

THE VEIL OF ANTINOË

A. M. DUBARLE

The formation of the imprints on the Shroud has always been a subject of discussion. Even today, the process which caused the image to form has not been satisfactorily demonstrated.

Some advocates of a natural process have pointed to possible analogies: a bridal veil, used but once, on which an indelible imprint made by the sweat of the face and hands can still be seen after one hundred years; a martyr's shroud, on which strong imprints were produced, though bodily forms are not recognizable;¹ brownish stains obtained experimentally on untreated linen by Antoine Legrand; and the delicate images imprinted on paper by dessicating plants, as studied by Jean Volckringer.²

This present note will offer as complete a documentation as possible about an object which has been mentioned numerous times³ although, unfortunately, it can no longer be found. But if one can give credence to descriptions of witnesses, it could offer interesting sidelights on the Turin Shroud. It is a veil that covered the face of a corpse in the cemetery of Antinoë in Upper Egypt, recovered during the course of excavations conducted between 1901 and 1902 by Albert Gayet: some thousands of corpses, mummified and hardened like horn, and still dressed in their burial clothes. Thanks to the very dry climate, the bodies did not decompose.

Descriptions

Two expositions of the findings were mounted at the Musée Guimet in Paris: in 1901 and 1902. The 1902 catalogue gives this description:⁴

Showcase 21: At the back of the case. *Suaire* embroidered with doves, birds perched upon flowers resembling nests, and bunches of grapes. All these themes belong to the symbolism of primitive Christianity.

This *suaire* served as a face veil, folded in four, and the face is imprinted four times. Three imprints are clearly distinguished. The fourth is less visible, since there is a bunch of grapes at the place of the left eye.

The Excavation Report states:⁵

...documents from the necropoles of the plain. The most important is a face veil, folded in four, and carrying four imprints of the face over which it had been laid. These imprints form something like brown stains, where the projecting features of the face are indicated by shadows. These stains, according to specialists, result from the action of the aromatics employed in the burial. Whatever the case may be, the image is sufficiently clear and gives us the portrait of the dead person; of this, there cannot be the least doubt. The cloth, 2.40m wide, is of fine linen, embroidered with roses, doves and bunches of grapes.

Georges Montorgueil, a journalist who covered the Exposition, after describing the mummy of a monk that reminded him of a Head of Christ, continued thus:⁶

Since this name comes under my pen, let us open a parenthesis to recall the discussions which, a few weeks ago, were raised about the Shroud of Turin. A scientist, M. Vignon, had it affirmed at the Academy of Sciences that the figure seen on the shroud was not at all the work of an artist, but the direct photograph of the dead man enveloped in the shroud.⁷ He sustains the theory that the image of a human body on a linen coated with aloes could be fixed like a sensitive plaque by ammoniacal vapors emanating from the body. This assertion did not pass without causing a certain surprise. Someone asked M. Vignon: 'How is it that no one has ever noticed a similar phenomenon?' He answered, 'Its production is due to a concurrence of extremely rare circumstances.' He enumerated them; but he emphasized as most important the climate of Egypt. [Reporter's mistake. ED.] And now an unexpected support comes along. From Antinoë, M. Gayet has brought a veil which was used to cover the face of a corpse; it was laid directly upon the face. This facial image took form, probably not in as perfect a manner as that on the shroud of Turin; but the oval of the face is perfectly distinguishable, as well as the arrangement of the hair. With a little attention—and emotion too perhaps—one seems to make out the blurred shapes of the eyes, the mouth and nose.

It is for chemists to examine this stain a little more closely, and to see if it is nothing more than the ordinary imprint of a body smeared with some kind of substance that impregnated the cloth. However the case may be, it is enough to put new life into the argument which was petering out, and to make everybody run to the Musée Guimet where the exhibit of these exciting excavations are exposed.

Unfortunately, no photographs accompany these descriptions. And after the Coptic art objects were transferred from the Guimet Museum to the Louvre Museum, Mme. M. H. Rutschowskaya, conservator in the Department of Egyptian Antiquities of the Louvre, was kind enough to search for it, but this particular cloth could not be identified in the reserves. Unfortunately again, Gayet did not number the objects described in his publications.

So it was not possible to undertake the verifications suggested by Montorgueil. At the same time, it would seem that his explanation cannot be supported. If the fabric was impregnated by direct contact with the corpse, there would have been notable differences between the imprints on the layers folded one over the other, and the witnesses did not mention that.

If one could examine it directly, this veil might, it seems, provide a good confirmation to the thesis that organic vapors, rising from a corpse, can form recognizable images on his shroud.

