

CARBON DATING - WHAT SOME OF US THINK NOW

by Michael Clift

I find most thought-provoking the failure of the scientists in 1988, with their fanfare-style accusations of "fake", to have killed the Shroud stone dead by now. At the time of the announcement of the three University findings over four years ago I have to admit to having had a profound sense of shock and disappointment at the result, forgetting, of course, that throughout the whole history of science the rule, rarely broken, is that time will modify every result, every method, every finding, every hypothesis. The outstanding example of this lies in the Phlogiston Theory, the belief that combustion is completely explained by the releasing of the substance phlogiston. When it was shown that the products of burning weigh **more** than before, the scientists clung to their unassailable claim by telling us that this was because phlogiston had a negative weight!

The Phlogiston Mentality, as it pleases me to call it, continues in **some** entrenched minds to this day even in the face of Newton's Laws of Motion necessarily modified by Einstein, and Einstein's Relativity Theories necessarily modified by modern physicists. And as for the constant changes of opinion in the world of Medicine, well I'd better not tell you about them for fear of giving you nightmares. Suffice it to say that because logic, reason, experiment, deduction all conspire to one end there is no need to regard any hypothesis as the last word ever, just as in the medical world there is no case, ever, that is hopeless, as any doctor worth his salt should be able to confirm.

Now there is a growing body of evidence that impels us to question what they told us in 1988. It is idle for dedicated scientists to say to me, as many have, that the thing must have been done honestly so we have no grounds to doubt the results, that there was no reason to cook the books so the books are reliable, or that the only reason I reject their findings is wishful thinking on my part. Even if the Shroud were of fourteenth century flax my Christian beliefs must be unaffected because I really and truly have no axe to grind in this sense. Indeed if axes are to be ground what about the scientist who stubbornly defends science? Have they not heard of the current findings, in several branches of science, that reason does not prevail everywhere, certainly not in Galactic matters, nor in subatomic physics, nor in the behaviour of light, to mention only three examples?

Therefore it is not without justification that I bring before you some of the considerations which make me more and more sceptical as time goes on. Firstly the attitude of one of those 1988 scientists, Professor 'Teddy' Hall, was in my eyes starkly unobjective. He said something like, "It's finished, finished! No one will have any further interest in the Shroud of Turin". Setting aside the fact, unconcealed by him, that he is an atheist (and might therefore have an axe of his own to grind) I really must tell of his reaction when I questioned him on these words of his. "Surely, Professor Hall", I asked him, "if your result shows that the image was not produced miraculously by God the Father, will not scientists now be more interested in it, to find out how man did this thing?" His incredible reply was, "I don't believe in God the Father, old boy"! At that moment of breath-taking non sequitur I wrote him off as a thinker. 'The Fool hath said in his heart ...'

But around this time there appeared an article in *New Scientist*, signed by thirty academics, telling us that the margin of error in carbon dating can be far more than the three Universities would admit - in some instances several hundred years, and this more likely where the period being studied is as little as twenty centuries. Indeed we are told that the method is of greatest use over much longer periods, five thousand years at a minimum. Contemporary with this article was a news item that one laboratory was given an object only eleven years old but told that it was very ancient. They came up with eleven thousand years.

Another surprise was that the three authorities, Oxford, Arizona, and Zurich all used the same dating method. Would it not have been more scientific for each to use a different one, for we know that there are several methods? Given that it was the same method it would have been no surprise if they had all achieved the same result. Only they didn't. Glossed over in the official report were the substantial differences between them.

If that were not enough to ask them to look again what can one make of the fact that although we were promised a double blind trial this precaution was apparently not applied, for we have heard it said that certain samples were actually labelled before leaving Turin. Should this be true we are entitled to ask, and to keep on asking until we are satisfied, what reason there was for dumping this safeguard?

In all the scientific assaults on the Shroud only one is said to have come up with something that is incompatible with authenticity. Unless we could be sure that no carelessness crept in, and that the procedures were as impeccable as they could possibly be, would it not be perverse, not to say irrational, to base our assessment of the Shroud's truth on a single trial of science in the face of the immensely long list of other trials equally deserving of respect?

But that is not all; so many tiny bits and pieces of information, perhaps having their origin in the subconscious, inform and feed my intuition increasingly so that as time goes on the significance of the carbon dating becomes less and less worthy of attention. That the Vatican, no less, has rejected the 1988 figures and is calling for a repetition is worth some thought. Of course there are those who will see this as another dip into the bran tub to see if a more suitable present will be found, and they are entitled to question it.

But let them not forget the cubit. As Ian Dickinson has shown us the Shroud measures exactly two by eight of the Palestinian cubit, which was not in general use in the fourteenth century. One might accept a coincidence if the whole number of cubits was in one direction, but surely not in both? So if the cloth was deliberately cut to this unit in, say, 1340, it can have been only to deceive as to its origin. Why then, we are prudent to enquire, was not attention drawn to it long ago, instead of it's being a chance finding in 1990? And while you ponder this take into account that if the cubit is telling us a true First Century origin we have at once the only truly satisfying explanation for the side strip. It is enough to occupy your meditations until the Shroud throws us its next, long overdue, surprise.