

The Vignon Markings Myth

In 1939 Paul Vignon, Professor of the Catholic Institute in Paris, published his second book on the Shroud, *Le Saint Suaire de Turin, devant la Science, l'Archéologie, l'Histoire, l'Iconographie, la Logique*. A large format, greatly expanded successor to his first book, *Le Linceul du Christ. Etude Scientifique*, from 1902, it has never been published in English, which is no doubt why his researches into the early artwork he thought was derived from the Shroud are so comprehensively misunderstood. [Fig. 1]

The book is divided into three parts, dealing with the image on the Shroud itself, its history, and finally Vignon's pictorial researches. This Part is entitled "Iconography to the Aid of the Inconclusive Texts," and "A sketch of the iconography derived from the Shroud." After a preamble discussing whether Christ had a beard or not (whose conclusion is, unsurprisingly, that he did), Chapter One looks at the Image of Edessa, concluding that it was derived from the Shroud, and how Vignon himself could produce a similar image, even reproducing small errors due to the imprecision of the marks on the Shroud itself:

It was necessary to remove the wounds and blood, to open the eyes, and to remodel the rather too prominent nose. For the rest, we could just copy: but although we would copy according to careful interpretation, we would actually make a whole series of errors. In my version, I make the same mistakes, as I am putting myself in their place, but the difference is that I know I'm making them.

The standard image of the Vignon markings, an interpretation by his friend and disciple Edward Wuenschel, includes some marks which Vignon himself does not mention,

such as the detached threads of hair at the peak of the forehead and two extra, triangular, supranasal markings.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about Vignon's observations is that he did not apply them to images of Christ alone. Quite the reverse. It was his contention that the whole of Byzantine religious art owed its facial iconography ultimately to the Shroud, via the Image of Edessa, and his illustrations demonstrating this include apostles, saints, bishops and even emperors. Thus he begins his defence of his thesis with the dome of the Neon Baptistry in
30 Ravenna, from the mid 5th century, very shortly after the Image of Edessa was first known.
[Figs 2 - 4]

*Around the centre of the dome, the Apostles process around Christ who is being baptised by the Forerunner. Neither Jesus nor John the Baptist here are of the lineage of the Shroud. But it is different for some of the Apostles: Andrew, James the Greater, Simon Peter and especially Paul. As I understand it, Christ and the Forerunner were placed here in about 458, at a time when no copy of the Mandylion, derived from the so-called picture painted by the envoy of Abgar had yet reached Ravenna. But soon models arrived, and some of the Apostles were marked with the sign of
40 Christ; not all, because one wouldn't want to overdo it.*

In Ravenna, things to look out for include the supranasal square, the moustaches (left and right) separated and a distinct 'nasolabial furrow' (what we would call a philtrum), eccentric marks on the forehead and cheeks, and a distinct clear area on the top of the chin. Where these are present, the image is clearly derived from the 'model', where they are not,

then they have been deliberately omitted for one reason or another. I do not find this is very convincing.

Vignon continues his survey, using figures from the Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Rome (St Cosmas, St Peter and St Theodore), and the Euphrasian basilica in Istria, Croatia (Bishop Euphrasius, Archdeacon Claudius and St John the Baptist) as examples. [Fig.

50 5 - 6] This is what he says of Sts Cosmas and Damien:

The most faithful to the Shroud is St Cosmas, on the right. Although his supranasal square is rounded at the base, it is at least visible. The transverse shading across the forehead has lost definition, but broadly maintains its shape. The supra-orbital arches are clear and precise. The indentation below the nose is lost beneath insufficiently separated moustaches, but that's not serious. The top of the chin is a clear horseshoe, with a darker stain between its wings. [...] Now let's move on to St Peter, on the left. See for yourself how, if the frontal arches are here less prominent, the supranasal square is firmer. The forehead wrinkles are a standard adaptation of the transverse shadow. Classic rings exist under the eyes. The nasolabial fold is obvious. In spite of the whiteness of this beard, the underside of the mouth and the chin still conform to the rule.

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Christ, in the Church of Saints Cosmas and Damian, is less satisfactory, but does have a representative chin.

As for the bright top of the chin, it is as hairless as if it had been deliberately shaved! Why, on this mosaic, does a special type of tessera

ensure that an unquestionably hairless area dominates the centre of an otherwise abundant beard, unless the guidance of the Shroud was being slavishly followed?

