

The Impact of the Shroud Face on Art Work in the Middle East in the Early Centuries A.D.

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The study of the art of any period of time and any geographic area is very broad and highly complex. With the acknowledgment that in no way is it possible to deal comprehensively in this short paper with the subject of art work in the Middle East in the early centuries A.D., I wish to examine one facet of this topic – one aspect only, but a highly significant one. And that is the impact of the Shroud face on art work, both Christian and non-Christian, in the Middle East during the first to seventh centuries.

Our research in this fascinating subject began in 1979. When I use the words “our” and “we,” I am referring to my husband Alan and myself. Alan has, from the very beginning to the present time, always been the primary researcher, the leader in determining what research to pursue, how to go about it, and locating resources for study. But I have been a part of the research at every step, at times making findings on my own. Because we work together, even though Alan puts in more hours and our work is complementary one to the other with each of us using our different abilities, we assume equal responsibility for our findings and conclusions. We have always valued the observations and inputs of individuals and groups who have acted as reviewers. In 1994, we founded the Council for Study of the Shroud of Turin (CSST), a non-profit organization to facilitate our research and educational activities.

We first became aware of the Shroud of Turin one afternoon in 1977 while browsing in a book store. Alan noticed the cover photograph of the Shroud face on the book *The Sacred Shroud* by Thomas Humber. Thinking that the photograph was highly unusual – Alan is an excellent amateur photographer – out of curiosity he picked up the book, scanned through it, and bought it. We did not know it, but this was the beginning of an adventure of discovery that was to become all- absorbing and lead us in many new directions.

At first, our interest in the Shroud was only casual, and we had no thought of actually becoming involved in the research on it. Then in 1979, we received a challenge that kindled a spark of interest that soon caught fire. It happened in this way. A friend, whose professional specialty is the study of the Biblical intertestamental period, went to St. Catherine’s monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Egypt, to do some research in their manuscripts from that period. St. Catherine’s is an intact sixth century church and is the world treasure house of early manuscripts and icons. While he was there, one of the monks, while showing him some of their icons, in response to a question about the origin of the impressive Christ Pantocrator icon, said that it had been painted from the Shroud of Turin. Wondering whether this could be true, our friend brought us both a photograph of the icon and the story of its origin. The icon was a gift to the Monastery by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I. It was produced using the encaustic technique, that is, the colors were applied in hot wax to a board, and it has been dated to about 550 A.D. The monk’s story, if

correct, would mean that the Shroud had to be in existence at least as far back as the sixth century. The challenge, then, was to find a way to determine whether the monk's story was right.

With increasing enthusiasm and determination, Alan began to search the literature for a way to compare artistic images to determine same source or lack thereof. Not finding anything useful, he then began experimenting with various techniques of photographic comparisons, including side-by-side photographs of the Shroud face (both positive and negative) and the icon, and split images of the Shroud face and the face of Jesus on a gold solidus coin of Justinian II struck 692-695. Many similarities could be seen, but they were suggestive only and not sufficient to provide the objective data which scientists require and which are necessary if the evidence is to be convincing.^{1, for most of pp. 2-6}

Finally, in late 1981, he tried superimposing one image directly on top of the other, but this produced a confusion of features with no way to separate one from the other. Then it occurred to him to use polarizing filters, crystalline filters that transmit light in one plane only. He superimposed the images, projecting one image through a filter using the vertical plane and the other image through a filter using the horizontal plane, and aligning them as well as possible generally by tip of nose and eyebrows. Then, looking through a third filter and turning it back and forth at about right angles, he found with great excitement that it is possible to compare the images exactly, feature by feature, even very tiny points. We called this technique the Polarized Image Overlay Technique, and the matching features Points of Congruence (PC).² The PC can be diagrammed and counted. Not finding a mathematical formula for determining likelihood of same source, we have used forensic criteria, which is 14 PC for monotypic structures such as fingerprints and 45 to 60 PC for polytypic structures such as faces.

