RESEARCH ARTICLES (2)

THE PRAY CODEX
Hugh Farey

In a vault at the National Széchényi Library in Budapest, Hungary, lies an old medieval collection of manuscripts from the closing years of the 12th century, made into a book in the early 1200s. It consists of 175 parchment folios, about 24cm high and 15cm across, written on both sides almost entirely in Latin, but is particularly celebrated for containing the earliest piece of continuous prose in Hungarian, a funeral oration (Sermo super Sepulchrum) and prayer.

It appears to have been compiled in a Benedictine monastery, possibly Boldva in North Eastern Hungary (it is sometimes called the Sacramentarium Boldense), and is a fairly random collection of various liturgical texts, in different handwriting, different styles and of different qualities, including the missal, prayers for various occasions and lists of saints days, a collection of laws, lists of the kings of Hungary, and some of the earliest notated music. It was discovered in 1770 by the Jesuit priest and historian György Pray, and is now usually referred to as the Pray Codex.

Its primary interest to sindonologists lies in four pages of rather poorly drawn images, of the Crucifixion, the Deposition, the Anointing, the Holy Women at the Tomb, and Christ in Majesty, although I have chosen to illustrate the front cover of this newsletter with another page containing a full script of the Quem Quaeritis Easter liturgy, which may also have some relevance. The pages of illustration have very little inscription, and what there is is very difficult to make out, although the words and music of the Easter Exultet can easily be discerned under the final picture. I hope that my rather unscholarly attempts to make sense of the rest here may encourage readers better versed in medieval Latin style to pursue a better translation.

The first two pictures occupy a full page each, and show Christ on the cross, and on the reverse Christ being lowered from it.

All Codex images © National Széchényi Library, Budapest

A complete copy of the codex can be found at mek.oszk.hu/ 12800/12855/html/index.html, and these two pages are 0060 and 0061.

Christ on the cross is uncoloured and almost faded away. The body is curved in a typically Byzantine stance, and the feet separated. The cross itself barely sketched in, but each limb terminates in big finials. Christ is smartly coiffeured, and wearing an elaborately trimmed loincloth. There is no sign of any wounds, nails, crown of thorns or blood. He is accompanied by a figure with either wings or very long hair holding a ceremonial staff, and a grotesque looking bird. Neither of these is easy to interpret.

The Deposition is much clearer, and some attempt has been made to colour it. Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and John assist in lowering the body from the cross, while Mary embraces her dead son. Jesus has acquired a stubbly beard since the last picture and, like two of his companions, some bands in his hair. We note the extraordinarily lengthened body of the disciple on the right, and the improbable placing of the ladder.

Bird and Figure redrawn for clarity

The next page is the one that has excited the most interest, although in many ways it is wholly conventional. It consists of two images, the 'before' and 'after' of the Resurrection, which actual moment was at this time very rarely depicted in art. The upper picture shows Christ lying dead on one half of a shroud, the rest being held by two disciples while another pours a jar of ointment onto his chest. No doubt these are the men from the previous page, but their hairstyles and clothes have changed. Christ still has his stubbly chin, but, most significantly sindonologically, he is naked, his wrists crossed over his groin, and his hands only have four fingers. This, it is sometimes claimed, is evidence that the artist had seen the Shroud, although some of the Shroud image's most conspicuous features, such as the full beard, the blood, and the marks of the scourging, are conspicuously absent. The basis behind this claim is the hypothesis that prior to 944 AD, when the Image of Edessa was captured and taken to Constantinople, nobody knew how Christ had been laid in the tomb, but that while it was in Constantinople the full

body image became known, and artists now felt themselves able to depict the scene, following the information contained in it. The evidence for this lies in a number of illustrations from the late 10th century and later, showing Christ lying on a cloth, with his wrists crossed, but really it isn't good enough. No contemporary descriptions of the Image of Edessa suggest that it was anything other than a portrait, and one showing Christ very much alive at that. There are mentions of shrouds in Constantinople from visiting crusaders, and even hints that they may had had images on them, but it is apparent that Christ's appearance and posture was certainly not sufficiently well established ever to achieve artistic uniformity. Gertrud Schiller, in her monumental survey of Christian art,[1] attributes the development of the iconography of the events surrounding the passion,

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[1] Iconography of Christian Art, Gertrude Schiller, New York Graphic Society, 1971

death and resurrection of Christ entirely to the development of the liturgy, and illustrates her ideas comprehensively.

