

Science by Press Release (Again)

Another Editorial Response by Barrie Schwortz

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Once again we are being bombarded by media claims about the Shroud of Turin, although this time admittedly from a pro-authenticity position by researcher Barbara Frale. However, the same rules must be applied to these claims as those applied to the recent claims by anti-authenticity researcher Luigi Garlaschelli.

Frale claims she has “discovered” inscriptions on the Shroud that prove it is authentic. However, she is basing her conclusions on the work done by French researchers Marion and Courage (published in the late 1990’s) which made these same claims. Rather than submitting her work to a journal that could review and verify her research, she too, like Garlaschelli, is publishing her work in a commercial book (and only in Italian). In fact, the recent press coverage seems to be mainly designed to promote the sale of that book. Once again, we are seeing “science” reported by press releases rather than in the conventional scientific literature.

As for the Marion and Courage inscriptions themselves, these were carefully evaluated from a linguistic point of view in 1999 by Shroud scholar and language expert, Mark Guscini, who published his results in the British Society for the Turin Shroud (BSTS) Newsletter in November 1999. That article, titled, ‘The “Inscriptions” on the Shroud,’ was ultimately reprinted on this website and can still be found at this link:

<http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/guscini2.pdf>

In the end, Guscini concluded:

“So none of the inscriptions which some claim to be able to see make enough grammatical or historical sense. This in itself is enough to doubt their very existence on the cloth, but the clinching point was evident in the presentation of the work in the symposium at Nice (1997). The slides that Marion and Courage used showed the areas of the cloth where they could see the inscriptions, and then the various optical treatments they had subjected it to, and finally the inscriptions written in over where they were meant to be. They were only visible on these last slides. There was absolutely nothing visible on any of the other slides. If the inscriptions made any kind of sense then maybe a more sympathetic attitude would be called for, but as it is I think the whole affair is yet another example of things being seen on the Shroud in an attempt to come up with something new.”

To make matters worse, Marion and Courage based all of their imaging work solely on the 1931 Giuseppe Enrie photographs, which have sadly been the basis for a vast array of claims of objects or writings being found on the Shroud. I say "sadly" because the high resolution orthochromatic film used by Enrie, coupled with the extreme raking light he used when making the photographs, created an infinite number of patterns and shapes everywhere on the Shroud. Since orthochromatic film basically only records black or white, any mid-tone grays of the Shroud image were inherently altered or changed to only black or only white, in essence discarding much data and CHANGING the rest.

The grain structure of orthochromatic film itself is distinctive: It is not homogenous and consists of clumps and clusters of grain of different sizes that appear as an infinite myriad of shapes when magnified. It is easy to find anything you are looking for if you magnify and further duplicate the image onto additional generations of orthochromatic film, thus creating even more of these shapes.

Although Enrie's images are superb for general views of the Shroud (they look great), they contain only a small part of the data that is actually on the Shroud so they are much less reliable for imaging research purposes and have a tendency to lead to "I think I see..." statements. I would feel much more confident if these claims were based on the full color images of the Shroud which contain ALL the data available.

As I used to try and explain to Fr. Francis Filas, who first "discovered" the rather dubious coin inscriptions over the eyes and who had enlarged and duplicated the Enrie images (through at least five generations - and always onto orthochromatic film), there is a fine line between enhancement and manipulation. Fr. Filas first presented his findings to the STURP team in 1979 and frankly, not one of the STURP imaging scientists accepted his claims.

Since everyone now has the ability to manipulate images on their desktop, the number of these claims is increasing. Sadly, unless one knows exactly what they are doing, spurious claims will undoubtedly be the final result. I personally must reject any claims of secondary objects or inscriptions on the Shroud, particularly if they are based solely on the Enrie images.

As for Barbara Frale's conclusions, I have not read anything more than the press releases we all have seen, so once again, very little information has been provided and certainly not enough for anyone to get overly excited by these latest claims.

As I mentioned in my last editorial, with the Shroud going on public display again next year, I am not at all surprised by this type of media coverage, no matter which side of the authenticity issue is touted. In the end, there is nothing here that resembles good, empirical science, at least not so far. As one who was a member of the team that performed the only in-depth scientific examination of the Shroud ever permitted, I am bound and obligated to stick to the facts, no matter which side of the authenticity issue they fall on. Sadly, the real facts are rarely found in commercial books or press releases or television documentaries. Remember, these media venues have no standards of scientific accuracy to adhere to and consequently, they rarely do.