The word icon, as used in the Eastern Orthodox Church and in this paper, refers to an artistic representation of a sacred person. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, icons had (and still have) the same status as Scripture. Thus the iconographer would no more create an image according to his/her own imagination than a scribe would casually rewrite Scripture. Iconographers commonly spent many weeks in prayer to prepare themselves before undertaking such a sacred task.

Until about the middle of the sixth century, artists depicted Jesus in a variety of styles, sometimes as a young boy and other times as an adult but with no consistent features, indicating that there was no clear or consistent idea of what Jesus looked like. There were exceptions to this in certain places, indicating, according to art historians, that there must have been a model, perhaps as copy books, which circulated in certain areas and were available to the artists in those areas.

Beginning about the middle of the sixth century, suddenly virtually all of the artistic depictions of Jesus began to look very much alike. Subsequently through the centuries, many hundreds of icons of Jesus in every known artistic media and in every size from very tiny to extremely large and in a wide variety of places all resemble each other in many ways. The only explanation for this is that the artists, either directly or indirectly, were using the same model which they considered to be authentic and "not made by hands," and they were trying to the best of their ability to copy or produce it as faithfully as they could.

Ian Wilson in his book *The Shroud of Turin*³ sets forth much careful research indicating that the Mandylion of Edessa and the Shroud of Turin are one and the same. Our research about the impact of the Shroud face image on various works of art in the Middle East in the early centuries A.D. corroborates his findings.

Because our breakthrough in finding a technique to accurately compare different images came with the Pantocrator icon and the solidus coin, and because they are dated toward the end of the period we are considering in this paper, we shall look at them first, and then go backward in time.

The Polarized Image Overlay Technique comparison of the Shroud face and the Pantocrator icon yielded about 250 PC, far in excess of the 45-60 PC needed to determine same source. This icon is the most accurate non-photographic depiction of the Shroud face of the hundreds of icons from many centuries that we have examined. This encaustic icon has been dated to about A.D. 550.

The gold solidus coins of Justinian II, A.D. 692-695, were the first coins with a depiction of Jesus. They were used commercially, but they were also religious icons. They are inscribed "Jesu Christu, Rex Regnantium" (Jesus Christ, King of Kings). The face image on the first solidus that we compared with the Shroud face is 9 mm from the top of the head to the bottom of the beard, and has 145 PC. The face image on the second solidus (by a different die cutter) is only 8 mm, and has 105 PC. The detail on both is incredible, much of it too small to be seen with the unaided eye.

Numismatist Bill Yarbrough sent us first a photograph and then a copy of another gold coin of Justinian II, the tremissis, a coin of one-third the weight of a solidus, also bearing a depiction of Jesus. This depiction is rather crude looking, but a comparison with the Shroud face reveals it to be a direct copy of the Shroud face with 188 PC. A comparison of the tremissis face with that on the solidus with 145 PC shows over 140 PC between the two coins. Certain features, too small to be seen without magnification, overlay each other exactly, for instance, whisker on whisker. They must have been designed by the same die cutter, who must have been one of the most skilled artists of all time to produce so many details so accurately in such tiny areas. Our speculation is that the tremissis may have been a prototypic coin. The Emperor may have commissioned his iconographer/engraver/die cutter to produce as accurate a copy of the face image believed to be that of Jesus "not made with hands" as possible. And so the die cutter produced the image on the tremissis, but it is not attractive. It may have been that the Emperor was unhappy with the crude appearance and instructed his die cutter to produce an image that would be not only accurate but also aesthetically pleasing. In any case, except for this one direct copy, all the other Byzantine gold coins bear what we might call derived images, that is, images that are accurately based on the Shroud face image, but are also artistically more complete and pleasing.