Below the Anointing is another conventional scene, the holy women visiting the tomb on Easter Sunday morning, and finding an angel who tells them of the resurrection. As I discussed in a previous newsletter, this traditionally contains a rectangular sarcophagus, an irregularly placed lid with an angel standing on it, a folded shroud, and the four principle characters; and the Pray codex version of this conforms precisely to the iconography. Nevertheless, many people have attempted to show that some of its characteristics can be interpreted as convincing evidence that this scene depicts the Shroud itself, although, as we shall see, such a conclusion is largely fanciful.
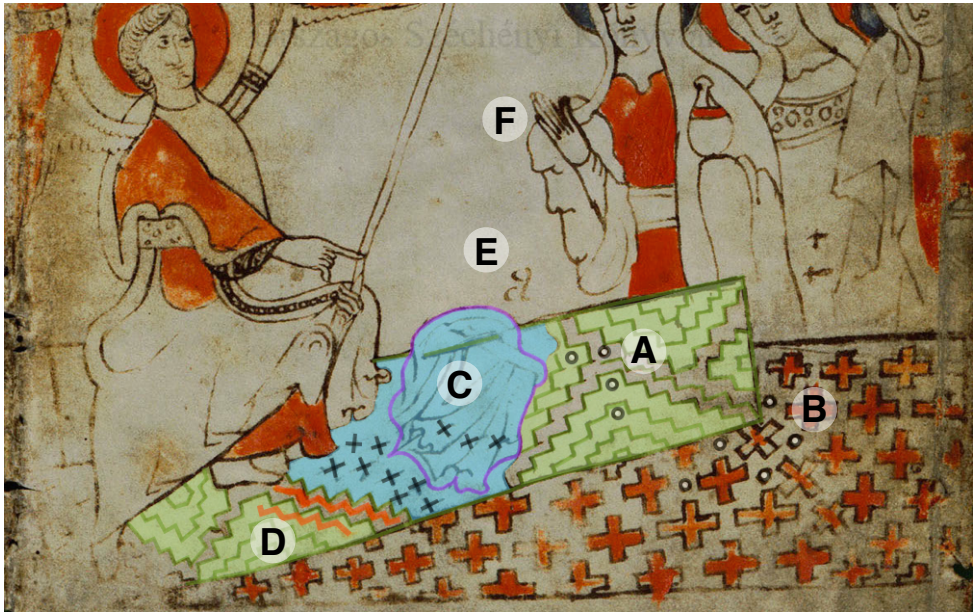
I believe it was Dominican priest and theologian André-Marie Dubarle who first interpreted the illustration above as a representation of the Shroud, and what probably first struck him were the little groups of circles (marked A and B above) one of which resembles a pattern of holes

on the Shroud, apparently created by hot charcoal or incense falling from a thurible while the cloth was folded in four, as the pattern repeats four times, the holes getting smaller each time. It is true that the group at A does not seem to serve any other purpose, functional or decorative, but as it is clearly on the lid of the sarcophagus (marked green), and not on the cloth folded up on top (blue), it is difficult to believe it is related to the Shroud. Undeterred, however, our sindonologist pressed on. Maybe the rectangular slab was really the Shroud itself, and cloth on top of it merely the headcloth mentioned in St John? In that case, he argued, maybe the zigzag patterns were a representation of the herringbone weave. As can be seen by my emphasis, these zigzags form a series of concentric triangles, rather like ziggurats, and in no way look anything like herringbone, and no other Three Marys image shows a flat rectangular Shroud, let alone one with an angel

standing on it like a surf-boarder, although he is often seen standing on the lid of a sarcophagus. Still, it is a fair question to ask why the artist chose to decorate the tomb lid in this way. Considering that it is the top of a sarcophagus, it will be sensible to consider the structure as a whole.

