

## COMMENT

**THE ORIGINS OF THE SHROUD OF TURIN  
MY HISTORY TODAY ARTICLE, THIRTY MONTHS ON****Charles Freeman**

Sadly my article, which was there to be read freely online by anyone interested when it came out in October 2014 (although we could not afford the cost of many of the illustrations for this online version) is now archived and only available through finding a library back number or by subscribing to the History Today archive. This is a pity as it regularly came up in Google searches among the top five or six articles on the Shroud so it must have been widely read. Still, my name is well enough known for those approaching the Shroud for the first time to find their way to me through my publishers or History Today and I have been able to send them the fully illustrated original version. The (Anglican) Church Times also published a two page article by me on the Shroud in June 2015, and there is also my article: *'The Real Mystery of the Shroud of Turin: Why Does the Catholic Church Not Publicly Declare That It Is Not Authentic?'* in the Journal of Information Ethics, Vol.24, No. 2, Fall, 2015.

I argued that there is overwhelming evidence that the Shroud was woven on a treadle loom, not known in Europe before AD 1000. Experts in ancient looms I have consulted have failed to provide any record of one able to provide a cloth of these dimensions but the length is easy on a medieval treadle loom and the width is a typical medieval measurement for cloth. The images were then painted. Painted surfaces on linen were very vulnerable and usually linen was painted only for temporary exhibition purposes. Eventually the paint on the Shroud disintegrated, probably in the nineteenth century. One wonders whether it was correctly stored between its rare expositions. It is likely that the Shroud was originally a painted grave cloth, woven in linen to reflect the gospel accounts, used in the Quem Quaeritis Easter ceremony, at which such cloths with images of Christ's body are known to have been displayed to the congregation to show that Christ had indeed risen. This hypothesis

best fits the evidence but still needs further academic research by experts in painted linens to confirm it.

I was warned when I first published that there would be a lot of hostility to my views but there has been surprisingly little other than from one or two websites. On the contrary there has been a lot of sympathetic academic support. However, without direct access to the Shroud, experts are unwilling to come to a public judgement on its likely medieval origin. This is, of course, frustrating but understandable. It is still widely reported that the radiocarbon dating is faulty, despite clear evidence from photography and the meticulous examination by Mechthild Flury-Lemberg in 2002 that showed that the samples were taken from the original weave. I have found no one who actually deals with radiocarbon samples in the laboratory who doubts the results.

When I am approached by researchers on the Shroud, I now have a clear response. First, I expect them to buy a second-hand copy of John Beldon Scott's *Architecture for the Shroud, Relic and Ritual in Turin* (2003). As many (but not all) Shroud researchers will know, this is the fullest account of the ways that the Shroud was displayed after the 1350s and has a mass of illustrative material and quotations that are vital for understanding the history of the Shroud. My argument that it was once a painted linen can be supported by looking at the earlier images so it helps for a researcher to have a copy that I can refer to. I don't think anyone can undertake serious research into the Shroud without having one.

I also ask researchers to provide me with any scientific evidence that they find in their researches that would be accepted by the scientific community at large as evidence that the Shroud existed before 1000 AD. So far none has been provided but I do now have scientific contacts who would assess it if it ever came my way.

Since writing my article, that draws heavily on the illustrations of the Holkham Bible of 1325, I have not only seen that Bible itself but learnt (via Professor Michelle Brown, an expert on medieval illuminated books)

that it was designed as a copy book, to give examples of, for instance, how the blood running down from the Crown of Thorns might look. The comparison of the bloodstains as illustrated in the Bible and those on the Shroud, especially on the head, are very close although there is no evidence that the Bible was directly used in this case. The art historian James Marrow has shown how this iconography of bloodstains and all-over scourge marks only appear after 1300. An all-over scourging is unknown in any ancient source but reflects, according to Marrow, the new interest in Isaiah 1:6 that was regarded as a premonition of the Passion. Those who believe the Shroud is authentic must explain why the flagellation marks on the two bodies cover front and back, from the crown of the head to the soles of the feet, even though there is no record that an actual Roman flagellation would have been carried out in this way. The other known examples of these patterns in paintings all date from after 1300, or 1290 at the earliest.