In the Cathedral of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, there are spectacularly beautiful mosaics. Among them are two depictions of Jesus which strikingly illustrate the marked change in artistic style that occurred at the end of the first third of the sixth century. One, on a wall, showing Jesus as a young boy, was completed about A.D. 525. The other, many feet above on the ceiling, depicting Jesus as a long-haired, bearded adult, was completed about A.D. 545. These two

mosaics confirm the fact and the timing of the renewed availability of the Shroud image to artists, coinciding with the rediscovery of the Mandylion during the repairs to the city wall of Edessa about A.D. 530.

Probably in the first century, and certainly by about 150, Christians began to dig burial places in soft rock. In Rome, there are about fifty different Christian subterranean cemeteries called catacombs containing over seven hundred miles of passages lined with niches for the bodies. Various larger areas or rooms and some of the tombs were decorated, and some of the bodies were interred in elaborately carved stone sarcophagi. There are two types of depictions of Jesus in frescoes and on early sarcophagus carvings in these catacombs. One is a youthful figure, and the other is a bearded, long-haired adult which we today can recognize as Jesus. These catacomb depictions of the adult Jesus were not signed or dated, but it is generally accepted that most of them date from the late second century through the fifth or sixth century. One of them may even be from the first century. They are similar enough to each other and to depictions of Jesus in certain other areas that, as mentioned earlier, art historians have concluded that there must have been copy books based on a common source that were not universally available but were circulated only in certain areas.

There are three types of catacomb depictions of Jesus as a bearded, long-haired adult: full face (looking straight forward), right three-quarter face (face turned slightly to the right), and left three-quarter face (face turned slightly to the left). There is one lateral profile depiction which may be first century. One of the full face images from the Catacomb of Callistus (the catacomb of the Popes) is obviously and excellently based on the Shroud face, as they have about 150 PC. Interestingly, this painting shows Pope Urban II, who reigned 222-230, looking intently at the face of Christ.

The three-quarter face images are fascinating when examined by the Polarized Image Overlay Technique. This shows that the various artists depicted the face features in a variety of ways so that in each portrait there are a number of accurately congruent features, but also there are a number that have been rotated or otherwise altered so as to make an artistically coherent and pleasing image. For instance, the third century fresco in the Catacomb of Aurelli, a face portrait measuring eleven by sixteen centimeters which some have thought represents one of the Apostles, has 107 PC with the Shroud face. Another excellent portrait, facing the opposite direction, is found in the Catacomb of Commodilla and attributed to the fourth century, has 75 PC with the Shroud face.

A small mosaic found in the tomb of the Julii and known as “Christ Helios” depicts Jesus as the sun god going up to heaven in a chariot. It has been dated to the late second century, a time of crossover from paganism to Christianity. This one has 49 PC with the Shroud face, showing that even in the very earliest depictions of Christ, even with the pagan-Christian mix, the Shroud image was used as the prototype.

Contemporary with the catacomb paintings are the magnificent frescoes that cover the walls of the Jewish synagogue and the much smaller and less skilled depictions in the Christian house-church, both in Dura Europos. These frescoes date to about 240. Alan made photographs of all

twenty-one of the patriarchs and prophets and other major figures in the Dura-Europos synagogue frescoes and also of every depiction of Jesus that we could find from the Roman catacombs, both frescoes and sarcophagus carvings, and from some other contemporary mosaics in Rome. On examining all these photographs, we were able to identify similar figures in the Roman depictions for every one of the synagogue depictions. The similarities, which range from fair to excellent, are of such features as: pose; clothing; position of arms, feet, and head; thongs on sandals; beard type; and objects being held. We then lined up the ten face images of Jesus from the catacombs which had shown fair to excellent congruence with the Shroud face, and found that there were many similarities in pose and general appearance among nineteen of the twenty-one figures in the synagogue. There are clearly many differences and dissimilarities, and the congruencies are rather low, but we feel that the similar features of almost all of the figures indicate that similar models or prototypes were available at each place to serve as examples for the various artists, who of course made modifications to meet their own culture, needs, and varying skills.