70 In Croatia, in the Euphrasian Basilica,

The brows of the bishop Euphrasius and his neighbour Archdeacon Claudius are similar to that of St. Peter; with an extra degree of stylisation for the bishop, for whom the supranasal square is now set as part of two lines. [...] In the same apse, St. John the Baptist ignores the Shroud as far as the forehead is concerned, but reverts to convention on the chin, the mouth and the moustache [...] Anything can be allowed along the lineage, provided that there is at least here or there an act of visible conformity.

Vignon's next section goes into more detail of one particular 'line of descent' from the Shroud, beginning with the Christ of the fresco of Christ in the Catacomb of St Pontianus.

80 [Fig. 7] In spite of its differences (which he considers trivial) Vignon considers very close to a first generation copy of the Shroud. He is particularly interested in the 'supranasal square', in actuality a barely discernible three-sided irregularity in the cloth just between the eyebrows, which he considers has

a deliberate lack of anatomical significance, the blatant futility of what would seem to us to be a bizarre ornament, if we didn't know that it shows one of the most significant of the 'accidents' found on the shroud itself.

The exaggerated confidence of this statement has echoed unchallenged through the annals of Shroud mythology, when a mere glimpse of a set of portraits will reveal that such a three-sided square is far more an obvious feature of elderly men with wrinkles than it is of the Shroud. [Fig. 8]

Apart from the distinctive 'supanasal square', he pays particular attention to the curved band across the forehead, which he thinks derives from the Shroud, and is repeated, more or less accurately, in dozens of images derived from this one. Unfortunately, as we shall see, he destroys his own argument by over-generalisation. Almost every forehead in every portrait has some variation in shading, even if it is a photograph, but according to Vignon, they are all derived from the vague discolouration on the Shroud.

In the church of Hagia Sophia in Thessalonica, another parade of apostles circle Christ in the centre of the dome. These two attracted Vignon's attention. [Fig. 9]

My figure shows the upper body of two of these apostles. Copying Christ, the transverse brow mark, shaped like a sabre-blade ends in the a shadow derived from the daylight shining from the left. The apostle on the right maintains a trace of supranasal square, but a hook-shaped shadow on his cheek is very marked. As for the philtrum, it is missing on one of the apostles [...] but very thick on the other. [...] This all goes to demonstrate the care artists took to vary the individual figures within the bounds of the overall canon.

Having explored the lineage of the fresco of St Pontianus, Vignon starts again with the mosaic of Christ Pantocrator in the Church of St Ambrose in Milan. [Fig. 10] Although it

is generally dated to the early 13th century, Vignon cannot believe it is so late, and he may be
110 correct, although it has been extensively restored.

What strikes me is how faithful this Christ is to the Shroud in many respects, which cannot in general be claimed of mosaics of the twelfth century.

But characteristically, Vignon immediately points out all the differences this image has from the Shroud, such as the deeply indented curve across the brow, leaving almost no space for the eyebrows or the supranasal square. However these differences, he thinks, are completely outweighed by some astonishing similarities, such as the marks on the cheeks, which exactly reproduce the equivalent marks on the shroud - although one is bit too low and both have been curled upwards to point at the corner of the eyes. The angles at which the
120 moustaches are cut off are exactly correct, but the shadow under the lip is too thick. But the clear space on the top of the chin, well, apart from the irregularity of its shape:

It would be absurd to imagine that this, with the beard, does not derive from a peculiarity of the Shroud.

The beard, it is true, is not properly forked, probably so as properly to balance the weight of the hair, but the long tresses on either side are almost perfect, the one on the right being wavy compared to the one on the left, as well as being tucked behind the neck.

In short, the Christ of Milan must have been copied from a first class model.

Frankly, this is little less than fantastical wish-fulfilment, but blithely ignoring all the contradictions he himself notices, Vignon doggedly pursues his theme. Any resemblance to the Shroud, in any image, is incontrovertible evidence that the the latter must derive from the former, while any difference, however gross, is incidental.

For Vignon, even the Battle Flag of Ivan the Terrible, from the 16th century, was clearly derived from the Shroud, with its sharply truncated moustaches and shadow under the lower lip.. [Fig. 11] So to was the Emperor Nicephorus III, as we can tell by the dark circles under the eyes. Christ himself, crowning the Emperor, is more subtly drawn, but they both have similar eyebrows, similar noses, and faint marks depicting the supranasal square.

