

The Desire for Total Darkness

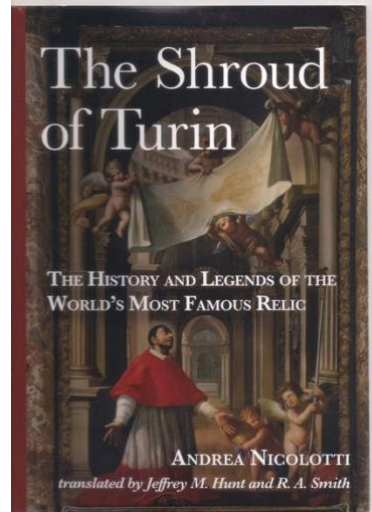
Review of Andrea Nicolotti's *The Shroud of Turin - The History and Legends of the World's Most Famous Relic*

By Emanuela Marinelli

"God has put enough light into the world for those who want to believe, but he has also left enough shadows for those who don't want to believe".

Blaise Pascal

In the darkness of the ancient centuries, some lights come on here and there to illuminate Turin Shroud's troubled path. The historian's task is to look for these torches and to reconstruct, through them, a likely path. This would be expected from Andrea Nicolotti, associate professor of the Department of Historical Studies of the University of Turin, who has published a substantial volume (502 pages) entitled *The Shroud of Turin - The History and Legends of the World's Most Famous Relic* (Baylor University Press 2019). The work is the English version, expanded and updated, of *Sindone – Storia e leggende di una reliquia controversa* (Einaudi 2015, pp. 370).



The volume presents itself with a remarkable apparatus: a promising title; a captivating cover showing Saint Charles Borromeo praying in front of the Shroud; 23 illustrations (unfortunately in black and white); thanks to 76 people¹, of which 66 for the Italian version and 10 for the English version; 475 pages of text; 26 index pages of the 1817 names of personages mentioned, 1214 total notes in the five chapters; six short sentences of praise by authoritative personalities on the back cover, of which three are from priests, reported as longer sentences at the beginning of the book. Everything suggests a wide-ranging, complete, documented and objective work.

Anyone who has already read other books by Nicolotti knows, however, his destructive attitude: his interpretation of the sources is always contrary to the authenticity of the Shroud and the denial of any possibility that the relic is the funeral sheet of Christ is

¹ I have not found, either in this book or in other books by Nicolotti, any acknowledgement to the historian Ian Wilson for the use of two photos he granted him. See: Ian Wilson, *The Shroud, the Knights Templar and Barbara Frale*, in *British Society for the Turin Shroud Newsletter*, n. 73, June 2011, part 5, <https://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n73part5.pdf>

continually repeated². He is anxious to turn off any light, so that the darkness could be total. Nicolotti operates a systematic exaltation of the scholars who believe the Shroud to be false, people he presents as reliable, and an equally systematic denigration of those who consider it authentic, branded as sindonologists who make pseudoscience. In reality, his criticism of exaggerated claims is right, but he constantly rejects all statements in favor of the authenticity of the Shroud and this is not acceptable.

There are enough shadows for those who do not want to admit that the Shroud comes from the tomb of Jesus, it is true, but there is enough light to claim that it wrapped his body. History alone does not allow light to prevail, but we are not discussing an object that no longer exists: the cloth is still there and the scientific investigations conducted on it tend to its authenticity. Only the famous radiocarbon analysis of 1988 seemed to go in the opposite direction, but the validity of that test - as is now known - has been widely denied³.

The number of sources cited by Nicolotti is enormous, among which there are documents found by him, but there is a strange silence on some sources and on some articles favorable to the authenticity of the Shroud, which he cannot ignore. We will see only a few examples, because the short space of a review does not allow a complete examination of all his statements. The index of names is vast and very useful. On the other hand, there is no general list of bibliographic sources, which appear only in the notes. This means that when in a footnote reference is made to a source already cited, it is not specified where it was mentioned and it is not easy to find it. An example: note 137 on p. 309 simply quotes "The exposition of the Holy Shroud" without indicating where it is possible to read the complete quote. That text had appeared in note 257 on p. 160 (the notes of each chapter are numbered starting from number one), but obviously the reader cannot remember it. Unfortunately there are no color photos. It is a pity, because obviously the color photos would have enriched the volume, as had happened in the Italian version. The choice of black and white photos may have been dictated by the need to contain the price, which in any case is \$ 59.99⁴.