The figure of Aron (Aaron), dressed in the robes of the High Priest, is especially striking. The face of Aron has 88 PC with the Shroud face. Faces of other synagogue figures, too, show marked similarity to the Shroud face. In fact, the faces of most of the figures look very much alike. Several art historians have commented on the ambiguous nature of the subject matter of the frescoes. There is frequent messianic and New Testament content. Many of the scenes have an Old Testament context, but a possible New Testament interpretation.

The few frescoes in the small Christian house-church of Dura Europos are of markedly inferior quality, but the two discernible depictions of Jesus are very similar to depictions in the Roman catacombs.

Noticing that the depictions of Jesus in the catacombs and certain contemporary depictions of other deities in certain places along the major trade routes to the Far East shared some of the same characteristics, and being aware that at the time it was not unusual to combine deities or attributes of deities, we decided to use our Polarized Image Overlay Technique to study them. We were able to show that some of these images of other deities are good to excellent derivations of the Mandylion/Shroud image.

We examined large numbers of these depictions, and soon noticed a very familiar appearance to many of them. The faces are full frontal, many have long flowing hair and large eyes which are often asymmetrical with the left eye looking slightly down and out, a heavy drooping mustache and a short curly beard often split slightly, cheeks that are often asymmetrical with characteristic markings, some markings on the forehead, some type of extension from the top of the head, and a fold or collar or line across the neck. They have the same expressionless face, and they lack three-dimensionality. These striking similarities led some art historians to the conclusion that this repetition demonstrated clearly that artists were using circulating patterns or copy books for inspiration (as mentioned above), and another to comment wryly that it looked as if these deities had patronized the same beauty parlor! Actually, all of these characteristics except the expressionless face and the lack of three-dimensionality are found also in the catacomb paintings and other depictions of Jesus, both early and later, and provide strong evidence that the common

source was the image we know today as the face of the Man of the Shroud of Turin. Undoubtedly, an artist or artists copied the face either in Jerusalem or in Edessa shortly after the crucifixion and it was these copies that circulated in some places, as less than thirty years later the image was hidden away, not to emerge again until about 525.

The fact that the Mandylion/Shroud face image was used to depict deities other than Jesus indicated that the image and the stories of Jesus' compassion and power were well and widely known. Edessa was one of the cities on the major trade routes to the Far East, and everyone entering that city had to stop and do reverence to the copy of the Mandylion/Shroud face which was mounted above the city gate. Doubtless, everyone also knew about King Abgar's miraculous healing through the power of Jesus. Devotees of various deities did not necessarily want to change their loyalties, but they did want access to the power and savior qualities they recognized in Jesus. As it was not unusual to combine deities or attributes of deities, this incorporation of the physical appearance of Jesus into the appearance of their own deities likely posed no problem for them.

In our research, we came across repeated observations by a number of experts in ancient art history regarding the abrupt appearance of an artistic style called "frontality," first in depicting various gods, and then rulers, and finally common folk. Frontality refers to multifigured scenes in paintings, mosaics, or carved reliefs in which the main figure or several of the figures directly face the spectator with no regard for the rest of the scene. Such frontality was infrequent and quite the exception in both Eastern and Western art until the first century A.D. Before this time, figures were generally shown in complete or partial profile.

The late Michael Avi-Yonah⁴, a well-known archaeologist and geographic historian, traced the abrupt onset of frontality to a carved relief of Zeus Kyrios, found at Dura-Europos and dated by its own inscription to the year 341 of the Seleucid calendar, which is A.D. 31. The face on this relief has 79 PC with the Shroud face. Also in Dura Europos, a statue of the god Aphlad, dated to 54, shows frontality and has 67 PC with the Shroud face.

With the appearance and spread of frontality, there came a rather abrupt change in the character of the gods. Previously, there had been a few "savior" gods in Eastern mystery religions whose main task was to take care of people after death, but these usually were for kings and rulers, who were the only ones assured of immortality because they were thought to become one with the gods after death. Commoners were left to struggle with escaping their fate in this life as best they could, and then after death to escape into nothingness or to exist in some manner in the dreary shadows of Hades or Sheol. Now, most of the deities became "savior" gods who listened and responded to the common worshipper and identified with him,/her rather than being detached from human affairs.

