

Secondo Pia

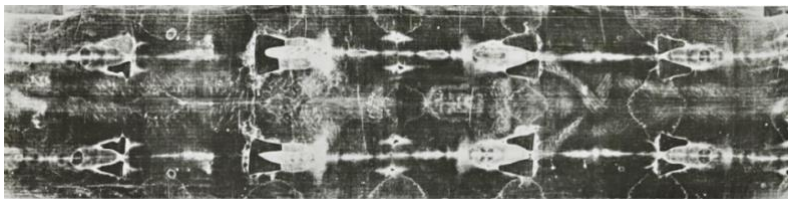
by Josep Fernández Capo

In 1898, the life of Secondo Pia, a 43-year-old lawyer from Turin and an amateur photographer, seemed as if it was going to be like yours and mine, and those of most human beings. That is, a life without special public notoriety. But something unexpected, what some might call luck, definitely changed the script of the other 43 years that remained until his death. A script that was characterized by initial popularity, by a long subsequent discredit, and, finally, by his rehabilitation at the end of his life.



Secondo Pia

The stroke of luck that made him famous is well known by now. Between May 25th and 28th 1898, after working really hard at overcoming technical setbacks¹, Secondo Pia was the first to photograph one of the most valuable Christian relics: the Shroud of Turin, the white linen allegedly believed to have wrapped Christ's corpse after the crucifixion. But this piece of cloth, from the point of view of science, was nothing more than a 'pious article', something of interest just for its devotees. What neither Pia nor anyone else could suspect is that the development of those first photographs was going to reveal something greater and unprecedented: the Shroud itself is a photographic negative! The image of the man in the relic is printed with the light-dark areas of the picture reversed, as in a photographic negative. In Pia's eyes, the Shroud image emerged from the development tray as the first photograph in history².



¹ Cf. Crispino (1986) *A letter from Secondo Pia*, Shroud Spectrum International No. 18 Part 4. (www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi18part4.pdf)

² The first surviving photograph in history was taken in 1826 by the French engineer Nicéphore Niépce from the window of his barn in Saint Loup de Varennes, France. (cf. www.muyhistoria.es/curiosidades/preguntas-respuestas/icual-fue-la-primera-fotografia).



D'Arcis Memorandum

Immediately the news —along with the photograph of the Shroud, both the positive and the mysterious negative— leapt to media notoriety³ and attracted many comments. A second surprise awaited Pia: the reaction of some intellectuals. Although his find had become popular in a short time, accusations of forgery and photographic tampering soon followed⁴. A shadow of doubt was cast over Pia's reputation. This shadow became even darker when two renowned Catholic intellectuals, Ulysse Chevalier (1900)⁵ and Herbert Thurston (1903)⁶ —both clergymen— firmly stated that the Shroud was a 'medieval forgery'. They based their claim on a historical document (the D'Arcis Memorandum) that already in the fourteenth century questioned the authenticity of the relic, although without disproving it. As a result, much of the Catholic intellectual

³ “The first media report, in *L'Italia Reale Corriere Nazionale*, appeared on 1 June (1898), quickly followed by one of the unofficial photos” (Wilson, Ian (2010) *The Shroud*, Ed. Transworld Digital). “Genoa's *Il Cittadino* newspaper reported Pia's photograph on 13 June, and a day later the story appeared in the national newspaper *Corriere Nazionale*. On 15 June the Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano* covered the story” (www.https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secondo_Pia).

⁴ “The *Italia Corriere*, on 15 June, authoritatively claiming that the strange effect was due to Pia's use of a yellow filter. There followed further 'intelligent', scientific-sounding explanations for the phenomenon. It was just an accident of 'transparency', or of 'over-exposure', or of 'refraction'. More hurtfully for Pia, there were also sly insinuations that he must have 'retouched' his negative, the strange effect thereby being just a cynical hoax that he had perpetrated (...) the opponents were well-served by journalists whose understanding of the photographic process left much to be desired. There was the claim that the photographic plate had been "over-exposed"; there was the claim that the photo had been made by "transparency", but as Pia pointed out, everybody knows that a red silk lining is sewn on the back of the Shroud and that would prevent all transparency. Furthermore, the notarial Act of 1901 specifically mentions that the Shroud was never removed from its frame. It seems strange to us today that Secondo Pia could have been accused of fraud and trickery in the darkroom”. (Wilson, Ian (2010) *The Shroud*, Ed. Transworld Digital).

