

SOME *GENUINE* MEDIAEVAL SHROUDS REVEALED

In all the literature on the Turin Shroud scarcely a paragraph has ever been devoted to the extent to which the Shroud may or may not resemble known burial shrouds from the Middle Ages. Although it might be thought that these must all have mouldered away long ago, that there are exceptions to this has recently been revealed in an important paper published by the United Kingdom Institute for Conservation of Historical and Artistic Works in a booklet entitled 'Archaeological Textiles'.

The paper, originally delivered nearly three years ago at a textile conference held in York, is entitled 'The conservation of medieval and later shrouds from burials in north west England', and was written by conservator Jean Glover MBE of the North West Museum and Art Gallery Service of Blackburn, Lancashire. Three of the examples discussed are of particular relevance in respect of the Turin Shroud.

The first and oldest of these came to light as long ago as March 1973, at Quernmore in Lancashire. A mechanical excavator, working on the construction of a car park, unearthed a boat shaped log coffin. On this, as in the case of the Shroud, carbon dating produced a controversial result. In Jean Glover's words:

... the coffin appeared to relate stylistically to examples which are generally regarded as being from the Bronze Age... but... radiocarbon (C14) analysis gave a result which puts the date of the coffin (and therefore of the contents) more probably between 525 and 745 AD.

Although only finger-nails, toe-nails and some curly hair remained of the original body, two accompanying pieces of cloth turned out to comprise the corpse's woollen shroud, almost intact. Unfortunately the archaeologists then made some serious conservation mistakes, including non-professionally washing these, and cutting away two sizeable pieces, before forwarding them to Jean Glover's laboratory. Her work revealed the original shroud as plain-woven from coarse, hairy irregularly spun wool yarns with a Z-twist (clockwise). Thanks to her expert restoration this is now displayed in a deliberately dimly-lit area of Lancaster City Museum.

Date-wise far more relevant to the Turin Shroud, however, is the second find worked on by Jean Glover. This consists of two even better preserved shrouds, dating from the 13th. century, that came to light in 1981 when an archaeological team from Leicester University unearthed a mediaeval coffin from the grounds of St. Bee's Priory on the coast of Cumbria. An outer, wooden coffin had largely disintegrated, but inside this was a sort of lead capsule which on being opened up was found to contain an enshrouded male body so startlingly intact that even before unwrapping it was quickly taken to West Cumberland Hospital for refrigeration and X-ray examination.

Careful untying of the strong twisted cord bindings released first the two shroud wrappings, then an remarkably preserved bearded adult male body most likely identifiable as the knight Robert de Harrington, recorded to have died at St. Bee's in 1297/8. The pathologist who examined the body noted that he appeared to have died from a blow to the side of the head, possibly when jousting. Amazingly, some of the flesh was still supple and internal blood had even retained its liquidity.

In this context equally remarkable was the state of preservation of the two shrouds, though again the archaeologists failed to take insufficient interest in their conservation. They were simply bundled into heavy polythene bags and refrigerated for eight months before their transfer to Jean Glover's laboratory, in this time growing what she described as "well-established colonies of green and fluffy white moulds". Adding to the conservation difficulties was the fact that everything was impregnated with a black, sticky, greasy tar-like substance, accompanied by mud, slime and decomposed human tissue, all of which had an appalling smell, and presented a serious health hazard to those about to work on it.

Even amidst all the untreated tar and slime Jean Glover noted on the inner of the two shrouds a feature of some interest in relation to the Turin Shroud. In her words:

Deep impressions, with skin imprints, in the moist fabric, showed clearly the positions of the heels, metatarsal arches and great toes, close to the torn uneven lower edge, and a depression in the linen, stiffened with congealed tar, to which short tufts of scalp hair adhered, showed the position of the head

The "imprints" were sufficiently striking that Jean Glover tried to find ways to preserve them by a gamma ray sterilisation process. But as they were composed of the very tar and slime she needed to remove from the cloth in order to conserve it, in the event this proved impractical.

After weeks of cleaning, which had to be performed in full protective clothing, Jean Glover and her assistant succeeded in restoring the two shrouds to a condition in which they could be displayed. They are revealed as of coarse but compact S-spun (anti-clockwise) plain-woven linen. The inner one consisted of three pieces sewn together; the outer one of no less than five pieces. Today they can now be viewed in a special glazed case at the Whitehaven Museum, Cumbria.

Important to be noted is that in both the Quernmore and St. Bee's examples the dimensions and mode of wrapping of the cloth around the body were quite different from anything indicated by the Turin Shroud.