

A Shroud-related Victim of the Iraq War

From Ian Wilson

Back in the 1960s, while puzzling over the Image of Edessa and its possible identity as the Shroud during Christianity's earliest centuries, my attention became drawn to a large statue in the Baghdad Museum. The life-size statue represented King Uthal of Hatra, a 2nd century AD monarch hailing from much the same Parthian culture as that of the toparchs of Edessa. Of very special interest was King Uthal's magnificent tunic, featuring a trellis or lattice-type decoration strikingly similar to a covering depicted on artists' depictions of the Edessa Image dating from before 1204. Accordingly I wrote to the Baghdad Museum requesting a photograph of the statue, which the then Iraqi Directorate of Antiquities kindly supplied, this photograph (seen here) duly being featured on my first book on the Shroud published in 1978.

It was with immense sadness, therefore, that in the very first TV news footage of the Baghdad Museum's looting in the wake of the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, I noticed among the few recognisable items remaining in the museum's main hall King Uthal's statue, now seriously damaged, and minus its head. This head, featuring a magnificent tiara similar to that worn by the Abgars of Edessa, will no doubt be sold to some wealthy private collector, and thereby (as happens with so many other looted Middle Eastern antiquities), disappear from the sight of the world of scholarship. Compared to other treasures looted from the Baghdad Museum, for example, a magnificent Sumerian harp and helmet from the Royal Graves at Ur, the loss of King Uthal's head may seem of relatively minor consequence. But with so many buildings and artefacts with Shroud associations having been destroyed over the centuries in Edessa/Urfa itself, this further, and rather more avoidable loss comes very hard to bear.