[Fig 12]

And so the Procession of Witnesses marches on. Every artist painting Christ or his associates for hundreds of years had a databank of characteristics to draw on, such that a forehead with a shadow that curves up, or down, or is indented in the middle; which reaches the hair on the left, or right, or not at all; distinct arches over the eyebrows, or not; bags under the eyes, shadows under the cheekbones, irregular, symmetrical or missing altogether; divided moustaches and beard, or one or the other, or neither, and especially a bare top of the chin; all these are clear indications that the image is derived from the Shroud. For page after page, Vignon comments on example after example in a very similar way, pointing out details which to him seem seem incontestable, but always, in all fairness, also pointing out aspects which it seems cannot. Less fairly, these digressions are all explained away to inconsequentiality. Nevertheless, his writing is enthusiastic, even exuberant, and quite colloquial, which makes his book an entertaining read. Here is the mosaic of Christ healing a sick woman:

Having already established the descent of all this iconography from the Shroud, it is no longer necessary for us to describe Christ, who, hardly surprisingly at the head of his apostles, is reaching out to heal the crippled woman. [Footnote: Except perhaps to observe that the split in his beard is slightly left of centre] What is important here is to show how the disciples also have some of the characteristics derived from their master's death mask. This will at first seem doubtful, especially as three of them are clean shaven, but look at their foreheads - there are traces of the classic model there; and the curves under their eyes, especially St John's right eye; and on the cheek of the man on the extreme left, the mark on his cheek. Two of his neighbours just behind have similar marks.

Now for the ones with beards. The man on the left of the second row has a lower lip and chin very like Christ's, and the man in the middle of the third row has moustaches in the exactly the same place as his neighbour would have them, if they hadn't been lost and replaced with shadows.

But it is St Peter who interests me most. Although his beard reaches right up to his mouth, the two clear areas we see so often under the mouth are not obscured, but delineated by it. Compare this to Christ. And then St Peter's beard defines the typical chin, eventually wrapping round it with an elegance the mosaicist should be proud of. Next to him is a man whose chin is so narrow the lighter areas above it disappear and the beard just flows down freely. [Fig. 13]

And so it goes on. The method is always the same, the Shroud is always the model from which these unconscious departures are made, expressing the joy and creativity of the artist, without being constricted into icy immobility.

And at the end of the section, Vignon reviews two figures from the the altar panel showing the Redeemer between the Virgin and Three Saints, painted in 1271, by Meliore di Jacobo “Toscano”, in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. [Fig. 14]

180 *Finally, I shall look at two strong witnesses, neither well known, but both from one and the same work of art, by the curious 13th century Italian artist Meliore Toscano. [...] Original in its composition and colours, this work is more important to us in the way in which Christ and Saint Paul derive from the Shroud, not only each one differently, but both differently from all the other mosaics, paintings, or miniatures studied by us so far.*

Let's look at Christ first. On his forehead, I don't want to over stress the curious olive-shaped, or strangely evolved "supranasal square", which by echoing the garnet cabochons of the halo becomes an integral part of the design. No, what matters to me is the incredible furrow dug vertically into the brow, interpreting a dark shadow in the same place on the Shroud.

190 *Then leading to this furrow, the little white slanting lines are also not without justification in the Shroud, which has pale areas on either side of the dark shadow, slanting down towards the midline [...]*

But I can't wait to come to the right cheek. To the right of a vertical patch, cut off from the shadow that surrounds the eye by a white line visible on the Shroud, the tone of the painting bulges into a kind of tumour that

seems to inflate the top of the cheek This swelling matches something similar on the cheek of the Shroud. On the left, the clear strip we have seen on the Shroud cuts off anything similar this side, so the artist has not accentuated it as much. [...]

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And why these mere commas as ears, when all Meliore Toscano's predecessors tried to give us acceptable ears? Because, no doubt, these thin curved lines were inspired by the faint strip visible just inside the right tress of hair on the Shroud. [...] All this being said, I hardly need to notice the clarity of the strictly parallel edges between the points of the beard. On the Shroud, the division is not far from permitting a simplification of this kind. We have already noticed this on the Christ in the Codex Gertrudianus, although there the painter has made it less stylistic.

Then Vignon moves on to the gaunt figure of St Paul, on the far right.

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“But look at the ridge of this nose! Although it's a little too long, the bulge in the middle is cut off top and bottom by little constrictions, precisely truthful to the Shroud, and the same goes for the dark line down the middle, and the pale line running alongside it to the right”

After this exhaustive survey, and the conclusion of an argument that has grown from mere suggestion to such glaring obviousness that only a charlatan could possibly admit of a tremor of doubt, Vignon concludes:

“But what model inspired this painter in 1271? It could not have been the Shroud itself, which had vanished into obscurity from Byzantium sixty-seven years previously, from which it was not to emerge for a century and a half more, having finally been led to Lirey in 1355...”

