

The Hiram Key:

Pharaohs, Freemasons and the Discovery of the Secret Scrolls of Jesus, London, Century 1996

By Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas

The Turin Shroud is only part of Knight and Lomas's story, but their reconstruction of how its image was created must surely rival the Picknett and Prince version for attention-grabbing inventiveness. Their linking of the Knights Templar with the present day Freemasons has been well-worn, and remains far from persuasive. But where the Turin Shroud comes into Knight and Lomas's story is with the quite definitely historical torturing of the Templars' Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, following his arrest, along with all other Templars in France, on 13 October 1307.

Although historically there is little if any record of exactly how de Molay was tortured, Lomas and Knight have no doubt. Very shortly after his arrest France's Grand Inquisitor Guillaume Imbert put him through a blow-by-blow re-enactment of Jesus's crucifixion. First he was scourged. Then a crown of thorns was thrust on his head. Then nails were hammered into his wrists and feet, pinning him to 'a roughly assembled cross', on which he was hung in agony for several hours. Brought down alive, a knife was then thrust into his side 'not deep enough to cause life-threatening damage but sufficient to complete the deliberate re-enactment of the suffering of the 'son of God'.

Finally the Grand Inquisitor apparently thought of 'one more amusing twist' to this scenario. In Knight and Lomas's own words:

He [Guillaume Imbert] has de Molay placed on the very burial shroud that Molay used to mock the Messiah. As the torturers laid him face upwards on the cloth and the excess section is lifted over his head to cover the front of his body, Imbert cannot resist a final quotation from the story of the Passion: 'And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth.' Patting the shroud around the desperately damaged body, Imbert suggests that the barely conscious man might care to raise himself, if he feels as important as the true Christ.

As Knight and Lomas go on:

The features of de Molay's body were [then] etched onto the cloth by the lactic acid from the free-flowing blood, reacting with the frankincense used as a whitening agent, which was rich in calcium carbonate.

Yes, you have now guessed it, this is really how the Turin Shroud was created. Its image is neither of Jesus, nor of Leonardo da Vinci, but of Jacques de Molay - the Templar Grand Master, who died alongside the Templar Geoffrey de Charney in 1314. According to Knight and Lomas, De Molay 'was revived from his crucifixion (necessary because historically he was publicly burnt at the stake with Geoffrey de Charney), and then the image-bearing cloth that he had so involuntarily created:

... travelled ... to the home of Geoffrey de Charney, where it was washed, folded up, and placed in a drawer. Exactly fifty years later, in 1357, this fourteen-foot-long piece of linen was taken out of store and put on public display in Livey [sic]

Of course there is not a scrap of hard evidence to support all this, but just in case of such doubts Knight and Lomas provide a pictorial 'clincher'. In their words:

The long nose, the hair beyond shoulder-length with a centre parting, the full beard that forked at its base, and the fit-looking six-foot frame all perfectly match the known image of the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar.

What 'known image'? Knight and Lomas urge their readers to look at their fig 20 where sure enough there is a line drawing identified as Jacques de Molay which indeed bears a good passing resemblance to the face on the Turin Shroud, as below:

But where did this line drawing of de Molay's 'known image' come from? If you check in the book's list of photographic sources, this is quoted as simply from the authors' own collection. Although I stand to be corrected, my impression is that it is merely a nineteenth or early twentieth century artist's entirely imaginary version of what De Molay might have looked like, probably from some illustrated history book.

For certainly there is no known definitive image of Jacques de Molay, the closest to this being a merely near-contemporary depiction of his burning at the stake, with Geoffrey de Charney, from the British Museum's Royal manuscript 20 C VII (see above). And whichever of the two stake victims in this may be intended as De Molay - and we can merely guess that it is the bearded one - it is not only quite different from the Knight and Lomas version, there is also absolutely no certainty that the artist had any direct knowledge of De Molay's one-time appearance.

In short, and exactly as in case of the Picknett and Prince book, Knight and Lomas have grabbed at an idea sufficiently attention-getting to whet the interest of a publisher. And then they have been totally unconcerned about the true value of their evidence to back this up.

The Shroud surely deserves better than it has received from any of the recent run of two-authored books purporting to explain its mystery, Knight and Lomas's being merely the latest from a very unworthy stable...