

The Holy Shroud and the Sudarium of Oviedo, between legend, science and faith: what do we know?

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By [Riccardo Petroni](#) - April 19, 2020

The Gospels tell us: "Joseph (of Arimathea), taking the body of Jesus, **wrapped him in a white sheet and placed him in his new tomb.** On the day after the Sabbath, Mary of Magdala went to the tomb early in the morning, when it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been overturned by the tomb. She ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved and said to them: **they took the Lord away from the tomb and we do not know where they took him.** Then Simon Peter went out with the other disciple, and they went to the sepulcher. Simon Peter entered the sepulcher and saw the bandages on the ground and the shroud, which had been placed on his head, not on the ground with the bandages, but folded in a separate corner."

And here we are **on Saturday 11 April 2020, about 1,990 years after** the events described above. **One billion people participated in the extraordinary online exhibition of the "Holy Shroud" in Turin.** In front of that exposed cloth, the Archbishop of that city, **Monsignor Cesare Nosiglia**, made the following invocation: "Free us from the epidemic that is affecting us, so that we can return calmly to our usual occupations and praise you and thank you with a renewed heart. We trust in you and raise our plea to you." The **Holy Shroud was exhibited normally every 25 years** (since 1578), but in recent times ostensions have been more frequent: **in 2000, in 2010, in 2013 (on television), in 2015 and in recent days (on television).** I personally attended the 2000 and 2010 exhibitions in Turin.

But what does Shroud mean and what is it? **The word "Shroud" derives from the Greek "sindôn" and indicates a linen cloth, which the Jews used to wrap the corpses before burying them.** Here the Shroud is a funerary sheet of a rough linen fabric, irregular in the yarn, **whose dimensions are 442 cm in length, 113 cm in width and 0.34 mm in thickness.** It bears the imprint of **a man of about thirty years, about 1.78 tall with a beard and long hair, with Middle Eastern somatic features.** Analyzing the body of the man of the Shroud, **the signs of a terrible scourging are evident.** The forehead, head and neck are **marked by a crown of thorns.** Then two large bruises with bruises appear, caused by the "patibulum," that is, **by the beam of the cross that the condemned carried tied to their arms.** The man of the Shroud was crucified with **nails on the wrists.** **The feet are also pierced.** There are numerous traces of blood and a **large cut wound on the side.** Elements, those mentioned above, which **perfectly match the description that the Gospels make of the crucifixion of Jesus.**

But then, is the Holy Shroud really that white sheet that was placed on the dead body of Jesus, of which the Gospels speak to us? I would start by asking myself this question: how did the Holy Shroud come to us? Well: in about **1353** the knight Geoffrey of Charny in Lirey in France declared to be in possession of the "sacred sheet", the one in which Jesus had been wrapped after the deposition (there is no certain information relating to previous periods). In 1453 Margherita, descendant of Geoffrey, sold the Shroud to the Dukes of Savoy, who placed it in Chambéry, France. In 1532 a fire struck the sheet (another fire occurred in 1997), which fortunately, however, was folded up inside a display case. Following this, the Shroud still appears crossed by numerous burn marks, arranged symmetrically on the two sides of the sheet. The front image, as a whole, however, was not damaged. In 1578 the Shroud was brought to Turin, where the Savoys had moved the capital, where it is still located today. In 1983 Umberto II of Savoy, on his deathbed, left it as an inheritance to the Pope, who delegated its custody to the Archbishop of Turin.