Frontality spread very quickly along the trade routes, and in a few years had reached much of the Middle East and into the Trans-Jordan, Egypt, and the Roman Empire. Another example of it, dated to A.D. 32, was found in a relief carving at the temple of Bel in Palmyra. By the early second century, both the style of frontality and the incorporation of features of the Shroud face

with another deity had spread all the way to the far end of the trade route, Ghandara, India, as shown in these first ever depictions of Buddha in human form.¹

About four months ago, a new avenue of research opened up to CSST when Alan was perusing a catalog from a well-established antiquities dealer with whom he had occasionally been in touch over a number of years. His attention was drawn to a series of ten carved stone oil lamps, all with the head of a bearded individual. Having studied the Shroud face image and compared it with hundreds of other faces in a wide variety of art objects for over twenty years, he immediately recognized that the faces on the lamps, no two of which are exactly the same, are related in some way to the Shroud face. These lamps, a cache of 20 altogether counting several that were not pictured, allegedly were found in an archaeological site in Syria allegedly dated to about A.D. 200.

With considerable anticipation, Alan ordered the one that interested him most, one which is in the shape of a cross and has the letters I.C. and X.C. clearly carved on it. The I. and C. are the first and last letters of the Greek spelling of Jesus, and the X. and C. are the first and last letters of the Greek word for Christ. When we first saw the lamp, we felt that Alan's suspicion that the face image was inspired by the Shroud face was correct.

Over the next few weeks, we were able to acquire nine more of these lamps. They are about 4 to 4 ½ inches long, are beautifully carved from the same kind of dense smooth stone, and are in pristine condition. Alan showed two of them to a retired professor of geology, who said that the stone is almost certainly soapstone.

This report on our findings up to now on the ten lamps that we have is a preliminary report, as we have not yet had time to complete the research. We have numbered the lamps arbitrarily for identification.

To do the congruency counts on the faces as compared with the Shroud face, all of which we did together, Alan used the same alignment that he has used with almost all the other hundreds of other comparisons that we have done, that is, the tip of the nose and eyebrows. The lamp faces are basically similar, but there are some variations and differences in style. As one would expect, the PC are variable. Seven of the lamps have congruency counts of 45 or higher. Forty-five is the lower limit of forensic significance. All of them, some more strikingly than others, show a component that could not be diagrammed as we do with the PC and therefore for which we have no forensic criteria, but which we feel nonetheless is highly significant. This is that the various areas of the face – forehead, eyes, cheeks, mouth, etc. – fit the corresponding areas of the Shroud face almost exactly. We have not noticed this type of patterning in comparing faces produced in other media. It is not that these areas in other comparisons do not fit, for they do, but there is something different in the way these lamp face areas which have no markings that can be diagrammed fit similar such spaces in the Shroud face image. One really needs to see a video comparison of this phenomenon to be able to understand what is meant. It is difficult to assign statistical value to this, but we feel it does help significantly in confirming same source. Only one lamp, number eight, has no significant number of congruencies with the Shroud face (this needs

further study, but we feel there may be a logical explanation for this), but it does have the similarities of spaces just mentioned.

Although the faces on all of the lamps are basically similar, there are differences and variations in style. The designs on the bowls of the lamps vary also. Three of the lamps have two male figures, one on each side of the lamp, which are mirror images one of the other. These figures are naked except for loin cloths and some type of covering of the faces. The pose is very stiff. They are nearly identical on all three lamps. Four of the lamps have clusters, two on each side, of structures that resemble pea pods filled with peas, three pods in each cluster. One lamp has a figure of a fish on each side. Two of the lamps are cruciform in shape and have the letters I.C. on one side and X.C. on the other. On all of the lamps, the placing of the side designs (i.e., the male figures, the clusters of pods, the fish, and the letters) is in the same part of the lamp.