Despite its conjectural nature, a comparison might be useful here. The accounts of the Edessa image make reference to a *tetradiplon* (folded in four), which was imprinted with Jesus' face after he wiped his face on the cloth.⁸ Is the veil of Antinoë, folded in four, a simple fortuitous coincidence, or did some Christians want to imitate, in their grave, that which was told about the image of Edessa?

We merely pose the question. In any case, shortly after Christians began to be buried in the cemetery of Antinoë (ca. end of the Vth century), the news of the Edessa image reached Egypt. A pilgrim, Antoninus Placentinus⁹ (ca. 570), reports that at Memphis, quite far north of Antinoë, a cloth was venerated on which there was an image of the Savior, imprinted when he wiped his face.

A strange question arises now concerning this veil from Antinoë that aroused so much interest because of the facial imprint upon it: How is it that Paul Vignon never mentioned it? He had every occasion to know about it. In 1901, he visited the first exposition of the Antinoë excavations. He compared numerous cloths, collected from the Egyptian tombs, with the Turin Shroud. Gayet himself gave Vignon an Egyptian shroud on which there were brownish stains where one could recognize the imprint of a back, but diffuse and vague, not offering the least similarity with the Shroud imprint. Gayet assured him that in the eastern sepulchres one could always expect to find accessory linens besides the principal shroud.¹⁰ Gayet had consulted specialists on the origin of the stains observed on the veil of Antinoë; the explanation given was that the stains were caused by the action of the burial aromatics. That is what Vignon, for his part, at first proposed for the Shroud imprints. It must be assumed that Vignon was one of the experts consulted.

In his great publication of 1938,¹¹ *Le Saint Suaire de Turin*, and in an article of 1932, Vignon traces the history of the weave we see on the Shroud and compares this to the fabrics from Antinoë.* How is

*Vignon writes: "Our Guimet Museum possesses some cushions woven in wool of several tints; and the unbleached border of one of them is made in a 3-to-1 serge with chevrons...."[ED.]

it possible that he did not concern himself in regard to a facial imprint on a funerary veil?

One conjecture is possible;¹² Vignon said nothing about the veil of Antinoë and its imprints because for him the portrait on the Shroud brooks no comparison; there could be no parallel. It was for this reason that in his book of 1938, in the section entitled "The Shroud and the Texts", Vignon did not cite the *Gospel to the Hebrews*, which he knew very well. It is the fragment which says that Jesus, after his resurrection, gave his Shroud to the "servant of the priest", then goes to show himself to James. "What is most shocking is the materialism of this conception of the Resurrection. I do not see Our Lord leaving the Tomb, in the way one ordinarily walks off, and on leaving he hands his shroud to a bystander."¹³ Nevertheless, even if the narrative is purely legendary, even if it does not harmonize completely with the canonical Gospels, and if Christ's gesture lacks majesty—all things which are not absolutely certain—the passage is still interesting, for it shows that a little after the year 100 of our era, some Christians believed that the Shroud had been preserved, and they had no horror of this object which, according to the Law, was ritually impure.¹⁴

One is astonished at the silence of Paul Vignon, who ought to have been the first to interest himself in such a remarkable fact, and who did not even respond to the invitation extended by Montorgueil in his article.

The Hamsin

The veil of Antinoë is imprinted on four layers; Gayet remarked that the image on the top layer was less visible. On the contrary, only one layer is imprinted on the Shroud. Aside from the bloodstains, the delicate tint of the body image lies upon the crests of the threads of the surface that was in contact with the corpse; the image is not visible on the backside of the fabric. With imprints on one surface only, the Shroud differs radically from the veil of Antinoë. Can we hazard an explanation for this fact?

Here we turn to the reports of experiments carried out to produce similar to those on the Shroud. Dr. Sebastiano Rodante¹⁵ mentions that in one of his trials, he added dust from the street in imitation of the "multiple elements present over Christ's entire body; bloody sweat, sweat, dust, blood from both deep and superficial wounds".