⁵ Chevalier, U (1900) *Etude critique sur l'origine du Saint-Suaire de Lirey-Chambéry-Turin*,

⁶ Thurston, Herbert (1903) *The Holy Shroud and the Verdict of History*, *The Month*, vol. 101, no. 1, pp. 17-29 and 162-178 and Thurston, Herbert (1903). *The Holy Shroud as a Scientific Problem*, *The Month*, p. 162 (Vol. CI). “In 1903, Herbert Thurston confidently pronounced the Shroud a fraud and sanctimoniously proclaimed that ‘...the probability of an error in the verdict of history must be accounted...as infinitesimal!’” (Markwardt, J. (2002) *The conspiracy against the Shroud*. British Society for the Turin Shroud, Shroud Newsletter 55.

<http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n55part3.pdf>).

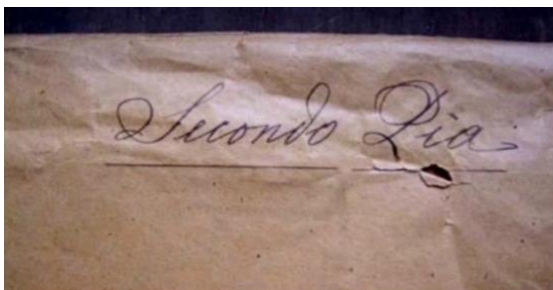
world, especially in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, considered the case closed⁷.

It was of no use to Pia that the prestigious French anatomist Yves Delage declared before the French Academy of Sciences in 1902 that, according to the scientific studies he had carried out based on Pia's photograph, he was able to conclude that the shroud was indeed the linen cloth that had wrapped Christ's corpse⁸. Ironically, two catholic intellectual clergymen were the first ones to bet on the relic's falsehood and an agnostic scientist a pioneer in favour of its authenticity. Two things became clear: on the one hand that the catholic faith felt free to discredit the relic⁹, and, on the other, that both scientific and technical data were imposing their own logic.

Neither was it of any use to Pia to appeal by letter to the director of the Laboratory of analytic chemistry of the University of Turin to ask for support against the accusation of falsity:

Turin, 28 February 1901.

*Illustrious Sig[nore]
Dott[ore] Cav[aliere]
Benedetto Porro, In the
past year of 1900, there
were interesting
discussions about the
Most Holy Shroud of
Turin (...); the discussions*



arose from the photographic reproduction that, by special authorization of the King, I had the honor to execute during the Exposition of 1898. The discussions concerned the attempts to present the hypothesis that special methods had been used in the photographic reproduction. To remove every doubt about the seriousness with which I made the photographs, I consider it my duty, for love of the truth, to make public a detailed statement of the way in which my work was carried out (...). I would therefore like that you, Professor (...) would favor me with your opinion (...). I made two exposures, the first of 14 minutes and the second of 20 minutes (...). It is clear, therefore, that I did not invent any special method nor did I use any artifice to obtain the reproduction of the M.H. Shroud

⁷ Through Thurston, the thesis of "medieval forgery" was introduced in the Catholic Encyclopedia (written in English) and had an important influence on the opinion of the Anglo-Saxon Catholic world (cf. Rinaldi, P. (1984) *When America first heard about the Shroud*, Shroud Spectrum International No. 12 Part 3; www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi12part3.pdf).

⁸ Delage, Y. 1902. "Le Linceul de Turin" *Revue Scientifique* 22: 683-687. "1902, 21 April. In Paris anatomy professor Yves Delage, an agnostic, having carefully studied Pia's photographs, presents a paper to the French Academy of Sciences. He claims the Shroud to be so medically accurate that he is convinced it wrapped a genuine, crucified human body, also that the body was that of Jesus" (Wilson, Ian (2010) *The Shroud*, Ed. Transworld Digital).

⁹ Cf. Fernández, J. (2015) *Faith and science dialogue in the Shroud of Turin*, *Scientia et Fides*, 3(1) /2015, pp. 37-59).

(...). *The photographic plates were not retouched and are at the disposition of whomsoever wants to assure himself of that. I can produce not a few testimonies from persons who, interested in my work, had occasion to see the original negatives the day after they were exposed*¹⁰.

