

The relationship of the Eastern Mandylion with the Western Veronica

The tradition of the imprinting of Christ's face onto a linen cloth is better known in the West from the legend of Veronica and her cloth (sometimes called the Vernicle). This story too is apocryphal (it is not in the canonical Gospels) and late (the story of the imprinting of Christ's face onto the cloth for a woman on his way to Calvary dates from the thirteenth century). By way of introduction, the incorrect interpretation of the name Veronica as "vera icona" is surprisingly widespread¹; the name Veronica is in fact nothing more than the Latin transcription of the Greek name Βερενίκη, a dialectical form derived from Φερενίκη, i.e. "the bearer of victory".

It has been argued that the story of Veronica and her cloth is a development of the Abgar legend². This, however, is a misinterpretation of the evidence. The stories are radically different. Veronica was a woman whom Jesus encountered on the way to Calvary, wiped his face and saw that an image of his face had been imprinted onto the cloth (hence these images often, but by no means always, show the crown of thorns and bloodstains)³; while Abgar was a man, a king, who never met Jesus. Christ imprinted his face onto a cloth just before the passion (this is so even if the Gethsemane version is accepted). In depictions of the Veronica it is almost always Veronica herself who is holding the cloth, whereas Abgar is rarely shown holding the Mandylion. There are numerous depictions of the Image of Edessa held up by two angels, one on either side of

¹ E.g. Herbert Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 11; Etelvina Fernández González, "Del santo Mandilyon a la Verónica: sobre la vera icona de Cristo en la edad media", in *Imágenes y promotores en el arte medieval*, edited by María Luisa Melero (Barcelona: Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2001), in the title of the article and again on page 360; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'Image* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1990), 227; and Gerhard Wolf, "From Mandylion to Veronica", in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation, Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996*, edited by Herbert Kessler and Gerhard Wolf (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1998), 156. Gervase of Tilbury is unique in attributing the meaning of the name to the fact that the woman walked doubled up, *Otia Imperialia* III:25, ed. Banks and Binns, 604: "... propter diutinam passionem fluxus curva indecens; unde a varice, poplitis vena incurvata, Varonica (quia incurvata) docta est" ("as a result of her prolonged suffering from the haemorrhage she walked doubled up, and so she was called Veronica ['the bent one'], from *varix*, the name of the bent vein in the knee"). T.M. de Blasio, *Veronica, Il Mistero del Volto* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2000), 16, is right in stating that the explanation with "vera icona" is an "ingenua etimologia popolare".

² Cf. Wolf, "From Mandylion", 153-180, and Fernández González, "Del santo Mandilyon", 353-371.

³ Although in the *Legenda Aurea*, in the text where Veronica's cloth heals the emperor Tiberius, the origin of the image is not specified anywhere; it is just said that Jesus imprinted his image onto the cloth. Cf. Maggioni, ed., *Legenda Aurea*, vol. 1, 398.

the cloth; a well-known Veronica that is also held up by two angels, just like the Mandyllion, is the Face of Christ by Albert Duhrer, dating from 1513. In the end, we could argue that all that the two images have in common is a possible desire to explain the existence of a piece of linen cloth with an image of Christ imprinted thereon.

It is also true that the two images were often confused in both literature and art. The nineteenth-century Mandyllion at the Romanian skete of the Prodromos on Mount Athos shows the face of Christ with the crown of thorns, although no bloodstains. A fifteenth-century Spanish manuscript of the Life of St Alexis describes the image in Edessa as follows:

estava la ymagen de Nuestro Señor Jhesu Christo que es dicha Verónica

there was the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ called the Veronica

MS *Parisinus BN français* 2810 (15th c.), f. 230^v, also states that the Lord sent the Veronica to King Abgar. Confusing the two images, however, is not equivalent to one developing from the other. The Abgar legend and the Image of Edessa survived in the West, albeit in a limited way, at the same time as the Veronica story was growing in popularity, while Veronica, although accepted as a saint in the Orthodox Church, is never related to the Mandyllion. The fact that in some versions of the Veronica legend she is portrayed as a princess of Edessa⁴ is a further example of the confusion between the two, but does not show that the western version had its roots in the eastern.

As for art, the vast majority of pictorial depictions of the Mandyllion are to be found in churches, whereas the majority of Veronicas are paintings, nowadays in art galleries. As for the literature, there is surprisingly much more written in the west concerning the Mandyllion than there is about the Veronica; scholarly books are surprisingly scarce in this field, and one of the few devoted specifically to the Veronica seems to have been written with the sole purpose of provocation⁵.