J. B. Azzola¹⁶ calls attention to the fact that dust impedes penetration of stain into the thickness of fabrics, and one can suppose that at the time of the crucifixion, everything exposed to the air would have been covered with the dust of aeolian winds. The synoptic Gospels note that, during Christ's agony on the cross, darkness covered the earth (Mt 27:45, Mk 15:33, Lk 23:44-45). Luke even adds that the sun was eclipsed. There is no reason to believe, with ancient commentators, that there was an absolutely miraculous

eclipse, with the full moon coming between the sun and the earth. Some modern exegetes suggest that a natural explanation needs not be sought, since Mark was thinking of a supernatural event. Others consider it a purely symbolic description founded on prophecies (Amos 5:6,18; 8:9) and only meant to underline the eschatological character of the event.¹⁷

When he published his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, the Rev. M.J. Lagrange¹⁸ had already passed more than twenty years in Jerusalem; he could speak of its climate with the authority of experience. He notes approvingly Origen's observation that an eclipse of the sun is impossible during a full moon, the period of the Passion. On the other hand, in the spring there are frequent "black siroccos" when "the atmosphere is filled with dust", sometimes with an impressive intensity. As F.M. Abel¹⁹ remarked, the east wind is "sometimes charged with dust and sand; it obscures the sky with a gray thickness."

Assuredly, the evangelists were not interested in meteorology *per se*. But this is not a reason for doubting the event, even if they reported it because of its psychological impact on the spectators.

The sand transported by the desert wind, the *hamsin*, falls upon the ground in a fine layer of impalpable dust.²⁰ To what extent could this very fine sand-dust render a cloth impermeable? There is nothing abnormal in the fact that the Shroud would have received its share. The interstices between the threads were obstructed. The imprints received from contact with the body, or the vapors in the immediate proximity, could have formed an image only on the inside of the fabric. Neither the backside nor a second layer could have been imprinted.

Conclusion

It is obvious that there is a good dose of conjecture in all that has just been said—conjectures arising from the reports on the unlocated veil of Antinoë. The three descriptions given above assure us of its remarkable aspect, but they are too general for ascertaining to what extent it resembled the Shroud.

Scientific research permits working hypotheses and progresses by verification and exclusion. The elements of diverse origin assembled here have been grouped for the first time in order to look at the problem of the formation of the Shroud imprints in a new light. It has been said²¹ that only two alternatives are possible: a "paranormal" origin or a manual fabrication by paint or other art methods. But these are not the only explanations possible. Right at the beginning, that pioneer in sindonology, Paul Vignon, proposed a natural process; and he and others, before and after him, have produced images on cloth, variously prepared, by natural chemical reactions. Neither the perfection nor the specific characteristics of the Shroud image have been achieved; but this has not discouraged scientists from continuing their experiments.

This present note might seem disappointing. It does not satisfy the curiosity aroused by the three reports of the Antinoë veil. It is good, just the same, to collect all the elements of information available. If today they are far from being decisive, they might, nevertheless, contain some clue which perhaps one day would contribute in resolving the problem of the formation of the imprints on the Shroud.

NOTES

1. W. BULST, *Das Grabtuch von Turin*, (1955) p. 69 and notes 147,148. For the bridal veil, he cites Mons. Barnes, *The Holy Shroud* (1934), which I did not consult directly. For the martyr's shroud, Bulst refers to a photograph shown to him by Dr. Volbach of the Roman-Germanic museum of Mainz.

2. J. VOLCKRINGER: *Le Saint Suaire de Turin: Le problème des empreintes devant la science*, (1942). L. FOSSATI, "Origine delle impronte; Il grande interrogativo" in *La Sindone e la Scienza*, Acts of the 1978 Congress, refers to Volckringer and Legrand. The same article appeared in *Ipotesi* (1978) pp. 327-332.

3. This veil was mentioned by M. GREEN, "Enshrouded in Silence", in *The Ampleforth Journal*, (1969), pp. 321-345; and by V. MARCOZZI, "Le scienze moderne di fronte alla Sindone; Il Congresso Sindonologico di Torino", in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, (1979); see p. 343 where he refers to P. BAIMA BOLLONE & P.P. BENEDETTO, *Alla ricerca dell' Llomo della Sindone*, (1978), which I did not consult directly.

4. A. GAYET: *Notice relative aux objets recueillis à Antinoë pendant les fouilles exécutées en 1901-1902 et exposées au Musée Guimet du 5 juin au 5 juillet*. Paris (1902). Brochure of 35 pages; see p. 25-26.

5. A. GAYET: "L'exploration des nécropoles gréco-byzantines d'Antinoë," in *Annales du Musée Guimet*, (1902). Many illustrations, but none of the veil, which is described p. 134.

6. G. MONTORGUEIL, "Les morts d'Antinoë", in *Le Petit Havre, organ républicain démocratique*, 9 June 1902, p.1. The complete newspaper is preserved by Antoine Legrand, who received it from André Peraté former conservator of the château of Versailles. Georges Montorgueil was the pseudonym of Octave Lebesque (1857-1933).