Gross evaluation of the styles of these components makes us suspect that four or five different artists were probably involved, most likely working together in an atelier or artists' workshop. The quality of the work is excellent, indicating that these were made by highly skilled artists, and the similarities and accuracies with the Shroud face would suggest that the artists were looking directly at the face of the Shroud and interpreting the two-dimensional fragmented partial image into three-dimensional attractive carvings. It is apparent that these carvings are specifically Christian works of art that may almost certainly be classifiable as icons.

The appearances of the faces of these carvings reminded us rather strongly of another face we had studied, that of Zeus Kyrios, a carved stone relief self-dated to A.D. 31 found at Dura Europos in Syria and the first example of frontality, mentioned above. Overlay comparisons of two of the lamp faces with the face of Zeus Kyrios show them to be highly similar.

Our conclusions so far about this intriguing new find which we are still studying are that these carvings are specifically Christian and that they may indeed be icons produced by a group of highly skilled artisans who had access to the Shroud (the Mandylion as it was then known) face image and knew that it represented Jesus Christ after crucifixion. Their pristine condition would indicate that they were venerated and likely were carefully preserved by having been sealed in some sort of container, perhaps a clay jar.

Future research will include another seven of these lamps of the cache of twenty, just acquired and made available to CSST by our Executive Director, Philip E. Dayvault.

Known circumstances lead us to suggest the following scenario: the lamps were produced by royal artisans in the royal workshop by order of King Abgar V of Edessa, who had received the folded Shroud in A.D. 30 from Thaddeus, one of Jesus' apostles, and was reportedly miraculously healed of leprosy. We know that Abgar then invited Thaddeus to address the leaders in his kingdom, including the artists, to explain the image and its implications. This would suggest that these lamps may have been carved as icons of Jesus, based on the Shroud face, between the years 30 - 55 before the Mandylion was hidden away for protection after Abgar's death because of severe persecution of the Christians which began in A.D. 57.

It is interesting that in his book, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'*,⁵ Judah Benzion Segal reports that the archives of Edessa had a reputation for reliability. He discusses the city and the society at length, and reported much cultural and commercial activity. Among Edessa's citizens some were wealthy and well-educated. Edessa was an important city on the major trade routes, and thus there were many travelers and merchants from distant places. There was a large and prosperous Jewish community, and Edessa either already was, or was becoming, a seat of learning. Segal wrote, "An important element in Edessan society were the artisans. Some were employed by the king and housed near his own residence, presumably at his expense." Segal reports the Abgar/Mandyliion story, and states specifically that Abgar invited the prominent people in Edessa, including the artisans, to hear Thaddeus speak about Jesus.

Some quotations perhaps help to explain that these lamps which are so unusual indeed may have been produced in a place like Edessa during the very early years. "In general, among smaller objects [of early Christian art] it is virtually only those distinguished by genuine artistic value or characteristic detail that survive. Their preservation depends to a great extent on the luxury to which they attest" [my addition - in this case, by royal instruction and favor]. "In the category of things extant and accessible to inspection, early Christian art offers in abundance only mural paintings, particularly those in the Roman catacombs....It is equally true that in the East most of the works of early Christian art have disappeared." "...none of the sculptures and paintings of the Christian East have survived."⁶ It is known that there were productions of early Christian art in the East, but their whereabouts are largely unknown. Our postulation – could these lamps be early sculptures that have only now been found? If that is so, then certainly King Abgar, his artisans, and those leaders among the Christians who were established there, would have prized them highly and would have sought to preserve them, for "...early Christian art is at the opposite pole from art for art's sake,"⁶ and, "Before the Renaissance and Reformation, holy images were treated not as 'art' but as objects of veneration which possessed the tangible presence of the Holy."⁷

Certainly more research is needed, and CSST plans to continue with this. Additional findings will be released at a later time.

