

ASSESSING REPORTS OF A TEMPLAR INITIATION RITUAL

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With great international fanfare, recent press reports have proclaimed that the missing medieval history of the Turin Shroud, extending from *ca.* 1204-1355, has been uncovered by Dr. Barbara Frale, described in her 2004 book, *The Templars: The Secret History Revealed*, as a “Vatican Secret Archives Historian”. According to several published versions of the alleged discovery, Dr. Frale has located, among documents buried in the Vatican’s Secret Archives, a source text in which a young man from the South of France, Arnaut Sabbatier, in describing his 1287 initiation into the Order of the Knights Templar, claims that, during the course of a ceremony attended only by a select few, he was first shown a long piece of linen cloth on which the figure of a bearded man was impressed and then directed to kiss the feet of that image three times. Dr. Frale identifies that cloth as the Turin Shroud and ascribes its custodianship, for at least a portion of the thirteenth century, to the Templar Order, and, on this basis, the press has proclaimed that all of the Shroud’s missing medieval years were spent with the Templars and their descendants, including Geoffrey de Charny, the relic’s first documented owner. In my opinion, however, a rather loud cautionary note must be sounded to those who might too readily employ such press reports to link, through a Templar custodianship, the early thirteenth-century Constantinople *sinidon* with the mid fourteenth-century Lirey shroud. Why, precisely, is such circumspection warranted?

Initially, it should be noted that Dr. Frale’s book, published only five years ago, revealed her 2001 discovery, in the Vatican Secret Archives, of the so-called “Chinon Parchment”, and that this document reportedly made specific mention of a Templar initiation ceremony:

A close reading of the text left no doubt. The Chinon Parchment is the record of the trial of the Templar leadership by the pope’s personal representatives. **It contains details of the order’s secret initiation ceremony, which had fueled great scandal.** (Arcade Publishing English-Language edition, 2009, Page 3, emphasis supplied).

Curiously, however, in enumerating the details of this strange induction ritual, which included requiring the fledgling member to deny Christ and to spit upon a cross, Dr. Frale made no reference to the image of a bearded man, a long piece of linen cloth, or any other Shroud-like object. The principal point of that book was that the Chinon Parchment “documented the absolution of the Templar leaders and their full reintegration into the Catholic community”, and not only did Dr. Frale fail to invoke any secret Vatican document to establish a missing biography for the Turin Shroud, but also she permitted Umberto Eco, in his Foreword to that book, to assert that ninety-nine per cent of everything written about the Templars is “pure fantasy”. Cognizant that, in her Afterword to the book, Dr. Frale suggested a possible connection between the Turin Shroud and the Templar-held Holy Grail mentioned in Wolfram von

Eschenbach's *Parsifal*, Eco equated such literary linkage with connecting the Ark of the Covenant to Indiana Jones on the basis of a movie script. On her part, Dr. Frale, while conceding that the Templars had secretly venerated an idol shaped as a bearded male head, criticized "the conjecture that the Templars were the custodians of the Holy Grail, which was believed to be Jesus' burial shroud", and pointedly observed:

Although there is some evidence to support the theory, proposed some thirty years ago, it isn't conclusive. ...Nevertheless, the path to knowledge on this question is still quite long and will lead us to credible results --- but only if the search remains distinct from all of the fiction born of utter fantasy that, especially in recent decades, has given the Order of the Knights Templar an exaggeratedly esoteric image. (Arcade Publishing English-Language edition, 2009, Page 200).

It appears clear, therefore, that had either the Chinon Parchment (which Dr. Frale claimed to have reviewed very closely) or any other Templar trial document described the image of a bearded man impressed on a long piece of linen cloth, the reference would have, and certainly should have, merited specific mention in her 2004 book, particularly in the context of her remarks concerning the Turin Shroud; however, no such revelation was made. While it is possible, of course, that this truly critical piece of historical information was only recently discovered, I am uncertain as to how, and why, it managed to remain concealed until just prior to its discoverer's slated publication of yet another book on the subject, particularly in light of Dr. Frale's admission that, by 2001, she had read "for the thousandth time the inventory of the documents on the trial of the Templars in the Vatican Secret Archives" and her declaration that "in four years of research I produced a compendium of all Templar testimony over the course of the entire trial". For these reasons, a satisfactory explanation regarding the source, the date, and the circumstances surrounding this important find, together with unimpeded access to the unabridged text of the source, will be necessary in order to determine the credibility and reliability of Dr. Frale's rather dramatic claim that this secret Vatican material provides a reference to the Turin Shroud, rather than, as Umberto Eco might say, just another example of pure Templar fantasy.