7. Allusion to the communication presented by Yves Delage to the Académie des Sciences de Paris. Vignon, a pupil of Delage, had been encouraged by the latter to undertake experimental research on the formation of the imprints; Delage then read the results at the famous session of 21 April 1902.

8. Concerning the Edessa image, see I. WILSON, *The Turin Shroud*, (1978), ch. XIV & XV.

9. *Itinera Hierosolymitana*, ed. Geyer, *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* 39, p. 139.

10. P. VIGNON: *Le linceul du Christ*, (1902), p. 66-67 & p.86, n.2.

11. P. VIGNON: *Le Saint-Suaire de Turin*, (1938). On p. 83, Vignon mentions the cloths of Antinoë that Gayet had shown him 36 years earlier. He cites Gayet again in *Études*, June 1932, "Après l'ostension du Saint-Suaire de Turin. État présent de la question".

12. This explanation, conjectural to be sure, seemed the most plausible to Antoine Legrand, who knew Vignon personally and had collaborated with him for several years in the study of the Shroud.

13. Personal communication, 26 December 1939.

14. As I. Wilson justly remarks, the text of the *Gospel to the Hebrews* leads nowhere (*The Turin Shroud*, p. 74). However, it is not without interest, because it is witness to a state of mind which can easily be explained by the knowledge of a shroud held to be that of Jesus. It is well to add that this apocryphal gospel is known only by short fragments quoted by ancient Christian writers. The passage which briefly alludes to a shroud was not cited by St. Jerome for its own sake, but because it precedes the mention of James the Less (*De viris illustribus*). A IVth century apocryphal gospel attributed to Gamaliel gives to Christ's burial linens the role of convincing evidence. That the *Gospel to the Hebrews* had contained more ample information about the shroud cannot be excluded. But this is only speculation; it can neither be proved nor firmly rejected.

15. S. RODANTE: "Il sudore di sangue e le impronte della Sindone", in *Sindon* #21 (April 1975) p. 6-11. Also "Mixturam myrrhae e aloes in soluzione? Rilievi di semeiotica sindonica", in *La Sindone e la Scienza*, Acts of 1978, pp. 419-423.

16. J. B. AZZOLA: "A possible image transfer mechanism on the Shroud of Turin", in *Sindon* 33, (Dec. 1984) pp. 21-24.

17. For example, V. TAYLOR: *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, (1952). See also R. SCHNACKENBURG: *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (1971). A. LOISY, in *Les Évangiles synoptiques*, t. II, (1908), declares: "It concerns a symbolical feature, not a darkening of the atmosphere" (p. 679).

18. M. J. LAGRANGE: *Évangile selon saint Marc* (1911), p. 404. The information is often repeated by recent commentators, for ex., A.E.J. RAWLINSON, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, (1925); K. H. RENGSTORF: *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, (1948).

19. F.M. ABEL: *Géographie de la Palestine*, t.I; *Géographie physique et historique*, (1933), p. 118.

20. I do not recall ever personally witnessing a sirocco during the two years I passed as a student at the École Biblique de Jérusalem (1934-1936). I did go through one at Mossoul (Iraq) in the spring of 1971 or 1972. The next morning, the interior courtyards of the houses were blanketed with a light layer of fine sand.

21. In his book, *Le Paranormal*, (1985), H. BROCH included a chapter on the Holy Shroud (pp. 43-67). One paragraph, entitled "Only two possibilities" (pp. 57-59), states the alternatives that, he says, "focalize the interest" of

many people on the Shroud of Turin. "Either it is a fraud, a fake due to an artist, or it is a 'miraculous' representation of the image of Jesus-Christ. There cannot be a third solution for this 'shroud'; for example, the transfer of the image of a crucified man who is not Jesus-Christ" (p. 58). This third solution, however, has been defended by authors as P. Gramaglia, *L'uomo della Sindone non è Gesù Cristo* (1978), or G. Brunet, *Cahiers du cercle Ernest Renan*, 27 (1979) pp. 53-96, "Le dernier des saints suaires; le suaire de Turin". Broch himself reports a text favorable to authenticity where he mentions the opinion of those who admit a chemical phenomenon for the origin of the imprints. The scope of hypotheses is very wide.

22. P. VIGNON, in his first book, *Le Linceul du Christ, Étude scientifique*, (1902).

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LAPSUS CALAMI...

...in *Spectrum* #25. p.18, note 5. "But a letter from Bishop Henri de Poitiers to Geoffroy, praising and approving 'what he had done' at Lirey, is dated 28 May 1355." How could I have let "1355" get into print when the year of the letter, as I well know! was 1356? Thanks to Don Fossati, who pointed out this error, accuracy is reestablished. [ED.]