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From the Mandylion to the Shroud

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The origin of the Edessan image is connected with the ancient legend of King Abgar.

Abgar was the toparch, that is, ruler, king of Edessa (modern-day Urfa, Turkey) and was afflicted with leprosy and gout. He had tried to consult any doctor and take any medicine, to no avail. He learnt that Jesus had worked miracles in Jerusalem but met with the Jews' ingratitude; so, on the day of the Passion, he called a certain Ananias (or Hannan), his secretary and excellent portraitist, and gave him a double task: deliver a letter to Jesus and paint a portrait of Him which would have to be as faithful as possible.

The text of the letter was the following:

Abgar Ukkama, to Jesus, the Good Physician, who has appeared in the country of Jerusalem. My Lord: Peace. I have heard of Thee and of Thy healing, that it is not by medicines and roots Thou healest, but by Thy word Thou openest the eyes of the blind, Thou makest the lame to walk, cleansest the lepers, and makest the deaf to hear. And unclean spirits and lunatics, and those tormented, them Thou healest by Thy word; Thou also raisest the dead. And when I heard of these great wonders which Thou doest, I decided in my mind that either Thou art God, who hast come down from heaven and doest these things, or Thou art the Son of God, who doest all these things. Therefore, I have written to request of Thee to come to me who adore Thee, and to heal the disease which I have, as I believe in Thee. This also I have heard, that the Jews murmur against Thee and persecute Thee, and even seek to crucify Thee, and contemplate treating Thee cruelly. I possess one small and beautiful city, and it is sufficient for both to dwell in it in quietness.



Fig. 1 – Jesus delivering His portrait to Ananias – Stories of King Abgar, cod. 382, Historical Museum, Moscow, 1063.

Ananias went to Jerusalem, delivered the letter and tried to paint the portrait as requested but couldn't, because "the radiance emanating from Christ's face was too intense to be painted". Understanding his difficulties, Jesus asked for some water to wash and a towel. He imprinted His visage on it, then gave it to Ananias along with a reply letter to Abgar:

Blessed art thou, who, although thou hast not seen Me, believest in Me, for it is written of Me, Those who see Me will not believe in Me, and those who see Me not, will believe in me. But as to that which thou hast written to Me, that I should come to thee, that for which I was sent here is now finished, and I am going up to my Father, who sent me, and when I have gone up to Him, I will send to thee one of my disciples, who will cure the disease which thou hast, and restore thee to health; and all who are with thee he will convert to everlasting life. Thy city shall be blessed, and no enemy shall again become master of it forever.

Before giving the letter to Ananias, Christ affixed seven seals below bearing words in Hebrew which, according to the Synaxarium, mean “wonderful view of God”. Abgar received the letter and portrait with great honor and profound veneration, and was quickly healed of his afflictions, except from some leprosy traces on his face.



Fig. 2 – Ananias delivering the portrait of Jesus to King Abgar – Stories of King Abgar, cod. 382, Historical Museum, Moscow, 1063.

After Ascension, apostle Thaddeus arrived in Edessa as promised. He immediately took Abgar and his family to the baptismal font. After the immersion, Abgar came out of it totally healed and full of fervor for the new religion: he ordered Jesus’ image to be fixed on a gold-rimmed board, which was placed in the centre of the city, in a rounded hollow from which a pagan statue, that had been an object of great veneration before, was removed and exposed to the cult with the writing: “Christ God, those who trust you will not get lost”. There, the image remained under the rule of Abgar and his son.



Fig. 3 – King Abgar and the Mandylion – Contemporary icon, Russia, 21st century.

However, as the Synaxarium reports, Abgar's grandson, who had returned to the worship of the idols, wanted to destroy the precious relic. In order to save the Mandylion, the Bishop of Edessa, having been warned in a dream by an angel, had the rounded hollow secretly bricked up with a tile and a little burning lamp placed before it.



Fig. 4 – The Mandylion being hidden - Details of the Savior's icon with twenty scenes by L. Stepanov and S. Kostromitine, iconostasis of the Cathedral Church of the Redeemer, the Kremlin, Moscow, 17th century.