Secondly, many other questions must be answered in connection with the historicity of the claim. Why, for example, and despite the extensive investigation of the Templars by both Church and Crown, was this aspect of the Order's initiation ritual described by one, and only one, of the many witnesses who were subjected to brutal examination, if, indeed, not torture? Why, too, did not one of the accused Templars cite the Order's possession of what was so obviously a Christian relic to refute the damning accusations that the Templars had worshipped a satanic, heretical, or Moslem "head idol"? And why, with this object having thereby become known to the papacy, was its historical existence not disclosed and invoked to refute the claims of forgery which were leveled by Bishop Pierre d'Arcis against the Lirey shroud exhibited by the Charny family in 1389?

Nevertheless, if we assume, *arguendo*, that the historical accuracy of Dr. Frale's source will be satisfactorily established and that scholars will come to accept a Templar possession of

the Shroud in 1287, what viability will remain to the several historical theories previously advanced to account for the Shroud's missing medieval years? It is self-evident that, were the Shroud actually held in Europe by late thirteenth-century Templars, it could not have been obtained by Geoffrey de Charny in Smyrna during the military campaign of 1346. Similarly, it could not have constituted any of the variously-described objects (e.g., the *sancta toella*) allegedly brought by Louis IX from Constantinople in 1248 and placed in the Sainte Chapelle, as such items were periodically inventoried during the second half of the thirteenth century and confirmed as then being present in that church's Grand Reliquary Chest. Finally, it could not have been kept either in the Besançon cathedral or in Othon de la Roche's Chateau de Ray-sur-Saône.

There are, however, two theories which readily accommodate a late thirteenth-century Templar custodianship of the relic. In 1978, Ian Wilson suggested that the Shroud was taken from Constantinople by Templar knights associated with the Fourth Crusade, and that it ultimately passed to Geoffrey de Charny through his familial relationship with Geoffrey de Charnay, the Templar master of Normandy who, in 1314, was burned at the stake with Grand Master Jacques de Molay. While Wilson intimated that the relic, having been brought directly from Constantinople to the Holy Land, was transferred to France upon the fall of Acre in 1291, it is clear that, were it being employed as an object of Templar initiation in 1287, its conveyance to Europe would have necessarily transpired earlier, perhaps when the Moslems captured Crusader-held Jerusalem in 1244. In 1997, I proposed that the Shroud was taken from Constantinople to Languedoc, by dualist religionists affiliated with the Cathars of Languedoc, and that, upon the fall of Montsegur to Albigensian Crusaders in 1244, the relic was spirited out of that fortress, kept, for a century, by Cathar families, and transferred, in 1349-1350, to Geoffrey de Charny by virtue of a royal forfeiture. I also noted, however, that "a Cathar-based Shroud biography which ends in the years after Montsegur still lends itself to a subsequent Templar possession and Geoffrey's acquisition of the relic through his family's putative Templar connections (inasmuch as) the Temple Order, infiltrated by Cathars, provided safe havens for Cathar refugees who may have given the Shroud to their Templar protectors". Although Dr. Frale's source document apparently does not recite how, or when, the imaged linen cloth came into Templar possession, the press has reported, without further elaboration, that she believes this event occurred in approximately 1260, a circumstance which, if true, would comport closely with the fall of Queribus, the last of the Cathar strongholds, in 1255. Thus, the heretics' entrustment of the Shroud to the Knights Templar could have been accomplished in more than sufficient time for it to have been utilized during the 1287 initiation of Arnaut Sabbatier who, as Dr. Frale has reported, hailed from the South of France, quite possibly, I would suppose, from Languedoc itself.

Unfortunately, we must patiently await the publication of Dr. Frale's highly-anticipated new book in order to properly determine the extent to which some arcane document, long interred within the shadows of the Secret Vatican Archives, might contribute to uncovering the missing medieval history of the Turin Shroud.