220 No, the master models from which all Christian art derived had to be images of the face of the Mandylion, rather inelegantly termed “Saintes-Faces Byzantino-Slaves”. And off we go again, although this time, Vignon is much more selective, describing only three before focussing primarily on the Holy Face of Laon, the master of the mastercopies, as it were.

Unfortunately, the “Holy Faces” still extant are all of quite a late date, and must be copies of copies, so it will be not be surprising if they do not show the precise details of the Shroud. Their value, says Vignon, lies in their direct imitation of the face of the Shroud, and their overall appearance, with no neck or shoulders, like the Shroud, and the face framed by long tresses of hair.

Vignon begins with an icon he finds illustrated in André Grabar’s 1931 work, *La*
230 *Sainte-Face de Laon, le Mandylion dans l’Art orthodoxe*, which is sufficiently rarely reproduced for me to have to use the reproduction in Vignon’s own book, although the Monastery in which it is apparently kept, the Andronikov Monastery in Moscow, is well known. [Fig. 15]

On the forehead, this somewhat heavy model highlights, at the same time, both a supranasal square quite similar [to others we have met before], a lowered version of the transverse shadow, as we have also seen before in a whole series of works, and strongly emphasised frontal arches. The bar of

240 *the capital 'T' [across the eyebrows] is also emphasised, thick and black. The ridge of the nose includes the two constrictions which top and tail the swelling in the middle, also derived from the Shroud. From the shading of the right cheek, turned slightly too much, a diagonal stripe (a little faint in my illustration) rises: it is inspired by a similar one in the Codex Gertrudianus, derived from the 'hook shadow' we have seen before, itself a version of a stain quite clearly visible on the death-mask itself. Between this rising band and the right moustache, under the corners of the mouth, and at the top of the chin, the usual white patches are irreproachably bright. Near the left ear, the shape of the cheek bears witness to the shadows we have seen in various other works, all following the marks on the Shroud, and as for the hair, the rounded, sausage-like tresses remind us that, on the*

250 *Shroud, the line is solid and relatively constant in thickness. The right one curls inwards at the bottom, as it should: the left one certainly shouldn't, but has been drawn this way for symmetry. In short, although the shape of the mould into which this wax is poured is rather inferior, the Holy Face of St Andronik is the most faithful to the Shroud of any of those shown by Mr. Grabar: the icon of Laon excepted.*

After finding traces of the Shroud in a couple of other Mandyliions, Vignon gets his teeth into the Icon of Laon, which he has had the opportunity of studying first-hand.

260 *Painted in greenish-brown tints, fading though half-tones to a few places of white, overall the icon is dark. Why should it contrast this dark and light so starkly? Because, in my opinion, the painter was copying the*

death-mask imprinted on the Shroud: in a darker tone than the cloth it appears on. [...]

But was the painter really working in front of the Shroud?

Considering the date, he could have been. Grabar gives us a history of the icon, suggesting that this Holy Face could have been painted while the Shroud was kept briefly in Sainte-Marie-des-Blachernes, between 1201, before when it was in the imperial chapel of Sainte-Marie-du-Phare, and 1204, and the sack of the city by Crusaders. Painted by a Slav, as evidenced by the perfect accuracy of the inscription, the image may have been made in Byzantium itself. In 1249, it was in Rome, from where the pontifical chaplain Jacques Pantaleon of Troyes, - the former archdeacon of the cathedral of Laon who would become Pope in 1260 under the name of Urban IV, - sent it to his sister, the Abbess of the Convent of Montreuil-les-Dames, not far from Laon.

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“But we must now ask if what was possible from the historical point of view actually took place. Must the painter have seen the Shroud and been directly influenced by it?

It will not be enough just to examine the forehead. There is, it is true, an emphasised vertical furrow, first seen rather strangely depicted in the altar panel of Meliore Toscano, a rather unanatomical gutter, attempting to interpret the shadowy centre line visible on the Shroud. But it is insufficiently well developed to the sides for us to believe that he copied it directly. [...] And as for the way he had to remove the sides of

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the supranasal squares to accentuate the depth of the furrow, this is a clear deviation from the Shroud.

But we will change our mind.

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I begin with the dark curves under the eyes of the Holy Face. The care that the artist has taken to model them underlines the difference he has observed between that of the right and the left, expressed so subtly that he must have actually observed the originals on the Shroud. So what he thought he observed as the pouch under the left eye (actually the bottom of the eyelid but that's not important here) very quickly gives way to a broad area of white space like that on the Shroud, [...]. while the curve under the right eye bends sharply horizontal, and then extends out to the side a little with its lower edge bordered by a narrow white strip which the painter has indicated by two little dabs of white. [...]