The sacred image was forgotten for centuries until Khosrow II, king of Persia, after assaulting all Asian cities, besieged Edessa. The city was about to be conquered, when Eulabius, the bishop of the city, had a vision who revealed to him the secret of the relic. He opened up the wall and the image appeared: the lamp, still burning, had helped imprint Christ's image on the tile covering it. The relic

was extracted and a procession on the walls of the city organized. Miraculously, a fire that the Persians had built turned upon them who fled in defeat.

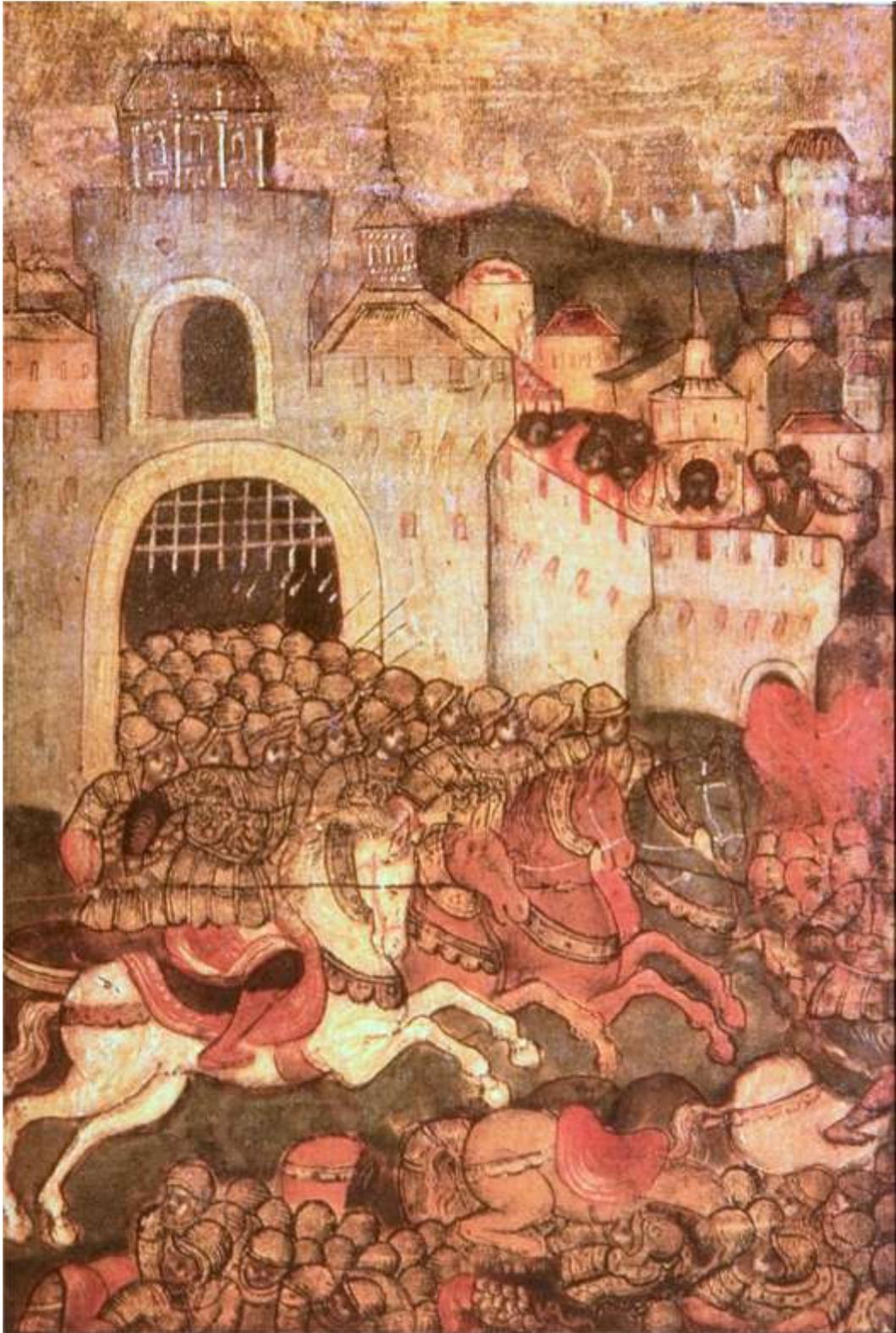


Fig. 5 - The Mandylion on the walls of Edessa - Details of the Savior's icon with twenty scenes by L. Stepanov and S. Kostromitine, iconostasis of the Cathedral Church of the Redeemer, the Kremlin, Moscow, 17th century.