The preface was written by Nicolotti himself. Here he states that there has been the veneration of various shrouds and that compared to the Shroud of Turin there are older

² In this regard, you can read the already published reviews: E. Marinelli, *Wiping the slate clean*, in *British Society for the Turin Shroud Newsletter*, n. 74, December 2011, part 8, <https://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n74part8.pdf>; E. Marinelli, *A small cloth to be destroyed*, in *British Society for the Turin Shroud Newsletter*, n. 75, June 2012, part 8, <https://www.shroud.com/pdfs/n75part8.pdf>; E. Marinelli, *Against the Shroud. But with mixed cards*, in *Storia in Rete*, n. 117-118, July-August 2015, pp. 28-38, <http://www.sindone.info/SINDFOB2.PDF>, all of them not mentioned by Nicolotti.

³ T. Casabianca - E. Marinelli - G. Pernagallo - B. Torrisi, *Radiocarbon dating of the Turin Shroud: new evidence from raw data*, in *Archaeometry*, vol. 61, n. 5, October 2019, pp. 1223-1231, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/arcm.12467>.

⁴ See: <https://www.baylorpress.com/9781481311472/the-shroud-of-turin/>

burial cloths. So he has already decided that the Turin Shroud cannot be authentic. Another strong statement comes after a few lines: in the history of the Shroud there are episodes that the House of Savoy and the Church have tried to hide. He goes on to say that the Shroud of Turin was more fortunate than the others - initially more famous - because it has an image and “because of the powerful propaganda that was first advanced by the House of Savoy and later by the ecclesiastical authorities”. In our own age, “a group of authenticist scholars known as sindonologists have also made the case for authenticity”. Nicolotti then warns the reader: “I must devote a good deal of space to dismantling historiographical hypotheses that do not hold up under criticism. One cannot pass silently over the cases in which the sindonology has muddled the evidence; it has produced propaganda and historical-scientific fabrications, successfully influencing the *opinio communis*. The historian is called to address the issue directly, without hiding behind an artificial moderation that would only lead to reticence”. We are still in the preliminary pages and Nicolotti has already begun to express himself with aggressive tones.

To warn the reader against believing in the existence of a real shroud, Nicolotti points out that “the ancient world was full of shrouds, bands, and sudariums kept in different places and in competition among themselves”. Some pages are then dedicated to the testimony of Robert de Clari, more difficult to devalue because it is very objective. The crusader describes in Constantinople, during the Fourth Crusade, “another church which was called My Lady Saint Mary of Blachernae, where there was the *sydoines* where our Lord had been wrapped, which every Friday raised itself upright, so that one could see the form of our Lord there”. But Nicolotti contrives every possible reason to demolish this testimony. The Blachernae chapel “exclusively housed relics of the Madonna”. The report of Robert is “isolated and in conflict with other sources”. “He may not have actually observed the relic directly”. “He was an uncultured man who had a tendency to accept unquestioningly the possibility of the strangest relics”. “He was not a historian by profession”. “The interval of time that passed between the events and the writing of the report certainly offers a basis for many errors”.

Nicolotti also suspects “a defect in his memory” and thinks that he may have seen an *aér*, a liturgical veil. One of Nicolotti’s most surprising statements on Robert de Clari’s testimony is undoubtedly the following: “This is a precise description, so precise that it reveals the particular misunderstanding into which the knight must have fallen”. I can’t understand why a “precise description” must be a “misunderstanding”, but let’s proceed with Nicolotti’s other statements. “Robert and his source confused the fabric of Mary with that of Jesus” or with “the silk veil that covered the icon of the Virgin”. The crusader “does not say anywhere that the image of Jesus was above the veil”. Could it be “the image of Christ on his mother’s lap?”. Luckily, at least he puts a question mark on the latter hypothesis...

Regarding the surprise of the photographer Secondo Pia in discovering the image of the Shroud in the photographic negative, Nicolotti asks himself: “Perhaps he wanted to convey a feeling of amazement to validate a sort of ‘proof of authenticity’ established

‘on purely emotional bases?’” Anyway, he concludes with a certainty about him: “In any case, it is no longer possible to believe in the story of the wholly unexpected amazement he felt in the darkroom on May 28”. In this regard, there is an interesting testimony which opposes this conclusion. The architect Carlo Capriata, grandson of one of Pia’s assistants, recalled what his grandfather, who was his namesake, had told him about that night: “Pia was on the threshold of the darkroom. With his hands he held the large plate still dripping the fixative. Looking at him, my grandfather was struck by the strange expression on his face. He looked down to the plate and saw... Standing and facing each other, the two could not take their eyes off that wonderful image, which according to their photographic experience must have been in negative, instead... It was Pia who first broke the silence: ‘Look, Carlino, if this is not a miracle!’”⁵.

