

## The meaning of the thorns and their discovery on the Turin Shroud



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Thorns, thistles and pollen were found on the Shroud, which can offer tangible proof of Christ's suffering on the cross

In the past, thorny plants symbolized suffering in Christian art and pious legends. The most familiar example is obviously the Passion of Christ, since on the Cross he had a crown of thorns.

### **The thorns and their meaning**

Thistle stems (*Cynara cardunculus*) were used in Greek and Roman cuisine, and remained a popular food in the region until the 19th century. In art, the plant alludes to man's need to work to earn food after expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and therefore to work even in his inclination to sin to attain the food of salvation - Jesus.

An easily recognizable thistle is the Scottish thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*), which symbolizes protection. It is said that the armies that invaded Scotland were thwarted by the defensive nature of this plant. The Order of the Thistle was founded in 1540 by King James V, who created it for himself and for 12 of his knights, "in allusion to the Blessed Savior and His Twelve Apostles".

In a legend of King Charlemagne, it is said that his army was dying of the plague when an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him to shoot an arrow in the air, then feeding his soldiers with the plant on which it had fallen. Charlemagne did as the angel ordered, and his arrow fell on a spot with milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*), then renamed *Cardo Santo*. He then made all his men eat that plant: they were all saved and carried on the battle to defend Christianity.

Historically, Benedictine monks have considered the Holy Thistle (*Cnicus benedictus*) a panacea. It was believed to be particularly effective in treating smallpox. Thistle with yellow flowers, it has been used in medicine - for internal and external treatments - for more than two thousand years.

### **Thorns and flowers on the Shroud of Turin**

We read in the Bible that the torture our Lord suffered during His Passion began with the cruelty at the hands of Pilate's soldiers. It was those brutes who gave Jesus His first crown - that of thorns - which, together with the cross, became a symbol of victory over evil. On the Shroud of Turin there are traces of *Cardus* and *Gundelia tournefortii*.



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Natural science experts began examining the Shroud towards the end of the 19th century. Botanical experts on the research *team found traces of plants and pollen grains that can serve as seasonal and geographic markers.*

Four plants on the shroud are significant, because, as researchers [Danin and Baruch](#) report , "the union ... occurs only in a small portion of the Earth, the Judean Mountains and the Judean Desert in Israel, near Jerusalem."

Experts managed to identify 36 plant species on the Shroud. They found that almost all of the floral images that remain on the cloth, and the highest concentration of pollen, were where the body's head was placed.

Botanists have found various factors of particular interest to those who study the authenticity of the Shroud, even doubting it. Here are some of their findings:

- All affected plants grow in Israel. Of these, 20 are known to grow in Jerusalem and another 8 in the vicinity of the Judean Desert and in the Dead Sea area.
- Although some of these plants are also found in Europe, 14 of them grow in the Middle East alone.
- 27 plants bloom in spring, during the Passover period.
- *There is both pollen and an image on the Shroud of Zygophyllum dumosum*, and it grows only in Israel, Jordan and the Sinai region.
- *Gundelia tournefortii* (of which the most frequent pollens on the Shroud have been detected, a factor that indicates the season) is the plant found where the crown of thorns is impressed around the head on the shroud.

In Lent, we look at our weaknesses, at the "thorn in our side" that urges us to entrust ourselves to the Lord, whose first crown was worn by enduring unspeakable suffering for our sake.

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