extinguishing a fire) extends down toward the head, whose entire upper dome shows wounds from a crown of thorns. The nasal septum is broken.*

fabrication. That allegation has persisted to the present day. The Shroud’s continued change of custody and location concluded finally in Turin.

This yellow linen cloth shows the dusky image of a man with marks on his head that believers maintain was produced by a crown of thorns, lacerations on his back and legs, stigmata on his hands and feet, and a severe wound on his right side. These and other markings serve as the basis for a detailed recreation of each stage of Christ Jesus’ Passion, as minutely and persuasively documented by Dr. Pierre Barbet, a French surgeon, in his book *A Doctor at Calvary* (Roman Catholic Books, Harrison, NY, 1953).

The Shroud has been subjected to a wide array

Courtesy of the Shroud Center, 18351 Beach Blvd., Suite B, Huntington Beach, CA 92648

of sophisticated scientific analyses, including NASA instruments, X-ray replications to mimic the Shroud's effects. While a team of radiocarbon experts in 1988 assigned, with 95 percent certainty, a date of 1260 to 1390 to the Shroud, there are cogent reasons why that result is dubious. First, carbon-dating is fallible, and it is entirely theoretical, results can no more be proved than disproved (unless one plans to conduct a controlled test for a few thousand years). Its accuracy is subject to environmental, climactic, and contamination factors, among others, and even when used for age attribution in geologic time, it is seldom relied upon as the sole indicium.

Secondly, only about two square centimeters from the Shroud's 14-foot length were tested, since Church authorities will not allow this unique relic to be significantly damaged. That small area could easily have been from medieval repairs to the Shroud, not the original cloth. There are good statistical reasons why large samples are required for reliable testing, and those samples were not available for the radio-testing of the Shroud.

Thirdly, the Shroud was subjected to a well-documented fire in 1532. Recent research on similar cloth independently known to be about 2,000 years old and subjected in the laboratory to thermal conditions such as those experienced by the Shroud has demonstrated that erroneous carbon-dating results are obtained. The error was of the same magnitude as the time difference between the radiocarbon date of the Shroud and the time of Christ. Moreover, a microscopic layer of bacteria and fungi on the Shroud casts further doubt on the carbon-dating.

Fourthly, as many as 170 points of congruity have been identified between the facial image on the Shroud and copies dating back as far as the seventh century.

Fifthly, nothing and no one have yet unequivocally explained how the image was produced. (While iron oxide, a pigment known in the Middle Ages, is plentiful on the Shroud, it does not explain the formation of the image.)

Sixthly, there is no known artist of the Middle Ages who arguably had the detailed anatomical knowledge and artistic technique to produce the

image on the Shroud. Of all known painters prior to the 18th century, only Leonardo da Vinci had the combination of anatomical expertise and knowledge of the *sfumato* technique which resembles the appearance of the image; however, Leonardo was not yet born.

This alleged fabricator, a *deus ex machina* for the skeptics, must needs be a prodigy of artistic talent, medical expertise and near magical powers to: (a) emerge momentarily from total obscurity, create the Shroud (but no other works), and just as suddenly disappear again into total obscurity; (b) create a negative, holographic image on cloth while his contemporaries were painting two-dimensional, stilted, iconic figures on hard surfaces such as wood or plaster; (c) come up with a large piece of cloth of a type and weave used in Palestine at the time of Christ; (d) contaminate the cloth with ancient pollen from plants known to be indigenous to Palestine at the time of Christ; (e) put the nail punctures through the wrists (as the Romans did) rather than through the palms (as all other medieval artists mistakenly did); (f) depict the figure nude, which was strictly forbidden by the Church during the Middle Ages; (g) find a way to make the blood images penetrate the cloth and leave organic traces, but prevent the body images from doing so; (h) be conversant with blood clotting and serum transfusion, at a time when it was thought that blood circulated through the body once and was then excreted; (i) depict a negative image, an unimaginable conception before the invention of photography, one, moreover that correctly shows, as if reflected in a mirror, the spear wound on the figure's *left* side; and (j) create the image without leaving brush marks, paint, or absorption on the fibers—a feat which has never been repeated, save possibly for the images left by the intense blasts of radiation produced by the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II.

Thus, to dismiss the Shroud as medieval fails to consider all the other, extrinsic evidence of which the foregoing is but a sampling. It is for this reason that Dr. August Accetta, an Orange County (California) gynecologist believes, as he reported to the *Los Angeles Times* (January 25, 1997) that “the public is being misinformed” about the

Shroud. At his own expense, Accetta has opened the Shroud Center of Southern California, consisting of an exhibition space and nonprofit research center. Trained as a chemist, the physician is also conducting his own research using nuclear medicine techniques. Though at the outset he too was skeptical of the Shroud flap, after personal investigation he became a believer.

What would be the effect of categorically proving or disproving the authenticity of the Shroud? Probably little more than what it has already produced. Believers need no Shroud to anchor their faith, because that is based on evidence *not* seen. And most disbelievers will persist until they change from within, for those convinced against their will remain unpersuaded. As Abraham says to the cruel master Dives, who, suffering in hell for his sins and realizing the error of his ways, wants to warn his brothers, "They have Moses and the prophets, and if they can't hear them, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

But the Shroud does provide fascinating material from the perspective of Christian anthropology: It serves as an explicit visual gloss on the Passion, vividly impressing on the viewer the actuality of physical torture and the graphic way in which it was administered, contradicting some traditionally held notions; for instance, that Christ Jesus wore a full cap of thorns, or that nails were driven into His wrists, not the palms of his hands, or that he hung almost completely borne up by those two nails, since his feet, through which one spike was driven, were not supported by a wooden block and gave no leverage because his knees were bent.

More mysteriously, the production of the image on the cloth seems to give weight to the contention by some occult writers that upon His death, the highly charged chemical components of Christ Jesus' body, normally held in place by an act of will and by the help of both Essene adepts and nonhuman agencies, underwent, upon the departure of His Spirit, a species of spontaneous immolation or natural holocaust, dispersing in a powerful radiation of centrifugal force, impregnating the linen with atomic traces superimposed upon the blood and serum already assimilated by the Shroud's fiber.

## Shroud Mysteries

Why is the image like a faint "negative" and when reversed becomes a startling positive?

Why does image enhancement by NASA computers achieve a 3-dimensional effect, a correlation of proximity of corpse to body, a non-duplicated laboratory phenomenon?

Why is science unable to employ a technique to duplicate the faint scorched image?

Why call it a painting when 150,000 hours of research, including X-ray fluorescence and microchemistry, proves no pigment or other medium was "used" to create the image?

How account for the logical placement of nails, the precision of the lance thrust, *rigor mortis*, and skeletal data, both internal and external?

Why, from the thousands of crucifixions before and after Christ, are there no other shrouds, and no records of any victim mocked as royalty with a crown of thorns?

Why do so many depictions of Jesus' face in early eastern church art and of a 695 A.D. coin have so many precise details as if meticulously copied from the Shroud?

Are the 58 pollens on the cloth, most found in Jerusalem and environs, a mere coincidence?

Whatever be the final scientific consensus, a sympathetic viewer cannot but be impressed by this image of resident Divinity, the Face of which shows "such serene and astounding and adorable majesty." Speaking about the Shroud in 1936, Pius XI might be said to best articulate the believer's point of view: "There is still much mystery surrounding this sacred object; but it is certainly sacred as perhaps no other thing is sacred: and assuredly (one can say this is an acknowledged fact, even apart from all ideas of faith or of Christian piety), it is certainly not a human work." □