In the fifth and final chapter: “The Creation of a Myth”, Nicolotti ventures into a field that does not belong to him, the scientific one⁶. Here are some other questionable considerations by Nicolotti, who is unleashed against the sindonologists. The 1978 scholarly commission “was assembled and led by those who had previously investigated the Shroud with the inclination to authenticate it”. “Almost all the material that has been produced is the work of those who are predisposed toward a particular outcome and are thus readily satisfied with conjecture about an object that they have never examined”. “The level of much of the literature on the Shroud, whether historical or scientific, is very low, and those who are sufficiently skilled to deal with it generally refrain from doing so in order to avoid making an argument that is controversial and unmanageable, scientifically speaking”. “The vacuum created by the absence of qualified research projects has created an avenue for intentional dilettantism”.

The criticisms continue. “The result is an impressive amount of scientific studies on the Shroud, the majority of which, however, are less than credible. Sindonology in the last century has been organized as a discipline that has drawn a great number of Shroud fans and unfortunately has adopted the characteristics typical of pseudosciences”. “Sindonologists are united in the shared belief that the Shroud cannot have been made by an artificial method⁷, but only in a way incomprehensible, extraordinary, or miraculous, and incapable of being replicated by human hands. This fundamental assumption is an indispensable one for them, without which the field of sindonology cannot stand”. “Sindonology does not have one of the most important checks common in science to prevent sincere scientists from presenting wishful thinking as data”. “The scientific community generally does not consider the Shroud an object of scientific

⁵ C. Capriata, *Miracolo*, in *Collegamento pro Sindone*, March-April 1991, pp. 38-47, on p. 40, not mentioned by Nicolotti.

⁶ See the critical comments: P. Di Lazzaro, *Let no-one who is not a mathematician read my principles*, in *Sindon* n. 2, January 2021, pp. 65-75, https://sindone.it/museo/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SINDON_02.pdf

⁷ I think Nicolotti refers only to the origin of the image on the Shroud, not to the whole Shroud.

study”. Sindonology is “organized in associations that ‘publish’ mainly through postings on the Internet, books, and self-referential and self-managed conferences”.

The outburst still continues. “Human curiosity about mysterious subjects, the superficiality of the press, and the strength of sindonological organizations have created the false impression among the general public that the Shroud is an object widely studied by science and is now definitively recognized as incapable of being deciphered”. “The ecclesiastical authorities have accepted unquestioningly what sindonologists advance as science”. “The ‘scientific’ response thus provides support apparently founded on what often remains substantially an apologetic impulse or an inclination toward interpreting reality in paranormal terms”.

Amongst the scientists personally criticized by Nicolotti is Max Frei⁸, founder and director of the laboratory of the Zurich scientific police. Nicolotti does not say that Frei, graduate in Natural Science, was also professor at the University of Zurich, at the Swiss Police Institute in Neuchatel and at the German Police Institute in Hiltrup; or that he was scientific editor for the German review *Kriminalistik* and was an UN expert investigating the death of the general secretary Dag Hammarskjöld⁹. Instead, to guide the reader not to trust Max Frei, Nicolotti talks about one of his reports that was “flawed”, insinuating that “his mistake could not have been accidental”. He also suspects that his 1973 sampling was not authorized. The samples would have been taken at night with the permission of a palatine chaplain without informing the commission. In reality, Frei took the samples in the presence of Msgr. José Cottino, vice-president of the commission and Msgr. Piero Coero Borgia, then secretary of the International Center of Sindonology and chaplain of the Confraternity of the SS. Sudario, with the help of Prof. Aurelio Ghio, expert of the Turin law court, and with the consent of the competent authority¹⁰.

