

New mystery shrouds holy handkerchief

by PETER WATSON

AFTER the Turin Shroud, the Genoan handkerchief.

Now that the Turin relic has been officially declared a fake, Mr Ian Wilson, author of several books on the subject, is to call on the Roman Catholic Church to submit two *mandilions*, or kerchiefs, each believed to bear the likeness of Christ's face, taken when he was alive, to scientific examination.

One is kept in the Pope's study in Rome but the other, more celebrated one, is preserved at the convent of San Bartolommeo degli Armeni at Genoa. The *mandilion* is shown publicly once a year on Ascension Day and at other times is kept in a shrine which can only be opened with eight keys in possession of eight magistrates and noble families.

The story of the *mandilion* is much fuller than that for the shroud — because its first historical record dates back to AD544, when the Persians besieged Edessa.

According to Christian tradition, Abgarus, Prince of Edessa, wrote to Jesus, asking him to come and heal him. Jesus sent a portrait of himself, achieved by pressing his face to a kerchief. When this was shown to the prince he was cured and Abgarus was baptised with his people.

The Edessa kerchief vanished in 1204, only to reappear — in three different places. One appeared in the Sainte Capelle in Paris, erected in 1252; a second



The Genoan kerchief.

turned up at the Church of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, from where it was transferred to the Vatican in 1870; and a third in Genoa.

The Paris kerchief was destroyed in the French Revolution in 1789 but the other two still exist. They have never been photographed and very few people have seen them close up. However, in the nineteenth century, Thomas Heaphy, a British artist, was permitted to sketch both likenesses. His drawings were purchased in 1870 by the British Museum. As shown here, the face has a dark colouring, a straight nose, and a somewhat austere expression.

Mr Wilson said yesterday: 'I feel that now is the time to have an authoritative analysis of these images. The likenesses of Christ occupy a special position and might contain important clues as to the early history of the church.'

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