

RESEARCH ARTICLES (2)

TOWARDS A MEDIEVAL CONTEXT FOR THE TURIN SHROUD

Hugh Farey

This is very much a work in progress, and builds upon the work of several earlier researchers, especially Ian Wilson, who devoted several pages of his book *The Evidence of the Shroud*¹ on it, and Charles Freeman, who caused a storm with his article for *History Today* in October 2014.² Ironically, although they are on opposite sides of the authenticity debate, Wilson (pro-authenticity) provides rather more coherent evidence for a medieval provenance than Freeman (pro-medieval), whose own work has been roundly attacked on several grounds.

From the the turn of the 9th/10th centuries, churches across Europe included a short dramatic interlude as part of the liturgy of Easter or the feast of Corpus Christi.³ There are hundreds of known variants: two or three clerics acting either as Saints Peter and John, or as the Holy Women on Easter Sunday morning, went to the north wall of the church, where there was a location representing the tomb of Christ, and another man (or men) dressed in white, who began (in the trope's simplest form):

"Quem quaeritis in sepulchro, Christocolae?"

"Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, O caelicolae."

"Non est hic. Surrexit sicut praedixerat. Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro."

"Whom do you seek in the tomb, Christians?"

"Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, O heavenly ones."

"He is not here. He has risen, as he foretold. Go, tell everyone he has risen from the tomb."

The place where this occurred was either specially built into the wall of the church, or signified by a wooden box, often elaborately

painted, representing the Holy Sepulchre.⁴ As I illustrated in a previous article, most paintings of the 'Three Marys at the Tomb', a particularly common subject for religious art, show such a medieval representation of the tomb rather than any attempt to copy the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.⁵ Churches across Europe still contain these tombs, both in the permanent and the temporary wooden structures, although many of the latter have been removed to museums.



Examples of Easter Sepulchres: permanent - St Andrew's Church, Irnham, Lincolnshire; portable - Weinhausen, near Hanover (note the bas relief figure of Christ); Baar, Zug; Maigrauge, Freiburg.

As the rite developed, it became more and more elaborate, and included more people and more dialogue. Often an image of the crucified Christ, sometimes with articulated arms which could be folded down against the body, was wrapped in a shroud and placed in the tomb on

Good Friday. The body was quietly removed on Holy Saturday, leaving the grave cloth behind. This was ceremoniously carried back to the high altar for display to the congregation on Easter morning. The 10th century rite from the *Regularis Concordia* (Winchester, about 970 AD), for instance, gives:

“Haec vero dicens surgat, et erigat velum, ostendatque eis locum cruce nudatum, sed tantum lintheamina posita, quibus crux involuta erat. Quo viso, deponant turibula quae gestaverant in eodem sepulchro, sumantque lintheum et extendant contra clerum, ac veluti ostendentes, quod surrexit Dominus et iam non sit illo involutus, hanc canant antiphonam: ‘Surrexit Dominus de sepulchro.’ Superponantque lintheum altari.”⁶

“Having said this, let him rise and lift the veil, and show them the place bare of the cross, and nothing but the shroud lying there, in which the cross had been wrapped. Seeing which, let them put down the thuribles they have brought to the sepulchre, lift up the shroud and display it towards the clergy, and then, as if showing that the Lord was risen and no longer wrapped in it, they sing the antiphon: ‘The Lord is risen from the tomb.’ Then they place the cloth on the altar.”



Figures of Christ used in Quem Quaeritis ceremonies. Left: Kerteminde, Denmark; Right: Västerlövsta, Sweden.



Two clerics dressed as angels display the 'shroud' to the congregation (Easter sepulchre, Baar, Switzerland)

There is some suggestion that the cloth used as the shroud was actually an altar cloth, stripped from the altar on Good Friday to wrap either a figure of Christ, a cross, a ciborium, or just a host by itself, which was then revealed to be empty during the rite, and returned to the the altar as described above.⁷ In other cases it is clear that the shroud, and often the face-cloth as well, were in addition to any cloths already in place on the altar.