In a press release, Frei affirmed that he found pollen from plants that only exist in Palestine. Furthermore, the Shroud would have stayed in Palestine and Turkey before arriving in Europe. Nicolotti excludes the assertion that a plant comes exclusively from

⁸ A short biography of Max Frei can be found at this link:

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/frei-sulzer-max>

⁹ M. Frei, *Note a seguito dei primi studi sui prelievi di polvere aderente al lenzuolo della S. Sindone*, in *Sindon* n. 23, April 1976, pp. 5-9, on p. 6. Nicolotti does not cite this article either the article that follows in the journal, in which the scientific method used by Frei is illustrated by Giovanni Charrier, professor of Geology, member of the Italian Paleontological Society, of the Italian Botanical Society, of the International Society for the study of Quaternary, of the Italian Geological Society, of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy and of the International Organization of Paleobotany: G. Charrier, *Attualità dei metodi palinologici*, in *Sindon* n. 23, April 1976, pp. 10-14.

¹⁰ M. Frei, *Note a seguito dei primi studi sui prelievi di polvere aderente al lenzuolo della S. Sindone*, op. cit., p. 7.

Palestine or Turkey. The botanist Avinoam Danin¹¹ of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel), known for having developed the database “Flora and vegetation of Israel”¹², has a different opinion. Danin, who is not mentioned in Nicolotti’s book, wrote: “As far as establishing the Shroud’s provenance, *Zygophyllum dumosum* is the most significant plant on the list. Max Frei identified pollen grains of this species on the adhesive tapes he examined. The northernmost extent of the distribution of this plant in the world coincides with the line between Jericho and the sea level marker on the road leading from Jerusalem to Jericho. As *Zygophyllum dumosum* grows only in Israel, Jordan and Sinai, its appearance helps to definitively limit the Shroud’s place of origin”¹³.

To devalue the research of the STURP scientists, Nicolotti notes that they “did not constitute a group of scientists selected on the basis of their competence” but “offered themselves spontaneously”. Therefore “in this case the effect was that, essentially, the proposals for analyses came almost exclusively from sindonological organizations”, “engaged with the Shroud” and “generally convinced of its authenticity”. He adds that STURP “operated under the aegis of a sindonological organization led by two priests”.

Jackson and Jumper, military men, “had recruited several others from the armed forces to their sindonological gatherings”. It is not clear why this is a problem, given that the military were also scientists anyway. “That group did not, however, have any experience with paintings, blood, images, or the coloring of cloth”. As for the experience in the necessary areas, the members of STURP¹⁴ had a lot of it instead. Just think of the biophysicist John H. Heller, of whom Nicolotti mentions only one book, and of the biochemist Alan D. Adler, whom he completely ignored. Same silence on pathologist Robert Bucklin¹⁵ and many others. Meanwhile Nicolotti notes that “it is clear that Jackson has in mind the resurrection of Christ” and thinks that the Shroud is “the tablecloth used at the Last Supper”. This is to conclude that “given such premises, some of the members of STURP may not provide the best guarantees of objectivity”.

According to Nicolotti, “the group could not reach a convincing answer on the origin of the Shroud image also because it took as its starting point a series of assumptions that are not necessarily true. For example, that the cloth wrapped the body of a real

¹¹ A short biography of Avinoam Danin can be found at this link: <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/42/3/16>

¹² See: <https://www.bio.huji.ac.il/en/content/prof-avinoam-danin-developed-database-%E2%80%9Cflora-and-vegetation-israel%E2%80%9D>

¹³ A. Danin, *Pressed flowers*, in *Eretz Magazine* 55, 1997, pp. 35-37 and 69, on p. 69, not mentioned by Nicolotti.

¹⁴ The complete list of STURP members can be found at this link: <https://www.shroud.com/78team.htm>

¹⁵ *Obituaries*, in *British Society for the Turin Shroud Newsletter*, n. 54, November 2001, part 12, www.shroud.com/pdfs/n54part12.pdf, not mentioned by Nicolotti.

corpse was never put into doubt: the supposition that this was the case, however, conflicts with the fact that the image and the bloodstains of the Shroud are not compatible with normal contact between a piece of cloth and a wounded human body". But in reality STURP did not take the presence of a corpse as a starting point: in fact, one¹⁶ of the articles¹⁷ published by STURP reports the experiments that were attempted to reproduce an image like the Shroud one. Regarding the compatibility of the bloodstains present on the Shroud with a corpse, it was demonstrated by Gilbert R. Lavoie¹⁸. Here is another statement by Nicolotti: "Science looks at STURP's studies with great suspicion or even with an inclination toward rejection". This affirmation is completely unfounded, given that STURP's works have been published in peer review journals. Nicolotti continues: "Though they act in good faith, sometimes scientists are able to find what they look for because they eagerly want to find it". Obviously, according to him this statement is valid only for those who believe the Shroud to be authentic.