In 1898 it was photographed with the equipment of the time and it was discovered, developing the plate, that the image impressed on the cloth had the characteristics of a photographic negative. By computerized analysis, the anatomical correspondence of the two images, frontal and dorsal, has been verified today. So that of the Shroud is a **"three-dimensional" image**, a circumstance confirmed by modern NASA equipment. **The on blood tests done in 1978 revealed the presence of hemoglobin and other human blood group AB specific substances.**

The examination carried out **with the "Carbon 14" technique, performed in 1988 by the laboratories of Oxford, Tucson and Zurich**, led to a dating that **could be placed between 1295 AD and 1360 AD**. This would highlight that it is an object not dating back to the time of Jesus. However, it is argued, again in the scientific field, that **the fire of 1532 may have increased the amount of carbon existing** in the Shroud closed in the display case, and therefore moved forward the its dating (less carbon is present and older is a find, and vice versa). To date the Shroud **a chemical method** was also used based on the present measurement of vanillin (vanilla seeds), an examination that **places it between 1000 BC and 700 AD.**, therefore in a period, which although very large, would be compatible with the Gospel events, which occurred in the first century AD The **Swiss criminologist Max Frei Sulzer** also examined the Holy Shroud and identified **pollen of various plant species in the fabric in Palestine and Asia Minor at the time of Jesus**, a thesis which however was **strongly contested after his death** .

Scientifically there is absolutely no explanation of how that image was formed. These are the hypotheses formulated:

- 1) Electric discharges: it is not possible to explain how the necessary electric field would have been generated.
- 2) Chemical reactions: it is considered impossible to produce a clear and detailed image such as that of the Shroud with chemical reactions.
- 3) Superficial burning with a heated bas-relief: the tests carried out revealed figures with physical and microscopic characteristics extremely different from those of the Shroud.
- 4) Painting: the tests excluded the presence of sufficient pigments.
- 5) Photography: the first experiments are from the 19th century and there are no traces of photosensitive substances.

6) Irradiation: explosion of protons or neutrons that would have imprinted the image. Apart from the fact that there is no explanation as to what this radiation would have produced 2,000 years ago, to date it is not possible to emit a similar power in the laboratory, with spaces as limited as that of the sepulcher of Jesus. Holy Shroud has been written about everything and the opposite of everything.

The Catholic Church does not officially express itself on the authenticity of the Holy Shroud, leaving science to verify it. But as a consequence of the analyses made so far, **the Holy Shroud is not defined** (and cannot be defined) as a "relic" (from "reliquiae"), which means "surplus or remnant of a dead person". To date, therefore, the "cult of the Holy Shroud" is authorized exclusively as an "icon **of the passion of Jesus,**" of an image bearing a sacred subject. But the Gospels tell us that in the tomb there was also a **"shroud that had been placed on his head"**. And they specify that "it was not on the ground with bandages, but folded in a separate corner".

Did they refer to the Sudarium of Oviedo? It is called so because it has been located in the Cathedral of Oviedo in northern Spain since 718. According to ancient documents, the shroud **was kept in Jerusalem until 614, then transported to Toledo in Spain** (through North Africa), then to Monsagro and finally from 718 to Oviedo. **It is a smaller cloth than the Shroud (about 84x53 cm),** which has no image, **but only bloodstains spilling from the nose and mouth.** It is believed to have been placed on the head of Jesus during the deposition from the cross and then removed before wrapping the body in the Shroud. The **blood group corresponds to that of the Shroud (group AB)** and a comparative analysis of DNA revealed quite similar profiles. **In 120 points there would be a coincidence between the arrangement of the spots on the Shroud and those on the face and neck of the image of the Shroud.**

The **texture of the cloth with "Z" twisting and the size of the fibers** are completely analogous. The pollens present on the fabric confirm the origin from Jerusalem. **The carbon 14 test, however, dates to around 680 AD.** The shroud is exposed to veneration three times a year. Returning to the Holy Shroud, I would like to conclude this discussion by saying that scientists believe, however, that the only hypothesis relating to the formation of the indelible and three-dimensional figure impressed in the Holy Shroud, even though it is currently not reproducible in the laboratory, is the "nuclear" explosion of the body that was inside, with the consequent sudden transition from the material state to the state of "spirit" and "light", of "energy". Hypothesis that leads us immediately and incredibly right to the "resurrection" of Jesus.

Consequently, it is to be believed that it will not be "science" that will reveal the mystery of that sheet, but the "faith or otherwise" of those who stand in front of it.