

MYSTERY OF THE MISSING MANDYLION by Ian Wilson

It is not often that your Editor and his wife find themselves facing the wrong end of a gun in the cause of Shroud research, but this was our fate in August this year when on the trail of a missing Mandylicon icon in northern Cyprus.

Back in 1947 travel writer Robert Cunis wrote in his book *Historic Cyprus* concerning Cyprus's district of Lambousa or Lapithos, a few miles to the west of Kyrenia:

The principal monument is the Monastery of Akhiropoietos... the church is dedicated to a wonder-working icon of the Holy Handkerchief of St. Veronica, though according to an old Cypriot legend the Shroud of Christ was once kept there, and carried off by a princess of the House of Savoy, and given to the Cathedral of Turin, where it is to this day. Whatever the dedication may be, the church is certainly one of the oldest foundations in the country...

Upon my first coming across this reference back in the 1960s it was immediately clear that Cunis had muddled the Veronica of western tradition and the Mandylicon of eastern tradition, it being the latter that one would expect to be the subject of a Greek Orthodox icon, a point corroborated also by the monastery's name as that of the 'Akhiropoietos', or image 'not made with hands'.

The fascinating element, however, was this association, albeit legendary, of the Cyprus Mandylicon with the Turin Shroud, not least because two daughters of the ruling house of Cyprus married into the house of Savoy. These were Anne de Lusignan, who had married Louis of Savoy shortly before the latter acquired the Shroud (seemingly from Margaret de Charny); and Charlotte de Lusignan, who also married into the Savoy family a few years after. So was it possible that instead of ever being owned by the de Charnys, the true Shroud had been in Cyprus and had been brought into the Savoy family by a Cypriot princess? If so it might still have earlier come from Constantinople via the Knights Templar, who had strong connections with Cyprus.

Further light was shed by the pioneering British Shroud researcher Dr. David Willis, who on a visit to Cyprus during the 1960s, managed to photograph the early 19th century silver-gilt case containing the icon to which the church was dedicated [see above]. Inscriptions on this confirmed that a Mandylicon icon lay underneath. But those in charge of the church at the time refused Dr. Willis any sight of the hidden original on the grounds of its extreme holiness. All they would impart was that it was very old, and had the disembodied face on cloth appearance common to most artists' copies of the Mandylicon.

Hopes of any relaxing of this prohibition were further dashed in 1974 when the Turks, taking advantage of a political vacuum in Greece, invaded northern Cyprus very close to the Akhiropoietos monastery, immediately commandeering this as a military barracks and observation post. Since they swiftly stripped many of northern Cyprus's Greek Orthodox churches of their icons and other fittings, hopes for the Mandylicon's survival have been slim, though any information on its fate was blocked because of the monastery's military status.

In August of this year, however, encouraged by guidebook information that the monastery was now a 'former' barracks, my wife and I used the opportunity of a vacation visit to northern Cyprus to try to ascertain what had survived, and anything that might be gleaned of the fate of Mandyion icon. Optimistically, we drove down the monastery's approach road, oblivious to what we subsequently learned were Turkish 'Keep Out' notices, only to find this still very much in business as a military barracks - and well guarded...

Although the man behind the gun was polite, he made it very clear that even to take a photograph of the monastery's Byzantine dome, which loomed tantalisingly just over his shoulder, was 'impossible'. We deemed it prudent to take him at his word...