This, I believe, provides a context for the Shroud. It was not designed as a painting of Christ, nor as a miraculously preserved relic of his actual entombment, but as one of the hundreds, perhaps thousands of cloths used every year from northern Sweden to southern Spain, as illustrations of the reality of the empty tomb. Its image was not designed to appear miraculous, nor a portrait, but as a representation of what might be transferred from a dead body to a cloth, in the imagination of the artist, probably with regard to possible interactions between blood and sweat, on the one hand, and myrrh and aloes on the other. As such, it does not come within the purview of conventional art history, and challenges John Walsh's naive but oft-quoted maxim: "Only this much is certain: The Shroud of Turin is either the most awesome and instructive relic of Jesus Christ in existence ... or it is one of the most ingenious, most unbelievably clever, products of the human mind and hand on record. It is one or the other; there is no middle ground."⁸

The Shroud, as an altar cloth, would necessarily be long and thin, a most unlikely and unusual shape for a grave wrapping, and its doubled image, as if folded over the head, with the images of the feet at the ends, is more suitable for display than the more likely disposition of a shroud, which is more naturally doubled over the feet, so that the head is the last part of the body to be covered. But unfolded, that places the four feet together in the middle of the cloth, and the heads at the extremities, which is undignified from a liturgical point of view. The images themselves are designed to be undistorted and easy to understand, and not true representations of whatever might emerge from a shroud wrapped tightly and most usually trussed, in the fashion of real burial cloths throughout the ages.

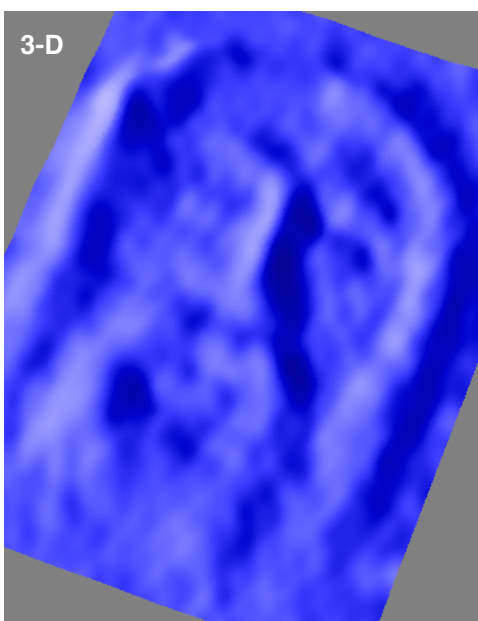
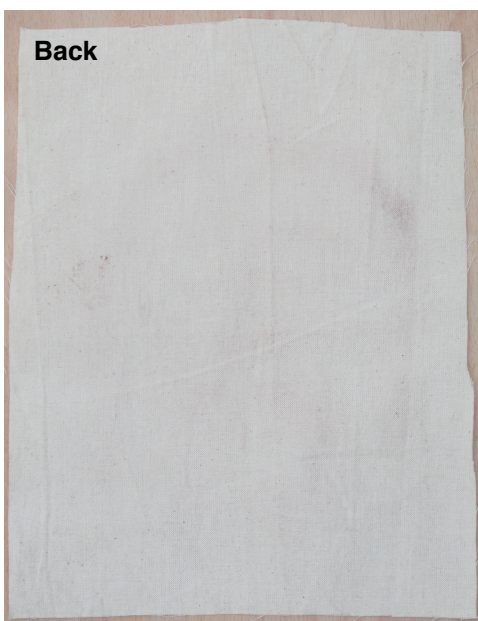
Another canard is that the Shroud is the most studied artefact in history. This is based on the impressive enough invasion of Turin in 1978 by truckloads of American scientists who studied it hands-on night and day for a hundred and twenty hours, followed by several years of detailed study of the primary findings, and decades of discussion. In fact, of course, as scientist after scientist reiterated in their published papers, these investigations were no more than a preliminary survey of what might constitute a really thorough study, which, so far anyway, has never been undertaken.

I mention this because of the difficulty in establishing parameters within which to model the colouration of the image. I think it was made using iron oxide with a slightly acid content which slightly damaged the surface of the linen. In their paper on X-Ray Fluorescence,⁹ STuRP scientists Morris, Schwalbe and London explain the procedure they undertook to measure the abundance of various metals in various places on the Shroud, and how they found a clear correspondence between iron content and image density. By careful comparison with control samples of known mass, they were able to quantify how much iron they found - about $17\mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2$ at the darkest part (the nose) to about $9\mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2$ at the lightest (the gap between the cheeks and the hair), and about $7\mu\text{g}/\text{cm}^2$ on non-image areas. These figures compare reasonably well with Walter

McCrone's finding that "2-3 micrograms (μg) of red ochre per square centimetre gives a reasonably visible image."¹⁰ So far, so good, but if we read John Heller and Alan Adler's paper - '*A Chemical Investigation of the Shroud of Turin*'¹¹ - we find that "In the light of our chemical findings we disagree with these conclusions."