As all the most beautiful things were flowing into the imperial city - continues the Synaxarium - it was also God's will that that sacred, ineffable icon should become part of his treasure. Many Byzantine emperors tried to get hold of the Edesseean relic which, meanwhile, fell into Saracens' hands. Eventually, emperor Romanus I Lecapenus, after long negotiations, managed to obtain it at a high price: a payment of twelve thousand silver dinars, the liberation of two hundred Saracen prisoners and the imperial army's promise to refrain from setting foot in Edessa and its property. Having learnt of the agreement, the Christian community of Edessa rebelled but had to give in to reasons of State. Therefore the relic, after a few stops, was taken to Constantinople, along with Jesus' signed letter to king Abgar, in a procession in which, among many dignitaries, the bishops of Samusata and Edessa also took part. Miracles were being worked along the way: when they got to the district of the Optimatoi, to the Church of the Mother of God (Theotòkos) called "the Church of Eusebius", he was applauded by huge crowds and many people suffering from various diseases were healed, among whom a possessed man who, immediately after seeing the relic, began shouting: "Receive your glory and honor and joy, Constantinople, and you, Porphyrogenitus, your empire".



Fig. 6 – Arrival of the Mandylion in Constantinople - Manuscript of Johannes Skylitzès, National Library of Madrid, 12th century.

According to the Synaxarium, on 15 August in the year 6452 since the creation of the world, which corresponds to the year 944, the procession got to the shrine of the Theotòkos of Blachernae, where the relic was exposed to the faithful and venerated by the imperial family - who was already at the shrine to celebrate the Assumed Virgin Mary - as well as by the nobles and the rest of the people. The following day, 16 August, the sacred image was carried on shoulders in a big procession led by patriarch Theophylactus and the young emperors. The elder emperor stayed at home as he was seriously ill, but all the members of the Senate and all the clergy joined the procession with the due accompaniment all the way to the Golden Gate. It proceeded through the whole city and arrived at the big Church of Saint Sophia. Here the Mandylion was exposed for public veneration. The procession was resumed, went through the imperial palace and got to the

church of the Theotòkos, named after the tower of the lighthouse, where it was definitively placed. As early as the 8th century, St John of Damascus, in his work, had expressly mentioned the acheropite image (meaning "not painted by human hands"), reminding, however, of the tradition whereby Abgar, after requesting an image of Jesus, obtained a cloth on which Jesus was believed to have miraculously imprinted His image. The cloth was described as being elongated, not square as other traditions report, with no mention being made on any folding of the cloth itself.

Egeria, a pilgrim who arrived in Edessa in 384, recounts that the city's bishop, on showing her the highlights, led her to the Gate of the Bastions through which Hannas had entered bringing Jesus' letter; however, her narration makes no mention of the image.

The first reliable news of the presence of the Mandylion in Edessa goes back to the 6th century. In 1544 the city was besieged by the Sassanids, led by king Khosrow I Anushirvan; according to Evagrius Scholasticus (594), the city was liberated from the siege thanks to the sacred image.

A coeval Syriac hymn also considers the existence of that miraculous image as already known and acquired.

Tradition has it that the cloth with the acheropite image of Christ was found in a niche in a wall towering over a gate of the city. Some give credit to this tradition believing that the Mandylion had been hidden centuries before because of persecutions and then was forgotten; maybe it was found again during reconstruction works following the catastrophic flooding of Daisan - the river flowing through Edessa - which occurred in 525. News of this flooding was reported by an author of the time, Procopius of Caesarea.