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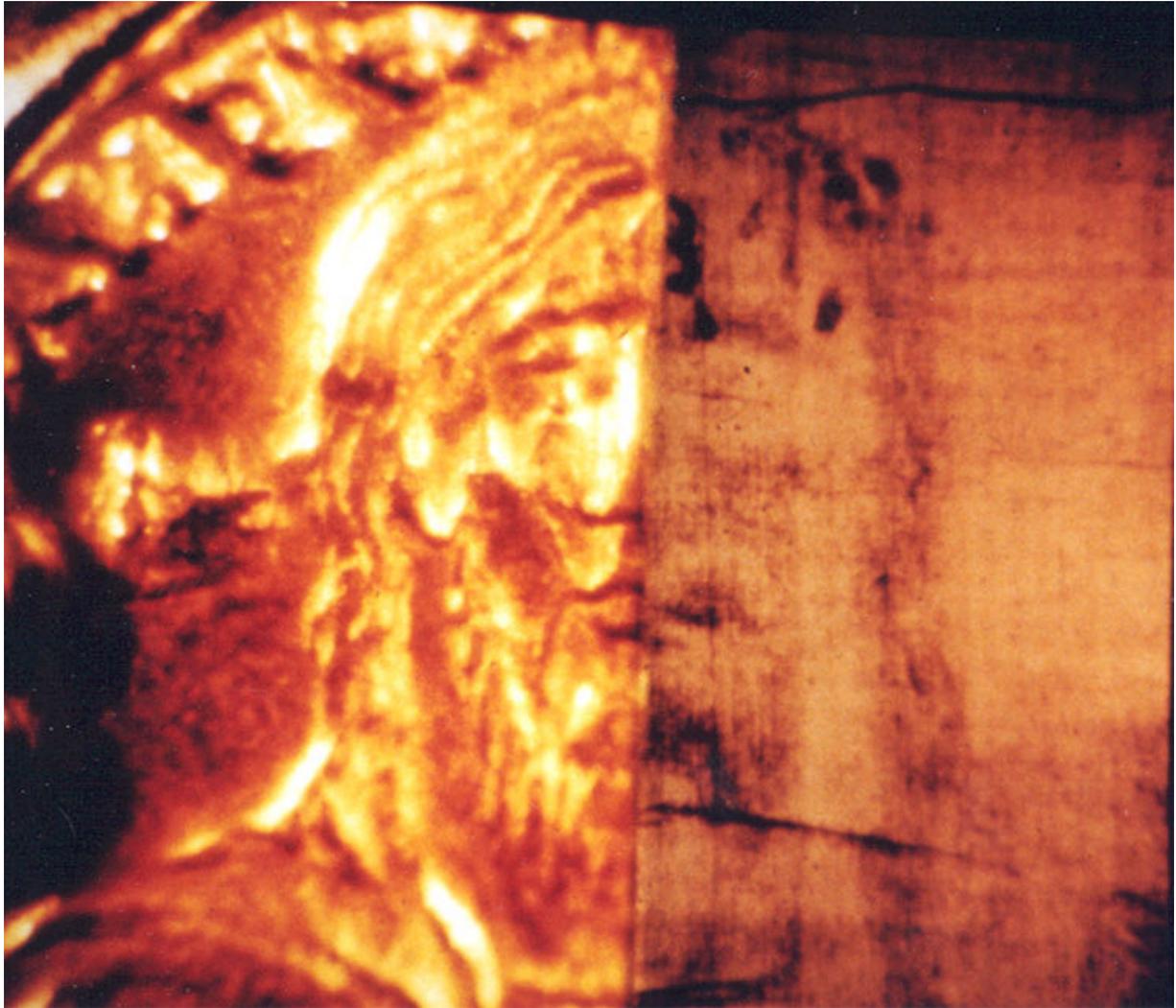


Figure 1

Split-image comparison of Shroud face with depiction of Jesus on a gold solidus coin of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II and dated A.D. 692-695. The face on the coin is 9 mm from the top of the head to the bottom of the beard.

