

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Doubts concerning the Coins over the Eyes

From New Testament scholar **Dr. Antonio Lombatti** of Pontremoli, northern Italy. This is in response to the news in the last Newsletter that **Professor Pier Luigi Baima Bollone** and **Professor Nello Balossino** have identified a lepton coin of Pontius Pilate over the left eye of the man of the Shroud, additionally to the one (with visible UCAI letters) identified back in the early 1980s by the late Fr. Francis Filas, S.J. Dr. Lombatti writes:

The hypothesis of the presumed coin, or coins, found on the eyelids of the corpse of the man of the Shroud began with electronic processing of the Shroud's image made by Prof. Tamburelli at the end of the 70's, and with the publishing of an article, and afterwards a book, by the American Jesuit Professor Francis Filas . After having distinguished what seemed to be four letters "UCAI" near the arch of the man of the Shroud's eyebrows, Filas and the Italian numismatics expert Mario Moroni identified these as part of the inscription of a *lepton* coin minted in 29 AD during Pontius Pilate's governorship of Judaea. "UCAI" was part of "TIBEPIOU CAICAPOC". This is what everybody knows. Now let us tell the other side of the story....

The reading of "UCAI" is mostly due to a photographic enlargement and to computer processing, often arbitrary operations which eliminate stains and shades. The tridimensional reproductions have shown, or they look like showing, a "U" and a "C". Nevertheless, Tiberius's coins always have the diphthong OY with a final Y and never with U, and besides, the first letter of the Greek word for "Caesar" is always the K, and never the C "TIBEPIOY KAICAPOC". This is the only, and correct, writing. It is absolutely useless showing ruined or corroded coins on which the K could seem a C. The supporters of Filas' theory have never explained that there absolutely did not exist a Jewish custom to put coins on the eyes of their dead in Palestine in the first century after Christ. They have always quoted two historical sources: the first is A.P. Bender, 'Beliefs, Rites and customs of the Jews, connected with death, burial and mourning', quoted in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 7 (1895), pp. 103-226, and the second R. Hachlili, 'Ancient Burial Customs Preserved in the Jericho Hills', in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 4 (1979), pp. 28-35. Bender, however, speaks about some Judaic customs of the 19th century and about some Russians, who used to put coins on the eyes of the dead, while Prof. Hachlili refers to having found two coins inside a skull of a defunct. Hachlili, however, has never affirmed that the coins were on the eyelids of the dead, or that it represented the typical Judaic burial custom of the first century. Therefore there does not exist an historical source to affirm that in Jesus' time in Palestine some Jews practised such rites on corpses.

In 1980 the greatest specialist in Judaic cemeteries, Prof L.Y. Rahmani, Director of the Jerusalem Museums, entered the debate with an article in *Biblical Archaeologist*. He rejected without hesitation the idea of a Judaic custom of putting coins on the eyelids of the dead. Prof. Hachlili, also writing in *Biblical Archaeologist*, then immediately confirmed that the tombs she found in 1979 were in bad condition. The two coins she

found in a skull were of the time of Agrippa (40-45 AD), but the ossuary was full of piled-up bones, the ossuary was no longer intact, and it was not absolutely clear that the two coins were on the eyes of some dead person inside the tomb. In short: the coin theory has not the slightest archaeological support.

Filas's answers to these historical problems have always seemed to me unconvincing, and some time ago he even had the temerity to affirm that the man who worked at the mint made a mistake with the coin and replaced the K with a C ! It seems useless, therefore, to use the coins on the eyes as referring to a Judaic custom of the first century after Christ.

Antonio Lombatti, Via IV Novembre, 22,
54027 Pontremoli, Italy, e-mail: lunigianese@tamnet.it