A little earlier than the Synaxarium, or even contemporary to it, is the homely held by Gregory (10th century), referendary of the Church of St Sophia in Constantinople, before the miraculous sacred image, as mentioned in the Gr. Vat. Code 511, which was discovered some years ago by Prof. G. Zaninotto. What is highlighted in it is its difference from a painted image: "The radiance... was impressed only by the drops of the sweat caused by the agony, which fell down from his face of divine nature like drops of blood and from the finger of God. These are really the beauties which led to the coloring of Christ's imprint, which was further embellished by the blood drops gushing out of his side. Both have a lot to teach: blood and water there, sweat and image here".

The synaxarium does not absolutely show a uniform text either. Aside from a shorter version, which can be traced back to around 1150, as early as the 11th century several variations of the story reported in it circulated. According to the two most important alternative versions, Christ imprinted His image on the cloth when drying His face after sweating blood, as observed by Luke, during His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Finally, the last relevant text regarding the Mandylion is one of the most vital accounts of the crusaders: "La conquête de Constantinople" by Robert de Clary, knight of Picardy, who in 1204 took part in the conquest and plunder of the imperial capital by the participants in the fourth crusade (after which the Mandylion disappeared from history) and described it in great detail.

Since 1204 no precise information has emerged on the Mandylion, the possession of which is currently claimed in Italy by the cities of Genoa and Rome and the town of Manoppello.

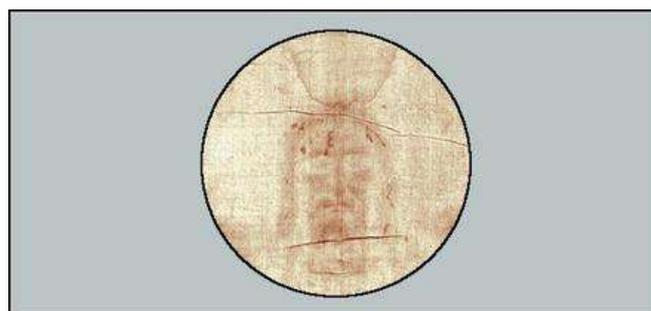


Fig. 7 – Reproduction of the Holy Shroud, folded.

According to recent studies, the Mandylion is nothing but the Shroud that wrapped the body of Christ, folded in eight parts, leaving just the face uncovered. Another very precious cloth covered the Shroud and, through an oculus, only the face of the man of the Shroud could be seen.

The big eyes of Christ *Panteropto* (meaning He who sees everything), the hair gathered in long strands, the beard divided in two and the lock of hair on the forehead are features which can be identified on the Shroud's image and became modular traits for iconographic painters of any time and any country.

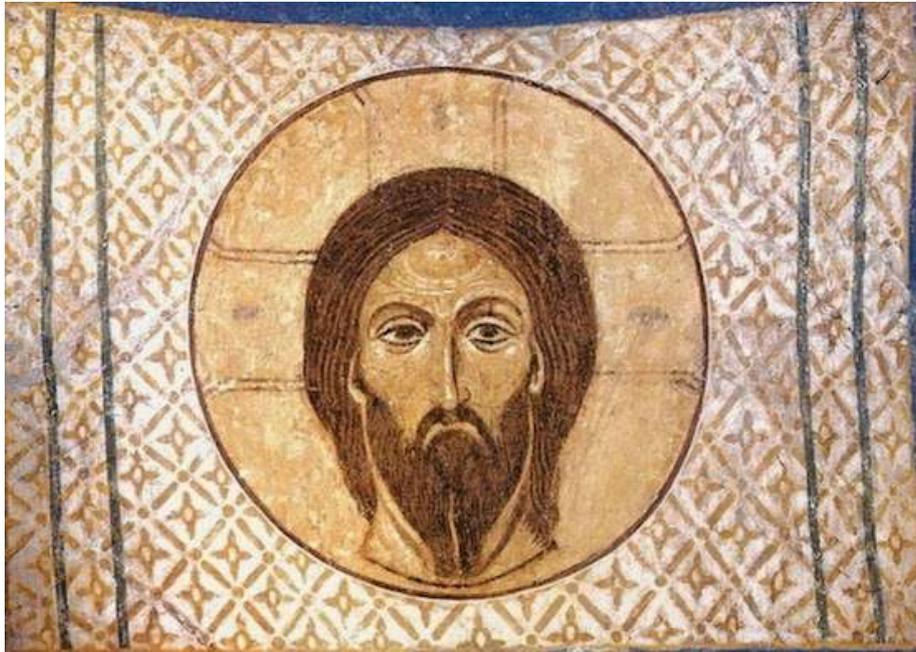


Fig. 8 – Mandylion – Pskov, Transfiguration Cathedral, Mirozhsky Monastery, 12th century.