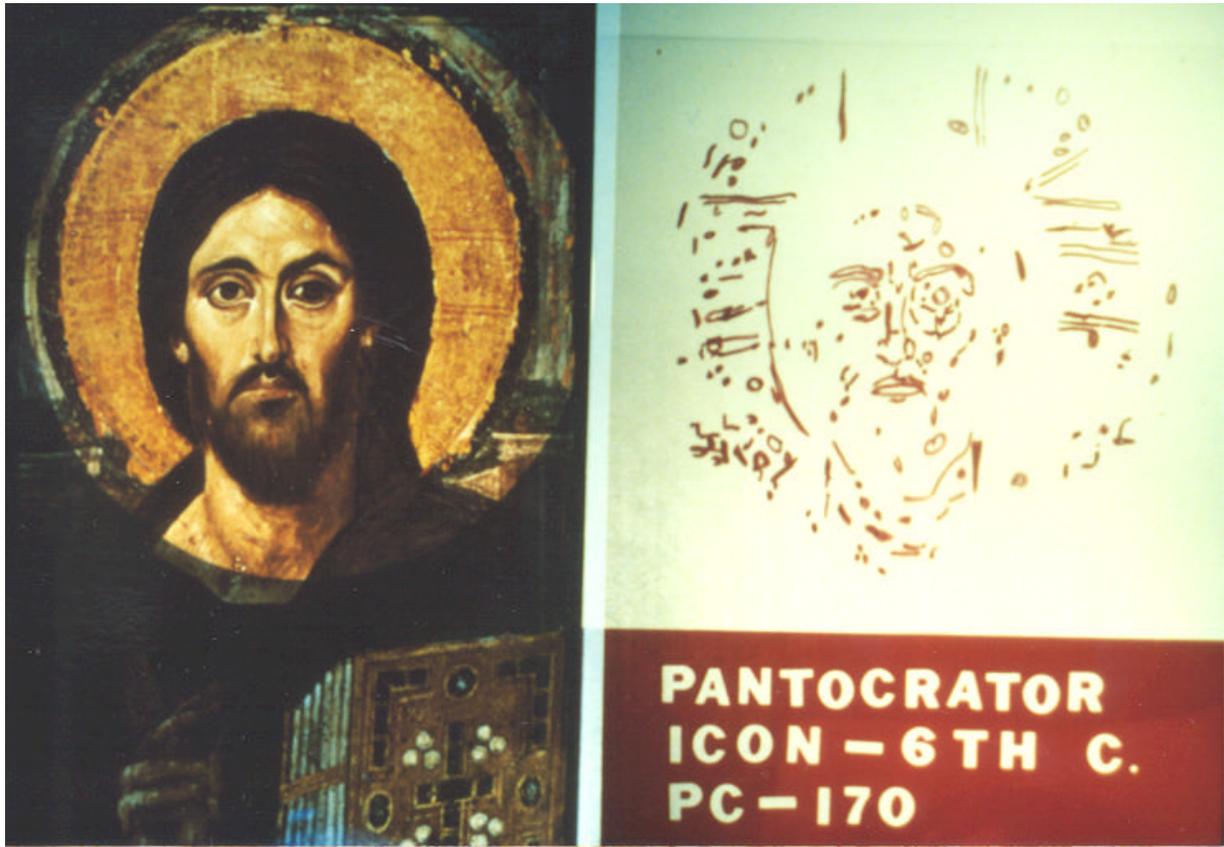


Figure 2

On the left, Pantocrator Icon, St. Catherine's Monastery, dated to c. A.D. 550. On the right, points of congruence between the Shroud face area and the Pantocrator Icon. On the Icon, there can be seen a circular structure which we feel represents the opening of the cover of the Mandylion.



Figure 3

Four carved stone oil lamps, allegedly found in an archaeological site in Syria allegedly dated to c. A.D. 200. The faces are significantly related to the Shroud face.