After reviewing literally dozens of Three Marys illustrations, it is clear that the shape of the tomb owes nothing to bible descriptions or Jewish burial archaeology, and only the very earliest bear any resemblance to features of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.[2] Early versions often show a temple-like building clearly derived from the Emperor Constantine's 4th century Aedicule, covering the presumed site of the tomb itself. The only rectangular features of the Sepulchre are the burial slab itself, and the Stone of Unction situated outside the Aedicule, both of rough hewn red-veined limestone.

Stone of Unction

By the 11th century all similarity to the actual Holy Sepulchre in Three Marys iconography has vanished, and sarcophagi such as that in the Pray Codex obviously derive from something else, either an unrelated tomb, or one of the multitude of Easter Sepulchres found throughout Europe, in wood or stone, and appearing in a variety of colours and designs, some of them with architectural elaborations. The decoration of these pictures frequently seems to represent some kind of mottled or veined marble or limestone, such as this one (right).

Art 1

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[2] See 'Three Marys Iconography', Hugh Farey, BSTS Newsletter 81, 2015

With this in mind I'm inclined to think that the decoration of the Pray Codex sepulchre lid is a representation of something like this:

Onyx Marble

This Lamentation, from the 12th century, may be another attempt to illustrate a similar pattern.

Art 2

The sepulchre itself is also of considerable interest. The polystaurion pattern may a representation of the material of or the decoration on an actual Easter Sepulchre, or even a reference to one of the walls of the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which is covered in crosses supposedly carved by visiting crusaders in the early middle ages (see below). It's really impossible to say.
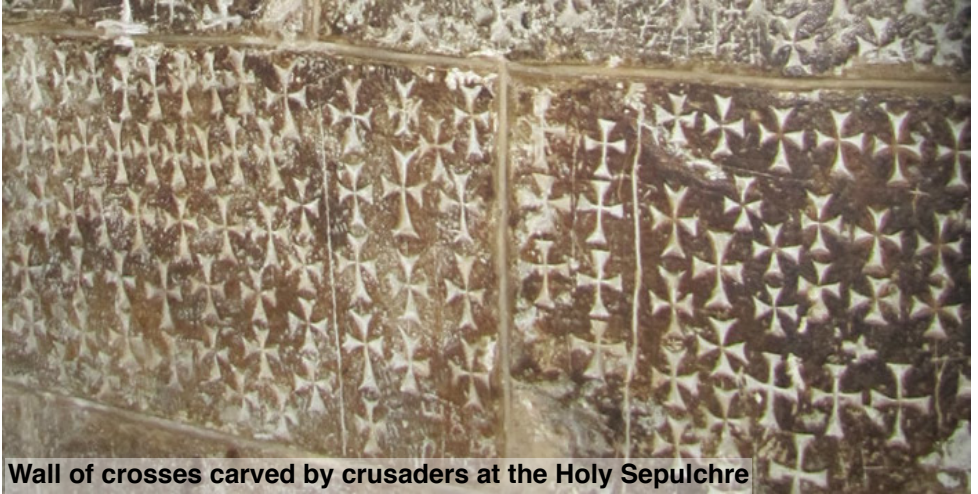
Wall of crosses carved by crusaders at the Holy Sepulchre

However the line of three diagonal crosses, and the accompanying pattern of small circles (at B on the annotated picture) presents more of a problem. Again, devoted authenticists sometimes attempt to explain this away by imagining that this block too represents the Shroud, this time the bottom layer, upon which Christ (symbolised by the crosses) actually lay, while the other slab represents the upper layer folded over the top. This is fanciful in the extreme, as in all respects apart from the decoration the Pray image fits perfectly into the iconographical tradition of the sarcophagus and lid, and there are no comparable versions showing an angel standing on a folded shroud.