Why might this be? Heller and Adler discuss iron at length, and find three forms: what they call "a cellulose bound chelated form" fairly uniformly distributed inside the lumens of individual fibres, "a heme bound form" exclusively associated with blood-coated fibres, and some " Fe_2O_3 " associated only with water-stains and scorched blood. These findings are no doubt true, but note that Heller and Adler were only reporting on the fibres they extracted from the sticky tapes, each of which had been "washed free of the tweezer-held tape with toluene into a spot plate well. The adhesive was then removed by repeated washings with toluene [which was removed by micropipette or absorbent paper] while the specimen was held in place with a glass needle." Any loose particles, such as the iron oxide observed by McCrone, and identified by Morris, were almost entirely either left behind on the original tape, or washed away by the "repeated washings." No wonder Heller and Adler didn't find any paint particles.

Various experiments have been carried out with powdered iron oxide to determine the precise method with which it was applied. Although these have yet to achieve the status of an entirely convincing demonstration, it is clear that it can be applied in an appropriately weak concentration, without penetrating the weave of the cloth, and in such a way as to produce both the startling 'negative' and '3D' effects so often claimed to be impossible. (See the images opposite, created in about half an hour by rubbing a cloth with a finger dipped in iron oxide, photographing and manipulating with ImageJ⁶⁴ software) Suggestions that it may have been made by some sort of rubbing over a bas-relief are supported by the many carved bas-relief images of Christ associated with the Easter Sepulchres described above that still remain extant, but they may simply have been used as a guide.

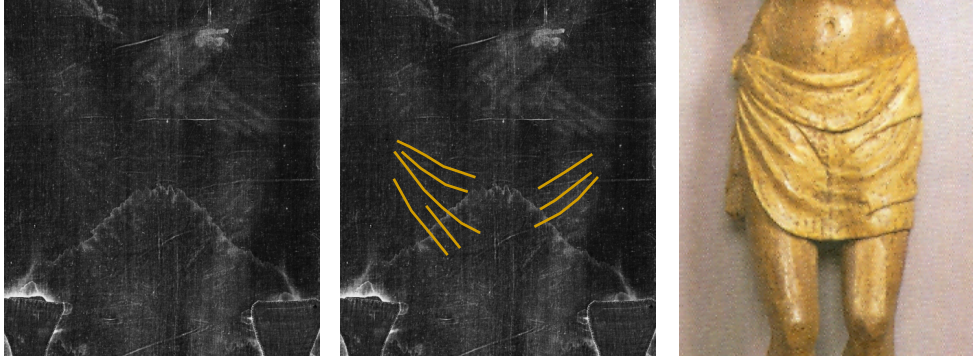


Nevertheless, there are a few strong arguments against this hypothesis. Principally, among all the hundreds of recorded variants of the Quem Quaeritis rite, there is not one mention of a shroud with an image on it. This is truly curious. Even if they were rare, you would have thought that someone would have recorded the fact. Can the Shroud really be the sole survivor of a unique variant?

Related to this is the problem of what, exactly, the Shroud looked like at the time of manufacture, and whether the image has been washed, faded or eroded away since. The earliest written account we have seems to be that of Antonio de Beatis saw the Shroud in 1517, and described it: "The images of the most glorious body are impressed and shaded in the most precious blood of Jesus Christ and show most distinctly the marks of the scourging, of the cords about the hands, of the crown on the head, of the wounds to the hands and feet and especially of the wound in the side, as well as various drops of blood spilled outside the most sacred image, all in a manner that would strike terror and reverence into the Turks, let alone Christians."¹² One wonders what de Beatis meant by the cords about the hands. Illustrations of the Shroud are, surprisingly, not much help either. There appear to have arisen two quite distinct traditions regarding its depiction. Actual copies of it, such as the Lier copy of 1516 and the Guadalupe copy of 1568, all show it quite similar to its appearance today, quite faint, with no crown of thorns, legs together and the feet crossed. On the other hand depictions of ostentations show it much more clearly defined, with prominent crowns of thorns, legs separated and the feet splayed outwards. There is some crossover between the two styles, and individual features such as hairstyles and loincloths vary rather at random, but on the whole the ancient appearance and subsequent metamorphosis of the Shroud image must still be considered a mystery.

Another difficulty is that of the apparent nudity of the image. This is not insurmountable, as Jesus was frequently depicted naked at his nativity and at his baptism, and sometimes in death or Resurrection so scantily draped with a wisp of material that holding his hands over his groin seems positively demure. However I have been examining the

scourge-marks on the thighs, and wonder if they have not been misinterpreted. They are in places long and continuous, and could be said to resemble folds of cloth as much as they do welts. I think this needs further investigation.



Comparison between long 'scourge marks' on the Shroud and the loincloth of a 14th century image of Christ (this one from Calabria).