The fact is that both Pia and Delage suffered criticism and contempt for tilting the balance towards the authenticity of the relic. Delage soon abandoned this war¹¹, but Pia experienced an ordeal that lasted thirty-three years. Steinbeck, in his famous novel *The Pearl* (1947), tells a story similar to Pia's: he tells how it can turn into a tragedy for a modest person to make the greatest discovery of his life, in this case to find a pearl of incalculable value. But these things don't just happen in literary fiction; they have happened and continue to happen in reality, as when the American policeman Richard Jewell discovered a bomb in time at an open-air musical concert and prevented a massacre (July 1996); He was first hailed as a national hero, and shortly afterwards he was indicted on suspicion of having planted the bomb himself. The truth ended up prevailing and his fame was restored¹².

Pia's rehabilitation came in May 1931, when the prestigious photographer Giuseppe Enrie took new photographs of the Shroud. The result was the same as that achieved by Pia more than three decades earlier, to the great relief of Pia, who was present at the taking of the photographs. Secondo Pia was then 76 years old and died ten years later, in 1941. In this last decade of his life he also witnessed the rehabilitation of the prestige of the Shroud as a scientific object: the medical studies of Dr. Pierre Barbet (1931-1950)¹³, the popularization of the Shroud in the USA thanks to the famous article by Peter Rinaldi in *The Sign* magazine (June 1934)¹⁴, the creation of the research centre *Cultores Sanctae Sindonis* (Turin, 1937) for the promotion of the science of the Shroud; the publication of an article on the relic in the prestigious *Scientific American* magazine (February 1937), etc. After his death, the figure of Pia has been gaining ever greater historical prominence. The Catholic Church paid him public tribute in 1998, when it

¹⁰ Crispino, (1986) *A letter from Secondo Pia*, Shroud Spectrum International No. 18 Part 4. (www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi18part4.pdf)

¹¹ "Deeply wounded by the fuss, then frustrated by the Turin authorities' refusal to allow him any direct examination of the Shroud, not long after Delage dropped any further active work on the subject, instead devoting his energies mostly to marine biology studies at the Biology Station at Roscoff, Brittany, where he is remembered by an impressive relief sculpture". (Wilson, Ian (2010) *The Shroud*, Ed. Transworld Digital).

¹² Cf. [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Jewell_\(film\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Jewell_(film))

¹³ Dr. Pierre Barbet, a prominent French Surgeon, published his landmark book, "A Doctor at Calvary" documenting 15 years of medical research on the Shroud image. He described the physiology and pathology of the man on the Shroud as "anatomically perfect" (<https://www.museumoftheholysroud.net/History.htm>)

¹⁴ Rinaldi, P. (1984) *When America first heard about the Shroud*, Shroud Spectrum International No. 12 Part 3; www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi12part3.pdf.

organized an Exposition of the Shroud to commemorate the centenary of Pia's photography. Pope John Paul II visited the Shroud on the same day that Pia had photographed the relic a hundred years earlier. It was no wonder since that photograph marked the beginning of a new science (the Sindonology) and the universalization of interest in the relic.

Fortunately, Pia's story ended well. But we could ask ourselves: what were the reasons why Pia had to suffer thirty-three years of discredit? Mainly two. On the one hand, there was the liberal ideology of the nineteenth century that had permeated vast strata of the culture, not excepting theology: first, Protestant theology¹⁵, and later, as if by contagion, Catholic theology¹⁶. Among some Catholic intellectuals, there was a desire to devalue as much as possible everything supernatural in religion in order to smooth the dialogue with an increasingly secularized dominant culture¹⁷. Within this program of theological renewal, the relics were in the spotlight, since their worship—sometimes excessive—was the object of criticism from the liberals. This partly explains the motivations of the scholars Chevalier and Thurston to sharply discredit the authenticity of the Shroud and win the applause of their colleagues. And perhaps it also explains the desire of the owners of the Shroud not to give too much prominence to the relic during the nineteenth century, since there were only five public displays, when in previous centuries those displays took place every year¹⁸.

On the other hand, we have the same liberal ideology represented now in the scientific thought of freethinkers¹⁹, which explains the frontal rejection by the French Academy of Sciences of the authenticity thesis of the agnostic Delage. For freethinkers, religion could and should be tolerated, but it must remain anchored in the realm of sentiment, not in scientific truth. Experimental science had taken the place of metaphysics and theology, and it was self-sufficient to explain every human question that might arise. As the French scientist Laplace had said a century earlier, the God hypothesis was no longer necessary. Pia's finding and Delage's scientific conclusions shook the foundations of freethinkers.