The diagonal line of crosses must represent something however, and my suggestion is that it is simply the corner of the sarcophagus. Artists of the time often had difficulty with three dimensions, and the artist of the Pray Codex was clearly not very skilled. Here are a few other

versions, showing a distinct failure to appreciate how to solve the problem.

Art 3

Art 4

Art 5

Apart from any spurious resemblance of the sarcophagus and its lid to the Shroud, there other some other interesting features of the Pray Codex drawings which bear investigation. Crumpled on top of the lid is what is more obviously the Shroud (in blue on the annotated picture), which appears to extend beyond its most obvious border (in purple) over, or including, a cluster of small crosses, and terminate in a couple of thick wavy red lines (at E), at least one of which is clearly within one of the zigzag lines of the lid. At one point the edge of the sarcophagus lid is made visible through the cloth. I believe this is an attempt to make the shroud look as if it was made of a diaphanous, semi-transparent material, and this too is a feature of many contemporary and later representations.


Art 6

Art 7

Art 8

Some researchers have suggested that the two wavy red stripes (D) are a reference to the 'blood belt' across the middle of the dorsal image of the Shroud, but this seems to me fanciful. The stripes on the Pray manuscript are not intertwined, and nor are they in the middle of the cloth. They are more probably simply a design on the fringe of one side.

There are two further puzzles about this picture, namely the symbol at E and the outline of the woman's sleeve at F. The symbol appears to be alphabetical, an "a", "d" or "cl" perhaps, but is in a different style of writing and with a different implement from the rest of the picture, altogether an anachronism, as out of place, in its way, as my own annotation. Its significance is anyone's guess.

The sleeve is even more peculiar, and may simply be an example of pareidolia, that tendency of the human brain to see a face in any conceivable pattern. If not, then it is also in a very anachronistic style.

Across the top of this page of the Codex are two lines of almost indecipherable Latin, but the phrases '*usq. ad September*', '*usq. ad octob*', and '*usq. ad Novemb*' can be made out, suggesting that the lines refer to different prayers to be said each month.
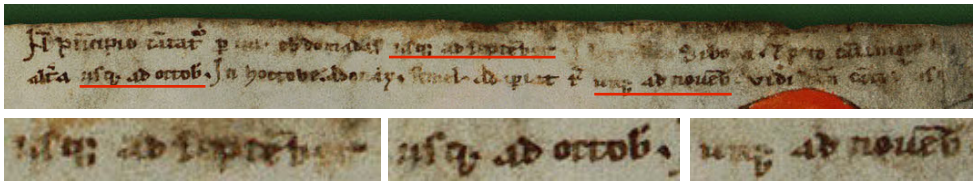
The final illustration is another rather poorly drawn but conventional depiction of Christ on his throne, attended by an angel holding a cross. Christ is beardless, but does have three of the 'five wounds' marked. What is really interesting about this page is the Latin text squeezed into the top right hand corner. It runs:

"In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Elisabet genuit Johannem baptistam praecursorem Domini. Anna peperit Mariam. Sancta Maria peperit Salvatorem mundi et Salvator suscitavit Lazarum et dixit Lazare veni foras. Adiuro te infans per patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum, sive masculus, sive femina, sive vivus, sine mortuus, veni foras. Salvator vocat te, aut exeat a te, camelus, veni foras. Salvator vocat te, fiat, fiat, fiat tibi sanitas. Amen amen amen, a principio Elisabet et per ipsius partum adiuro partus ut non cruciatis amplius famulam dei. Christus vincit, Christus imperat. Fiat fiat fiat Amen."

Translation (as best I can make out):

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord. Anna gave birth to Mary. Holy Mary gave birth to the Saviour of the world, and the Saviour raised Lazarus, and said, 'Lazarus, come out.' I adjure you, infant, by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, be you male, female, alive or dead, come forth. The Saviour calls you, [...] come forth. The Saviour calls you, let it be, let it be, let health be to you. Amen, amen, amen, beginning with Elizabeth and through her act of childbirth, I adjure you to be born without excessive pain from this maidservant of God. Christ conquers, Christ rules, so let it be. Amen."