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And so he goes on. The cheeks are not exactly like the Shroud, because the artist was trying to remove all traces of the brutality Christ has suffered, and the nose is a little less emphasised, in order to accentuate some of the tiny details on the Shroud. The mouth is clearly curtailed by the descending curves of the moustaches, as on the Shroud, and although the dark area beneath the mouth is far too big, this was probably deliberate in order better to separate the bright area of the top of the chin from the bright lower lip. And this area, as in several other examples, has well defined steeply curved sides, and a vertical strip in the middle like the top of a dimple.

On the basis of all these details, the accurate ones of which are, according to Vignon derived from the Shroud while the inaccurate ones are deliberate omissions, his conclusion is clear.

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In short, the painter of this Holy Face saw the Shroud, in Byzantium, very shortly before the looting of the city by the Crusaders terminated the eastern history of the relic. The icon of Laon is, in this respect, the last of the works from which we can learn that the cloth of Lirey - the present Shroud - and the Sindon of the emperors are one and the same.

But in this respect we know more: a whole line of mosaics, paintings and miniatures is there to affirm that the Byzantine cloth existed, long before the year 1204. According to our iconography, it already existed in the fifth century. It existed when the so-called Hannan of the "Doctrine of Addai, the Apostle" painted, directly from it, the Image of Edessa. It existed as copies of the Image were dispersed, shortly after the year 458, from which were derived many of the apostles processing around Christ in the dome of the Baptistery of Neon in Ravenna.

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And so we conclude our rather hasty tour of Paul Vignon's ideas about the heritage of the Shroud of Turin. For him, some anatomical traits which to anybody glancing at portraits of almost anybody at all, appear quite normal, are unequivocal evidence, where they are depicted in Byzantine Art, of an origin in the Shroud. And where they don't, they are evidence of deliberate or accidental omission. He concentrates particularly on differences in patterns of moustaches and beards, common to men with facial hair, to creases at the top of the nose, common to old men generally, and to shades of difference in the forehead and cheeks, common to everybody.

It must have been obvious to Edward Wuenschel that this overenthusiastic scatter-gun catholicism of iconographical derivation is too general to be at all meaningful, which is perhaps why he makes almost no mention of it in his own, Vignon-inspired, book, *Self-Portrait of Christ*. His list includes the absence of neck and shoulders, which we have seen for that Vignon applies only to copies of the Image of Edessa; and more peculiarly the absence of ears, although almost none of Vignon's examples omit ears, he actually taking some pains to account for their presence rather than their absence. Significantly, although he does not specifically deny it, Wuenschel carefully omits Vignon's application of his observations to the whole of Byzantine art. He also makes a couple of somewhat contradictory statements, suggesting that his own view was less than sufficiently critical.

There is no single art work in which all these peculiarities of the imprint of the face are to be seen together. Different details appear in different works, some more frequently than others. Many of these works were not derived from the Shroud, but indirectly through an earlier copy. Some of them are particularly notable for the minute exactness with which they reproduce some of the anomalies of the Shroud - an exactness which would have been impossible unless the artists had the imprint of the face before their eyes.

This is carrying Vignon's idea further than it will really stretch. Vignon himself only admits of the Holy Face of Laon as being directly copied from the Shroud, and even then finds himself explaining away some of its discrepancies. Almost every other example, he believes, is derived either from a copy, or a copy of a copy, more or less distorted. There are no images which can unequivocally be declared to have been derived from direct observation.

Nevertheless, a myth has been increasingly perpetuated, based on a rather redacted translation rather than actual reference to Vignon, that he thought Byzantine artists must have been copying more or less directly from the Shroud, and a few extra marks have been added to the canon which he didn't mention, such as the supranasal Vs, "an enlarged left nostril", "heavily accented, owlsh eyes", and "two loose strands of hair falling from the apex of the forehead". All these would have been news to Vignon, although no doubt he would have been delighted to add them to his list. We note that the enlarged left nostril, like the "raised right eyebrow" could occur on either side of the face, conveniently being explained by differing interpretations of the imprint on the Shroud. Vignon never notices this, invariably referring to left and right as they are to the observer, not to the image.

More recently, there has been a suggestion that the "two [or three] loose strands of hair" must refer to the epsilon blood-mark, which is a wildly unjustified guess. Finally, "the transverse line across the throat", which is often assumed to account for a double line describing the top of a tunic, especially on coins, is attributable to a crease in the Shroud which was clearly not present in Secondo Pia's 1896 photograph, and only arrived on the Shroud between his photo and that of Giuseppe Enrie, thirty-five years later. [Fig. 17]

Hugh Farey - The Medieval Shroud

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