The late Caroline Villers, a foremost expert on painted cloths, had no doubt that the Shroud was a typical example of a formerly painted medieval linen. The surfaces of painted linens disintegrate with time which is why we have so few of them. However, the fifteenth century Zittau Veil on display in Zittau, Saxony, makes a good comparison. It was a painted linen, fairly intact until the Second World War when it was looted by Russian soldiers and used to cover a steam bath. This resulted in the paint disintegrating, leaving discoloured linen with the outline of the original underneath. These images are very similar to those of the Turin Shroud. The central panels of the Zittau Veil would seem to solve the problem of the Shroud images without much difficulty.

One of my academic colleagues put me onto the manuscript containing a depiction of the Shroud from the early sixteenth century that has since been sold at Christies. It probably belonged to Johann von Erlach (1474-1539), the mayor of the city of Bern and a military commander. It reminded me that new images of the Shroud as it was originally are still turning up. Even while I was researching my History Today article in 2014 I found two new ones. One was an illustration of the exposition of

the Shroud in Turin in 1608 found in the British Library. Another was sent by the Royal Library in Turin, in error as we had asked for a different one! There must be many more stored in libraries worldwide.

When I am asked what direction future research on the Shroud should take, I argue that the priority should be for an art historian to assemble all known illustrations of the exposition of the Shroud. These were provided for pilgrims and show the Shroud, its images, and the clergy or members of the Savoy family holding up the Shroud and there are examples from over three hundred years of expositions. It is quite clear that the images on the Shroud in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were much stronger than they are now but it is important to check different illustrations at different expositions to see what similarities are shown at different periods. Christ's thumbs could originally be seen as artists from different periods show them at the same angle from the hands. Again artists are agreed that there was long hair across the back of the head, not a pigtail as some reconstructions show today.

My researches into painted linens suggest that these were often refreshed when the paint started to disintegrate and there is some evidence that the Shroud was repainted, together with a loin cloth, when it was first exhibited in Turin in the 1570s. The loin cloth became compulsory after the canons of the Council of Trent required the covering up of nudity. (The nudes in Michelangelo's Last Judgement in Rome were covered up at the same time.) The loin cloth has, of course, vanished, leaving a lighter patch across the buttocks where it once was. A body lying on the cloth would have created the opposite, a darker patch.

I am now tied up with other projects and my Shroud books are put aside. I have enjoyed discussion on the Shroud with many different people since my article came out. I have responded to everyone who has contacted me and participate in online debates. I now feel I can concentrate on other things. Research on medieval painted linens is increasingly productive and I am confident that there will be new developments that fit the Shroud into that research. I am happy to wait for

it to happen. Confirmation that this was once a medieval painted linen from c.1325 (as the iconography of the images suggest) will be an important step forward in the history of the study of the Shroud.

Meanwhile my own experience has been is that if you argue that the Shroud is medieval, a rare survivor of an object provided for the veneration of the faithful at Easter, you will receive very little hostility but a lot of interest and even support. It has been a good experience and I hope that others will take the research on further. Unfortunately with the STuRP samples of 1978 apparently distributed often without record, we are dependent on the Turin authorities allowing access for new samples. A textile conservation laboratory would soon be able to provide a definitive verdict on the Shroud if it was given the chance to do so. The techniques for spotting the remnants of pigments are enormously more accurate than they were in 1978 when there was controversy over whether pigments were present on the surface or not.



Editor’s Note on the Comment above

I am very grateful to Charles for alerting me to the possibilities of the Quem Quaeritis drama, but appreciate that his argument above, especially that part based on the depiction of the Shroud in various paintings and prints, is open to question. The extraordinary variety found both in these and in the ‘replicas’ found in churches across the world does not lend itself to a coherent view of the state of the image through the ages, and he is certainly correct that a proper academic study is badly needed. The other main objection to the ‘paint has fallen off’ hypothesis is the very homogenous nature of the image, as if every area has been eroded by exactly the same amount, which seems unlikely. The Zittau Veil is a very good illustration of this; parts erased completely and others almost pristine. If loincloths really have been added and subtracted according to taste, surely some remnants of them would be more clearly detectable.