To our surprise, it turns out that this is a variation of a common incantation, or charm, to be recited over women in labour and addressed directly to the unborn child, boy or girl, living or dead.[3] Why it should be placed here, and whether it has anything to do with the preceding pages, is still a mystery.

Below the picture of Christ enthroned is the text and music of the Easter chant, sung by a deacon after the mounting of the Paschal candle:

"Exultet iam angelica turba celorum exultent divina mysteria et pro tanti regis victoria tuba insonet salutaris." "Now let the multitude of the angels in heaven rejoice. Let the divine mysteries exult, and the trumpet of salvation ring out for the victory of so great a king."

The other page of the Pray Codex of interest to Shroud researchers is the detailed script, words and stage directions (rubrics) of the Quem Quaeritis liturgy, to be enacted during Matins.

"In die sancto pasche ad matutinas dicatur: Domine labia mea. a. et Deus in adiutorium m. i. Postea invitatorium: Alleluia. Venite exultemus. d. a. Ego sum qui sum. Ps. Beatus vir q. n. h. decantantes vero tercium responsorium, cum crucibus, et cereis, et thuribulis, et timiamatis, omnes simul perveniant ad sepulchrum. diacones autem duo, angelico habitu ibidem sedentes istum inponant versiculum: Quem queritis in sepulchro, o christocole. Illi autem, qui thuribula cum thimiama. Ihesum Nazarenum. Item diaconus. Non est hic surrexit Et iterum. Venite et videte locum. Illi autem tollentes posita linteamina revertantur ad chorum cantando. Surrexit dominus de sepulchro. Tunc incipiat presbiter. Te deum laudamus. Sequitur versus. Surrexit dominus vere. Post hec. Deus in adiutorium & sequantur matutinales laudes."

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[3] The whole subject is dealt with in Elizabeth L'Estrange, *En/Gendering Representations of Childbirth in Fifteenth Century Franco-Flemish Devotional Manuscripts*, PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2003.

"At Matins on the holy day of Easter is said: 'Lord, open my lips', and 'O God, come to my assistance.' Then follows the invitation: 'Alleluia. Come let us exult the Lord' and the antiphon: 'I am who am.' Psalm: 'Blessed is the man', and while the third response to this is being sung, everybody, with crosses, and candles, and thuribles and incense, processes to the sepulchre. There two deacons sit, dressed as angels, who intone this verse: 'Whom do you seek in the tomb, O followers of Christ.' Whereupon the others, carrying the thuribles and incense, say: 'Jesus of Nazareth.' And then the deacon says: He is not here. He is risen.' And then: 'Come and see the place.' Then, taking the linen cloth lying there, they return to the choir singing: The Lord is risen from the grave. Then the priest begins: 'We praise thee, O Lord.' And then follows: 'The Lord is risen indeed.' After this: 'O God, come to my assistance' & so on with the liturgy of Matins."

All in all the entire codex would bear considerably more detailed study than has yet been attempted in English, although there are a number of Hungarian resources published.

Art works referenced:
Art 1: Mid 16th Century, Myrrh-Bearers, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos
Art 2: Mid 16th Century, Burial Lamentations, Theophanes the Cretan,
        Stavronitika Monastery, Mount Athos
Art 3: 12th Century Psalterium, New York Public Library
Art 4: 1190, Ham of Fécamp, National Library of the Netherlands
Art 5: Last quarter of 12th Century, Ottobeuren Collectar, British Library
Art 6: c.1330, Lamentation of Christ, Ugolini Lorenzetti (attributed),
        Fogg Art Museum, Harvard
Art 7: 12th Century fresco, St Panteleimon, Nerezi, Macedonia
Art 8: c.1490, Lamentation over the dead Christ, Sandro Botticelli,
        Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Hungarian bibliography:
József Ernyey, *A Pray-kódex termöhelye és eredeti rendeltetése*
Menyhért Zalán, *A Pray-kódex benedictiói*
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