If what Delage said was true, experimental science itself became an instrument to rehabilitate something that supposedly had already been surpassed by science itself: this is to say, the rational interest in relics. And this could not be allowed since some

¹⁵ “By liberalism I mean the anti-dogmatic principle and its developments”. (Apologia pro Vita Sua; Newman, J. H., 1865)

¹⁶ Markwardt, J. (2002) *The conspiracy against the Shroud*. British Society for the Turin Shroud, Shroud Newsletter 55. <http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n55part3.pdf>.

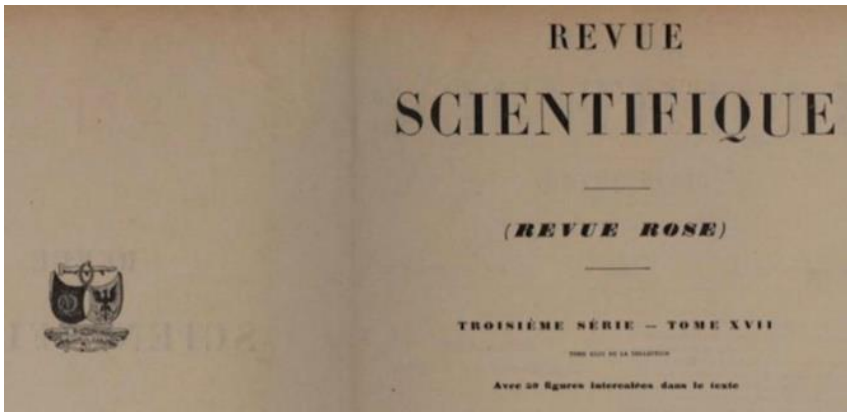
¹⁷ This movement within Catholic theology later became radicalized and was condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907 (Encyclical Pascendi Dominici Gregis). George Tyrrell, a friend of Herbert Thurston, was one of those sanctioned for his modernism (cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernism_in_the_Catholic_Church).

¹⁸ www.ldi5.net/e/sindo/e_sindhist.php.

¹⁹ Freethinker: “A person who has formed their opinions using reason and rational enquiry; somebody who has rejected dogma, especially with regard to religion” (<https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/freethinker>).

understood it as a betrayal of the prevailing canonical thinking²⁰. Delage and Pia had 'entered' a hostile world, as Galileo and Darwin did before²¹, and as later did Lemaître, the father of the Big Bang, which was a theory that made many uneasy because it seemed to point towards a creator God. In this regard, Delage's own defense words are very eloquent after having become the object of criticism:

*A religious question has been needlessly injected into a problem which in itself is purely scientific, with the result that feelings have run high, and reason has been led astray. If, instead of Christ, there were a question of some person like a Sargon, an Achilles or one of the Pharaohs, no one would have thought of making any objection (...). I have been faithful to the true spirit of science in treating this question, intent only on the truth, not concerned in the least whether it would affect the interests of any religious party (...). I recognize Christ as a historical personage and I see no reason why anyone should be scandalized that there still exist material traces of his earthly life.*²²



Cover of Revue Scientifique

One thing remains clear: whoever delves into the science of the Shroud and feels impelled by scientific findings to bet on their authenticity will have to be willing to suffer troubles and penalties, like Pia and Delage, and many others since. In the West we live in a cultural context that promotes and rewards (also financially) those who intend to demonstrate the falsity of the relic. This has happened historically with the great detractors of the Shroud: Chevalier, McCrone and the team that carried out the

²⁰ Fernández, J. (2015) *Faith and science dialogue in the Shroud of Turin*, *Scientia et Fides*, 3(1)/2015, pp. 37–59).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Delage, Y. (1902). *Le Linceul de Turin*, *Revue Scientifique*, 22: 683-687

1988 radiocarbon test²³. And this is a fact of experience, regardless of whether science finally decides against or in favour of the relic. Probably, in the zealous Constantinople of the 10th century, a wealthy and relic-loving city, the opposite would have happened to what did in the liberal Paris of the early 20th century. Ideological contexts change over time and, although facts are facts, their interpretation is not free from the bias of cultural conditioning factors.