Finally, we must consider the blood. The most obvious explanation is that it was trickled on (or in the case of the scourge marks impressed with a sponge or drawn with a paint brush) as deemed necessary either at the time of manufacture, or later, as the artistic trend for emphasising the physical sufferings of Christ developed. There is sufficient evidence to me to suppose it to be genuine human blood, which was readily available given the medicinal enthusiasm for blood-letting throughout the middle ages and into early modern times. There is no need to invoke an unwilling subject such as a tortured prisoner. Several researchers, both for and against authenticity,¹³ have affirmed that the pinkish colour of the blood is due to the addition of a pigment such as vermilion, the original application having been almost entirely eroded away.

There is an objection to this. Heller and Adler found that they could remove the adherent blood entirely from fibrils, leaving pristine flax behind,¹⁴ whilst 'image' fibrils, they found, invariably have a corroded surface. They attribute the corrosion to the image forming process, which they think is entirely due to the degradation of the cellulose of the surface

of the fibres. To them, therefore, this suggested that there was no 'image' under the blood, which must therefore have reached the cloth first. This seems a very unlikely way of doing things by an artist, but to be expected if the cloth was laid over a dead body.

The best counter to this is to suppose that the corrosion is not an essential part of the discolouration of the fibrils, but part of a continuing oxidation of the surface over the ages, which the coating of blood has prevented from occurring. Ray Rogers later decided that the image was not formed on the fibres at all, but on a thin 'impurity layer' which he thought he could detect all over the Shroud.¹⁵ Removing the blood would remove this layer as well. There has even been the suggestion that if the image was made by laying the cloth on a bas relief model covered in iron oxide, the application of blood to the model before laying on the cloth would transfer the blood before the image.

As I said in the opening paragraph, I do not consider that I have achieved the 'smoking gun' yet, and appreciate that to most authenticists, the Shroud's alleged artistic similarity to the Pantocrator, the descriptions of shrouds seen in Constantinople, and the accumulated evidence of various coins, flowers, pollen, minerals, anatomical and physiological arguments, and the possible correlation of the Shroud with the Sudarium of Oviedo, will outweigh the suggestions I have made above. There is also the possibility that the Shroud is the result of a genuine miracle, for which belief, of course, 'no evidence is necessary.'

However, I hope that at least I have put a fair case for the other side of the argument from a contextual point of view. Coupled to other evidence, such as the d'Arcis memorandum and the radiocarbon dating, and the contemporaneous theological and artistic emphasis on the physical suffering of Christ, I believe there is a substantial case for a medieval provenance for the Shroud of Turin.

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- ¹ *The Evidence of the Shroud*, Ian Wilson, Michael O'Mara Books, 1986, pp 72-77
 - ² *The Origins of the Shroud of Turin*, Charles Freeman, History Today, November 2014
 - ³ See, for example, the monumental *Lateinische Osterfeiern und Osterspiele*, Walther von Lipphardt, Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1976, and *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Karl Young, Clarendon Press, 1933
 - ⁴ For Easter Sepulchres, see *The Sepulchrum Domini Through the Ages: Its Form and Function*, Justin E.A. Kroesen, Peeters, 1975, and *The Easter Sepulchre in England*, Pamela Sheingorn, Medieval Institute Publications, 1987
 - ⁵ *Three Marys Iconography (The Mystery of the Skewed Slab)*, Hugh Farey, BSTS Newsletter 81, June 2015
 - ⁶ *From Medieval Drama*, David Bevington, Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., 1975
 - ⁷ The script at Senlis Abbey, for example, includes: "Tunc Presbyteri elevantes palam alteri dicent: Non est hic [etc.]" (Walther von Lipphardt, op.cit.) Trans: "Then the priests, raising the altar cloth, say, He is not here etc."
 - ⁸ *The Shroud*, John Walsh, W.H. Allen, 1964, p xi
 - ⁹ *X-Ray Fluorescence Investigation of the Shroud of Turin*, R.A. Morris et al., X-Ray Spectrometry, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1980
 - ¹⁰ *Judgement Day for the Turin Shroud*, Walter McCrone, Microscope Publications, 1997
 - ¹¹ *A Chemical Investigation of the Shroud of Turin*, J.H. Heller & A.D. Adler, Canadian Society of Forensic Science Journal, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1981
 - ¹² *The Travel Journal of Antonio de Beatis through Germany, Switzerland, the Low Countries, France and Italy, 1517-1518*, Antonio de Beatis, The Hakluyt Society, 1979
 - ¹³ *The Painting Hypothesis*, Walter McCrone, 1998 (at shroudstory.com) and *Blood Reinforced by Pigments*, Giulio Fanti et al., Journal of Cultural Heritage, vol. 25 (May-June 2017)
 - ¹⁴ *The Nature of the Body Images on the Shroud of Turin*, Alan D. Adler, 1999 (at shroud.com)
 - ¹⁵ *A Chemist's Perspective on the Shroud of Turin*, Raymond N. Rogers, 2008 (at shroud.com)

