

DOES THE LETTER OF ALEXIUS V TO INNOCENT III REALLY EXIST?

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In 2010, at the International Workshop on the scientific Approach to Acheiropoietos Images (ENEA Frascati, Italy, 4-6 May 2010), Professor Daniel Scavone summarized the three documents allowing us to know that the Shroud was in Athens in 1205:

- A letter dated 1 August 1205, sent to Pope Innocent III by Theodore Ange Comnene, brother of Michael, despot of Epirus; in this letter it is written: "the holy Shroud in Athens", and Theodore hopes for the Pope's intervention for the restitution of the relic.
- A report by Nicholas of Otranto, who writes that he had seen, together with Benedict of Santa Susanna, the burial linens "with our own eyes".
- Another document, "a letter reputedly from the Byzantine emperor Alexius V Mourtzouphlus to Pope Innocent III after his flight from Constantinople in April 1204", "published by Antoine Legrand in 1982".

The author of the present paper had been made aware of the communication of Daniel Scavone by Cesar Barta, who asked him for his opinion on the letter of Alexius V. The author indeed was a friend of Antoine Legrand, with whom he worked during long years from 1978 to his death in 2002. So, he can speak as a direct witness in this problem, and this letter of Alexius V at once seemed to him extremely suspicious, for numerous reasons.

First, if we study the bibliography cited in the papers of Daniel Scavone, the letter of Alexius V is only mentioned in the article of Antoine Legrand (D. Scavone, Proceedings of ENEA Frascati Workshop, "*Documenting the Shroud's missing years*", ref 17: A. Legrand, "*Du nouveau pour le Suaire de Turin: une lettre de l'Empereur Alexis V*", *Notre Histoire*, Librairie Taillandier, Paris, décembre 1982). Moreover, we must observe that this reference is erroneous, for this article was not published in *Notre Histoire*, which did not yet exist in 1982, but in *Historia*, actually in December 1982 (1). Another author, Daniel Castille, speaks also of a letter from Alexius V to Innocent III (2)..., but refers to the same article by Antoine Legrand in *Historia*.

After the communication of Pasquale Rinaldi, who discovered the letter of Theodore Ange, at the congress of sindonology in Bologna (1981, 27-29 November), Antoine Legrand asked the author to search for a possible filiation between Othon de la Roche and Jeanne de Vergy,

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wife of Geoffroy de Charny. This search was totally successful and the author presented his results at the Congress of sindonology of Rome in 1993 (3).

By reading the article in *Historia*, it is easy to verify that Antoine Legrand describes, for the discovery of the “letter of Alexius V”, the exact circumstances of Theodore Ange's letter: the same finder and the same site of discovery.

Moreover, striking analogies exist between Legrand's quotations and Theodore Ange's letter:

- “Crusaders have taken gold and treasures of the Empire. Of them I make my mourning” (*Historia*) – “They took the treasures of gold, silver and ivory and they were divided ... to the looters are thus given up gold and silver”. (*Theodore Ange letter*).
- “Only you, Peter his vicar, is capable of restoring it to me” (*Historia*) – “Thanks to your authority, the return cannot fail ... It is Peter's justice for which my brother and Lord Michael wait” (*Theodore Ange letter*).

On the contrary, the following does not exist in Theodore Ange's letter: “I had to go into exile myself *here in Trebizond*”, present in Legrand's quotation, for a very good reason: Theodore Ange's letter is written from Rome. More particularly, “*Otho de la Roche* brought me *in Blachernes* the sydoine of our Lord”, names carefully omitted by Theodore in his letter, because he could not directly attack one so great as Otho de la Roche.

Now, in the only article which Antoine Legrand ever wrote in *Notre Histoire*, this time in 1985 (4), Alexius V's letter disappears for the benefit of Theodore Ange's only letter. Antoine Legrand has meanwhile rectified his first article. Alexius V's letter and Theodore Ange's one (and if the first one existed, Father Rinaldi would obviously have stated it in Bologna) would thus be only the same document. The only possible explanation is thus an erroneous attribution at first, by Antoine Legrand, of the letter to Alexius V. Theodore Ange's signature is nevertheless perfectly explicit in his letter. Besides the quotation of *Historia* being unreliable, because Legrand himself admits this by writing: “I regrettably *may not supply a faithful translation* with it. However *I do not believe I have betrayed the spirit* of this important document *so by summarizing it*”. All this is surprising on behalf of this spirit that was so rigorous, such a brilliant observer and an outstanding investigator! A document of this importance deserved a complete translation! We have the impression that the information which Antoine Legrand has does not result from the physical ownership of the text. The

edition of the Acts of the congress of Bologna was only published in 1983 (5). It is the original source of this matter and does not mention any letter of Alexius but only the letter of Theodore. Legrand's mistake is maybe the result of the uncountable - and very long, those who knew him remember it - phone conversations which he had with very numerous correspondents. Did he on this occasion, without yet having the written text, confuse the two characters? According to us, this hypothesis is extremely plausible.

In any case, at the time of the congress of Rome in 1993 (where Antoine Legrand was not present), the ambiguity disappears. Legrand has obviously had the text of Theodore Ange's letter for a long time (cf. the article of *Notre Histoire*), and with the aid of the author of the present article, he had knowledge of the text of his future communication in Rome, without breathing a word of "Alexius's letter".

Anyway, the History absolutely opposes that Alexius V is the author of the letter such as it is presented in the article in *Historia*. Dethroned by the irruption of the Crusaders in Constantinople, he had left the Boucoleon at night, and, having gone four days' journey from Constantinople, he had to take refuge in Thrace, thus in the European part of the Empire, with his father-in-law Alexius III, in Mosynople, who blinded him. Abandoned by all, *he prepared to pass into Asia* when he was arrested by the Franks and led in front of Baldwin I who judged him guilty of the murder of Alexius IV. Sentenced to death, he was precipitated from the Theodosian column (6). Thus there was no Trebizond! Alexius V never put foot in Asia after the taking of Constantinople in 1204, and he had, as we see here, many other concerns than that of trying to get back the Shroud. Then, where does this reference to Trebizond in the article in *Historia* come from? A mystery!

The last problem: where does the initial confusion of Antoine Legrand between Alexius V and Theodore Ange come from? A possible answer is maybe in their patronyms: Theodore Ange *Doukas* Comnene and Alexius V *Doukas*. It is necessary to see Daniel Scavone on this subject: "*Besançon and other hypotheses for the missing years; the Shroud from 1200 to 1400*" (7), p.5, where we read that Theodore would have privileged "Angelos" in his signature by omitting "Doukas", so thinking of increasing the chances to see his request succeed because of Emperor Alexius IV Ange's favourable attitude to the Latins before his murder. Anyway, was it on the occasion of a conversation between Antoine Legrand and a Byzantine scholar, or of his own readings, that the confusion between the two characters was made? With no other information available, the hypothesis seems very likely.

We thus conclude that the existence of Alexius V's letter is extremely improbable, and that, subject to later discovery, it is advisable to stop referring to it.

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