Delage already said it, if it were Achilles..., the reaction would have been different. We cannot ignore that the verdict on the Shroud always moves between two types of audiences that can become polarized: that of those devotees who seem to need the authenticity of the relic to support their faith, and that of freethinkers who seem to need to hear it sentenced as ‘medieval forgery’ to be at peace. In this context, science and its findings are driving the debate until the day when a certain consensus is finally reached. In any case, the following is true for both parties to understand and remain at ease: neither will the authenticity of the relic ever constitute an experimental proof of the resurrection of Christ nor its falsity entail a discredit for the faith in the risen Christ²⁴. Even so, it is no wonder, since this is not about Achilles, but about Christ, the most beloved and controversial character in history, the one who always was, is and will be a ‘sign of contradiction’²⁵ And if anyone has doubts about it, ask Jim Caviezel, the actor who played Christ in the movie *The Passion* (2004), directed by Mel Gibson. Gibson warned him from the start: “Jim, I want you to be aware of what you are going to do. You may not go back to work”. Caviezel replied, “This is what I believe in. We all have to carry a Cross. I have to carry my own Cross (...). So let's do it!”. They did, and the movie was an unexpected box office success. It generated both recognition and controversy. Caviezel admitted it later: “I have been rejected by my own industry”²⁶.

After the contributions of Pia and Delage, the science of the Shroud continued to develop to this day, periodically fascinating us with surprising new findings. As Dr. Barbet prophesied in 1933, the best was yet to come:

*The more I delve into the marvellous complexities of the Shroud, the more convinced I become that we are only scratching the surface of this mystery. The best things about the Shroud have yet to be told*²⁷.

The law of the pendulum is also fulfilled for the still young science of the Shroud: alternatively, new findings appear that point towards authenticity, then others that point

²³ Damon, P. E., et al. (1989). *Radiocarbon Dating of the Shroud of Turin*. *Nature* 337: 6208: 611–615.

²⁴ Fernández, J. (2015) *Faith and science dialogue in the Shroud of Turin*, *Scientia et Fides*, 3(1)/2015, pp. 37–59).

²⁵ ‘Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: ‘*This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too*’” (Bible, Luke 2, 34-35).

²⁶ www.lavanguardia.com/cine/20181105/452677093561/jim-caviezel-actor-la-pasion-de-cristo.html

²⁷ Rinaldi, P. (1984) *When America first heard about the Shroud*, *Shroud Spectrum International* No. 12 Part 3; www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi12part3.pdf).

in the opposite direction. Regardless of the final verdict, it is a gripping science story: the Shroud remains a mystery (even if it was a forgery: how could some medieval forger do something that we have not yet the ability to explain or reproduce?²⁸) and a challenge to reason. In addition, the science of the Shroud is a paradigm for other disciplines, since it represents a fruitful dialogue between faith and science (with the legitimate controversy over the authenticity of the relic running on the sidelines) and is a model of interdisciplinarity²⁹.

As the renowned sindonologist Raymond Rogers once stated, “No matter what the truth is about the Shroud, it is a fascinating study. It can be studied according to the rigorous Scientific Method”³⁰.

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Archaeological evidence of Roman Crucifixion found in UK

The edition of the archaeological magazine, *Arkeo*, which was published on December 9th, contained news of the skeleton of a crucifixion victim discovered in a hitherto unknown Roman settlement at Fenstanton in Cambridgeshire. The dig took place there as a condition for allowing a modern housing estate to be built in the area. The skeleton belonged to the first such remains to be discovered in Britain. Like an earlier example discovered in Israel, it had a nail-hole. This was not in the middle of the feet, as in a Medieval or Renaissance painting of the Crucifixion, but through the ankles, as on the Shroud: and also in the Israeli find. In addition, the hole in the Fenstanton skeleton contained a very large and rusty nail.

There have been many bodies found which might have belonged to Crucifixion victims, but their condition is such that their detailing is uncertain. The only set of remains to compare with this find is the Israeli one already referred to. What Fenstanton provides is "one more nail in the coffin," for the idea that the Shroud is a Medieval forgery.

²⁸ D'Muhala, T. 1996. *Where do we go from here?* (www.shroud.com/dmuhala.htm)

²⁹ Fernández, J. (2015) *Faith and science dialogue in the Shroud of Turin*, *Scientia et Fides*, 3(1) /2015, pp. 37–59).

³⁰ Fanti et al. 2005, *Evidences for testing hypotheses about the Body Image Formation of the Turin Shroud* (www.shroud.com/pdfs/doclist.pdf).