Nicolotti does at least concede that "the publication of the results of STURP observed the usual peer-reviewed scientific criteria", but, because of the conclusions, for the CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), they could be considered "a case of pseudoscience". A logic to be envied.

In the 80s "on the wave of emotion caused by the results of STURP", he states that "everything seemed to presage an increase in the number of scientists or those presumed to be scientists who claimed to have found, by various means, further evidence of authenticity". Nicolotti warns the reader: "There is not space in this book to consider all of the wild Shroud theories". Then in reality he goes on citing all the most improbable theories as if they were the only hypotheses supported by the sindonologists.

The situation is this: if a sindonologist only puts forward an unlikely theory, Nicolotti is very happy to quote it. If a sindonologist puts forward a probable and an unlikely theory, he cites only the unlikely one. If a sindonologist only puts forward a plausible

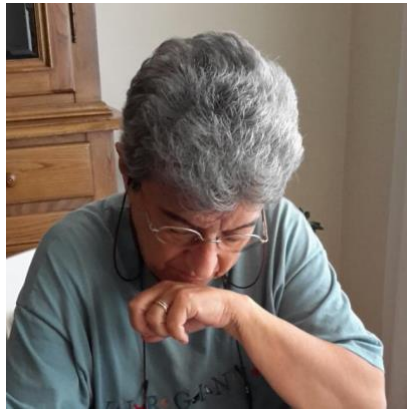
¹⁶ J. P. Jackson - E. J. Jumper - W. R. Ercoline, *Correlation of image intensity on the Turin Shroud with the 3-D structure of a human body shape*, Applied Optics, vol. 23, n. 14, 15 July 1984, pp. 2244-227,
<https://www.shroud.com/pdfs/Correlation%20of%20Image%20Intensity%20Jackson%20Jumper%20Ercoline%201984%20OCRsm.pdf>, not mentioned by Nicolotti.

¹⁷ The complete list of articles published by STURP and the possibility to download them can be found at this link: <https://www.shroud.com/78papers.htm>

¹⁸ G. R. Lavoie – B. B. Lavoie – V. J. Donovan – J. S. Ballas, *Blood on the Shroud of Turin: part 1*, in *Shroud Spectrum International*, n. 7, June 1983, pp. 15-20, www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi07part5.pdf; G. R. Lavoie – B. B. Lavoie – V. J. Donovan – J. S. Ballas, *Blood on the Shroud of Turin: part 2*, in *Shroud Spectrum International*, n. 8, September 1983, pp. 2-10, www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi08part3.pdf; G. R. Lavoie – B. B. Lavoie – A. D. Adler, *Blood on the Shroud of Turin: part 3*, in *Shroud Spectrum International*, n. 20, September 1986, pp. 3-6, www.shroud.com/pdfs/ssi20part4.pdf, all of them not mentioned by Nicolotti.

theory, he does not quote it. It is evident that Nicolotti does not mention the articles he does not like, because they do not help his anti-authenticist cause.

In conclusion, it can be said that the volume is undoubtedly useful for what it says, but it must be read knowing that Nicolotti does not say everything that should be said and what he says is always interpreted in a totally negationist sense, contrary to the authenticity of the Shroud. The book ends by ridiculing the congress¹⁹ held at the University of Bari in 2014: “References to earthquakes, to corona discharges, to lasers, and to sacred fires of the Holy Sepulcher did not obscure the news of the discovery of a new type of special energy”. He cites the intervention of a Belarusian physicist who spoke of seedlings that grow more if they are close to a copy of the Shroud. According to Nicolotti, that speech - which in any case was interrupted by the moderator of the session – not only represents the whole congress in Bari but all of sindonology: “Such, it would seem, is the triumph of sindonology in the twenty-first century”. With these words the volume of Nicolotti concludes, providing the measure of his hatred against the scholars who consider the Shroud to be authentic. To paraphrase his final statement, it can be said that his book is the triumph of sindonophobia in the twenty-first century.



Emanuela Marinelli reading Nicolotti's book

This article is an extract from a comprehensive, detailed critique of Nicolotti's book by Emanuela Marinelli, which can be accessed via the following link:
https://www.academia.edu/63809003/The_desire_for_total_darkness

¹⁹ ATSI 2014, Workshop on advances in the Turin Shroud investigation, Bari 4-5 September 2014, <https://www.uniba.it/eventi-alluniversita/anno-2014/la-sacra-sindone-e-le-nuove-ricerche-scientifiche>