In later painted versions, the oculus became the halo (photostaphanos) surrounding the head of Christ and inside which is the cross pattée that always identifies the image of the Lord.



Fig. 9 – Mandylion – Sakli, Goreme, Turkey, 12th century.

The iconographic analysis of many *Mandylion* icons, of the *Macedonian Renaissance* (9th-10th century) and *Komnene* (12th- 13th century) periods, led me to make an observation as a painter, of course, and not as a historian, suggested by the fact that in countless images from that period the

Face of Christ appears not just with the only face, as then it is possible to see in later icons, frescoes and mosaics, but also with the neck.

This peculiarity led me to think, what is already known, that the Byzantine painters used a single model, considered the authentic portrait of the Lord that could not be left to their free interpretation.

The question, then, should be moved to another level: why the most ancient icons of the Edessa *Mandylion* possess also the neck? This would mean to the viewer that the "towel - handkerchief " is only the final and most important part of something much longer and folded in such a way as to leave visible only the face. The hypothesis seems plausible.

Another interesting question is the one that shows how the veil has, in all of the icons, the same decorative motif: a kind of diamond pattern golden damascene with a small central motif that goes from the simple circle, with four small dashes, to a design like a chicken foot, as it can be seen in some miniatures and frescoes.

These variations could be explained by the fact that at certain times of the year, the *Mandylion/Shroud* could be covered with a cloth less valuable, we could say daily, a common thing for some very revered images in southern Italy - I mean, in particular, the icon of Our Lady of Ripalta in the province of Foggia - while at holidays this drape could be replaced with a much more precious and refined one.

In the pictorial transposition, all these elements have been faithfully reported to be able to offer to the believers, even the most distant from Constantinople, the same relic/image with the same characteristics.

We must also remember that the icons, in the Byzantine world, are real presences of the Divine Prototype in His own image and this has meant that painters remained faithful to what the Church considered in line with the Apostolic Tradition.

Finally, we can see that the nimbus/halo can be identified with the opening that revealed the face and part of the body (neck) of Christ. In many Cyprian frescoes, the nimbus is decorated with pearls and precious stones, while in other representations the halo is bounded by a simple dark line.

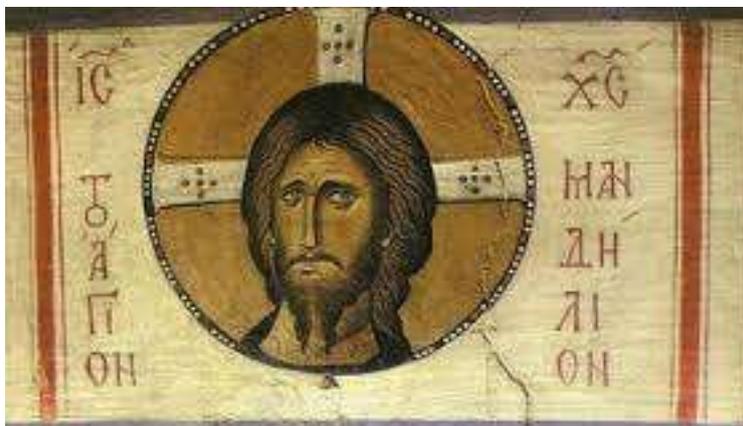


Fig. 10 – Mandylion – Panaghia Arakiotissa, Lagoudera, Cyprus, 1192.

Also in this case, the hypothesis of the double veil, daily/holiday, could be worth, but still painters, those very talented and those that did not have talent, would have faithfully reported in their work what they had personally seen or what they had been told by pilgrims and travelers, in deference to ecclesiastical laws which enacted rules for the liturgical art of the Byzantine world.

Translated by Augusto Monacelli