⁴ Cf. L. C. Casartelli, "The Origin of the Church of Edessa", *The Dublin Review* 104 (1889), 348.

⁵ Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). A couple of quotations will suffice to prove the point; 7-8: "The fifteenth-century double portraits of Veronica and Christ show a human pair but evoke a cosmic couple, with the woman-cloth functioning as the womb and earth, and Jesus' head as the sun, penis, child"; 90-91: "While King Abgar and Jesus communicated with each other by means of correspondence – language – the Hemorrhissa and Christ came into contact by touching each other. An official relation between two public men was thus replaced with a private affair, intimate and even embarrassing – a love story of sorts; action moved from center to backstage, and a straightforward

Just as with the possible presence of blood on the Image of Edessa discussed above (the alternative origin of the Image during the sweating of blood in Gethsemane, the relationship of the Image to the passion and burial shroud of Christ), Veronica's cloth, when it does contain bloodstains, is related to the theological and devotional aspect of the blood of Christ. Blood is mentioned around four hundred times in the Old Testament and a hundred in the New. This would appear to endow the concept with great importance, and yet over half the mentions in the Old Testament and over a quarter in the New are related to death by violence, and so have absolutely nothing to do with devotion or salvation⁶.

This said, at the same time blood is equated with life in Genesis 9:4-6 and Leviticus 17:11, and the expression "blood of Christ" became synonymous with the sacrifice on the cross, to such an extent that it is often said Christians are saved by or through the blood of Christ. In the Apocalypse, the saints wash their robes white in the blood of the Lamb (7:14). The act of communion, with or without transubstantiation, is centred on the body and blood of Christ. Devotion to the blood of Christ has been present in the church from the first century; Veronica's cloth forms a significant part of this devotion. It is related not to any metaphorical significance of the blood of Christ, but rather for the believer it contained the actual, real, physical blood of Christ shed during the passion.

The Veronica is much more directly linked to blood than the Image of Edessa ever was, despite the alternative version in some texts and the only version in others linking the origins of the Mandylion to the sweating of blood in Gethsemane. This is so to such an extent that in the *Cura Sanitatis Tiberii*, most probably dating from the early seventh century, Veronica the woman is identified with the Haemorrhöissa, the woman with an issue of blood who was cured by Jesus (cf. Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48). The Veronica is rarely depicted in churches, limited mainly to works of art in galleries, whereas the Image is found almost exclusively in iconographic patterns in

account about a sick king, a famous healer and messengers travelling between Syria and Palestine turned into an erotic reverie". Further on in the book (126), we are told that Christ and Veronica hold the napkin like a couple walking their child. The book also contains obvious errors; the etymology of Veronica is once again given as "vera icon" (8), and the "menaeon" (sic) is confused with the Synaxarion (57). A more reasonable account of Veronica and the cloth can be found in Emanuela Fogliadini, *Il Volto di Cristo* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2011), 163-189. For the origin and development of the legend see Rémi Gounelle, "Les Origines Littéraires de la Légende de Véronique et de la Sainte Face: La *Cura Sanitatis Tiberii* et la *Vindicta Salvatoris*", in *Sacre Impronte e Oggetti "Non Fatti da Mano d'Uomo" nelle Religioni: Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Torino 18-20 maggio 2010*, edited by Adele Monaci Castagno (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2011), 231-251.

⁶ Cf. Leon Morris, "Blood", in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 93: "In the Bible, therefore, blood normally points to the undergoing of death rather than to the release of life".

churches. Pilgrims flocked to Rome to see the Veronica and were granted indulgences for their pains⁷, while the Image stood for power and protection and took us back to the prototype, the actual face of Christ. There are no recorded pilgrimages to see the Image (the few times it is mentioned by western visitors to Constantinople it forms part of long lists of relics, and these visits could hardly be classified as pilgrimages).

In conclusion, therefore, it would seem that the details of the Veronica and Abgar legends are too different for one to have developed from the other. To reinforce this point, the Abgar legend continued to be known in the West to the same limited extent even after the full development of the Veronica story. As stated above, all that the two icons have in common is the attempt to justify the existence of an image of Christ on cloth, sometimes with bloodstains, whose origin could only be explained by resorting to the miraculous.

⁷ Cf. Fogliadini, *Il Volto*, 189, where it said that the Veronica has an “atteggiamento fortemente emotivo, estetico appunto, che accompagnerà la pur straordinaria devozione che caratterizzerà in Occidente non solo il Volto di Cristo ‘della Veronica’, ma anche quello dei diversi Santi Volti, di origine orientale, che seppero esercitare sul mondo latino una viva attrazione”.