

# The Mandylion and the Greek Orthodox Synaxarion

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The orthodox Greek website Icon and Light<sup>1</sup> shows an ongoing continuity and link to Constantinople and their synaxarion which is an abridged ‘lives of the saints’ shows this unbroken chain. It provides material for public worship and private prayer.

Indeed this focus and perception is very different from today’s Protestant churches in the West which do not venerate saints or icons, and the historical link through the centuries is not generally given much importance. The focus tends to be more on the gospels and epistles and how they are applied to modern day Christians. It is probably because of this viewpoint that the Mandylion and Turin Shroud are looked upon with scepticism or of no relevance and why the Eastern Orthodox Church still holds to the Abgar connection and doesn’t link it with the Turin Shroud.

In preparing his modern Greek edition of the Synaxarion of Constantinople, Saint Nikodemos the Hagionite in 1809 added the memoirs of a number of saints, most notably the New Martyrs. This is still being added to and used for public worship today. The question that may then arise is, how does this relate to the Mandylion of Edessa and the Shroud (of Turin)?

On the Icon and Light website they have a feast day for the Mandylion of Edessa and the Holy Keramion (ceramic tile) shown on the entry dated August 16<sup>th</sup> 2017. The day in August being the feast day in Constantinople. The listing starts with these words: *‘The entrance of the archeiropointon (not-made-by-hands) image of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, brought from the City of Edessa to the God-Protected Queen of Cities (Constantinople)’*.

Also under a separate heading ‘The Holy Keramion (ceramic tile) of Edessa’. The words of Saint Paisios of Mount Athos are then quoted. *“It is worth to struggle for a thousand years to see this beauty just for a moment”*. Then a commemoration is repeated for the day’s worship and prayer.

There is no mention here of the burial shroud. However this is apparent in the commemorative ancient verses. For the Mandylion: *‘Alive you wiped your face upon a cloth, a final burial cloth you wore when dead’* and for the Keramion: *‘Maker of all, my Christ, a tile once made by hand now bears your form not made by hand’*.

A version of the Abgar legend is then presented which continues:

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://iconandlight.wordpress.com/category/english/>

*'Around the time of the Passion of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, he (Abgar) wrote a letter and sent it (to Jesus) by a certain Ananias, ordering him to depict with absolute accuracy his (Jesus') height, his hair and his face and in short, his whole bodily appearance and to bring him the form of Christ, for Ananias was a skilled painter'.*

The letter Ananias took is then shown and his meeting with Jesus. It tells how he was unable to capture the image of Jesus. The narrative about Jesus then continues:

*'...for he asked to wash and while doing so was given a cloth folded in four<sup>2</sup>, and when he had washed, he wiped his most pure and divine face with it. Thus his divine form and appearance were imprinted - O the wonder! - on the cloth. This he gave to Ananias saying "go, give this back to the one who sent you".'*

He also gave him a letter which tells of his forthcoming Passion and how after the ascension one of the disciples called Thaddaios, will heal his disease and bless his city. It then tells how, Jesus at the end of the letter, *'fixed seven seals in Hebrew letters' which when translated means 'Picture of God Divine Wonder' (in Greek a play on words: Theou Thea Theion Tharma).*

The story ends with Abgar falling down and worshipping the Holy and most pure Icon of the Lord with faith and much love, and being instantly cured of his disease apart from a small patch of leprosy on his forehead. After the saving passion and assumption into heaven, the Apostle Thaddaios reached Edessa and baptised Abgar, which cleansed him from his remaining leprosy.

An account is then given regarding the Keramion. Here the Mandylion is referred to as a napkin. The account tells how Abgar placed the Mandylion in a gold frame adorned with pearls and placed it in a niche over the city gates. It then goes on to explain how it was hidden and only revealed again in 545 when Chozroes I besieged the city and was repelled due to its presence. Then about the Keramion it says *'and upon the ceramic tile closing in the niche, a copy of the icon was reproduced'*. Then it gives various legends about what happened. The main one being, that it was moved to Hierapolis and later moved to Constantinople on January 24<sup>th</sup> 967. Later it joined the Mandylion in the Pharos chapel in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and was then lost to history in 1204.

The Synaxarion then concludes with a prayer of worship of *'your most pure icon.'*

This modern Greek Orthodox view and perception of the Holy Mandylion is that there is an unbroken continuation from Edessa to Constantinople and to this very day. The

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<sup>2</sup> According to historian Ian Wilson, "A 6th century text refers to the Mandylion as a "tetradiplon"... "doubled in four". A most curious choice of word, according to Cambridge University's Professor Lampe, editor of the 'Lexicon of Patristic Greek'; in all literature it occurs only in association with the image of Edessa, being scarcely, therefore, an idle turn of phrase." Wilson, Ian (1986) *The Mysterious Shroud*, pp 113-114

day after the Mandylion arrived in Constantinople a sermon was given in Hagia Sophia by the then Archdeacon and referendarius, Gregory. He was an eyewitness to its arrival. He cites the Abgar legend in his sermon and describes the image as being formed by the 'perspiration of Death on Jesus face.' Then comes the most arresting part.

He speaks of the wound in Jesus' side and the blood and water found there. He goes on to state that... *'this (image of Christ) was imprinted only by the perspiration of the agony running down the face of the Prince of Life as a clot of blood drawn by the finger of God... and the portrait has been embellished by the drops of blood from his own side. The two things are full of instruction. The blood and the water there and here the perspiration on the figure. The realities are equal for they derive from one and the same being... teaching that the perspiration which formed the image and which made the side to bleed were of the same nature that formed the portrait'*.

This may be a rather strange description but it clearly refers to a Turin Shroud type of image. In fact it's interesting that some modern day mediaeval shroud hypotheses purport to show how perspiration created the image. Daniel C. Scavone says that Gregory in describing the Edessa cloth, divulges that it contains more than a facial image. He also says in describing the sermon "yet it's curious that Gregory did not express an iota of surprise of his unanticipated observation of the side wound on a cloth that for centuries hitherto was supposed by all to bear the face only of the Lord. He did not draw the obvious and reasonable conclusion that the blood stained Edessa Mandylion might actually be Jesus' grave cloth. In his defence it had just then arrived from Edessa and with it had come an old and revered legend that could not be easily set aside. It is not a question of blood and a miraculous image, but the perception of the people of those centuries".

Scavone makes an important point here, but is he correct in thinking Gregory would only be expecting a facial image? After all *'Alive you wiped your face upon a cloth, a final burial cloth you wore when dead'*. The early descriptions were of the form as well as the face of Jesus. Gregory is clearly speaking about the Image of Edessa (Mandylion) but his description accurately describes the Shroud of Turin.

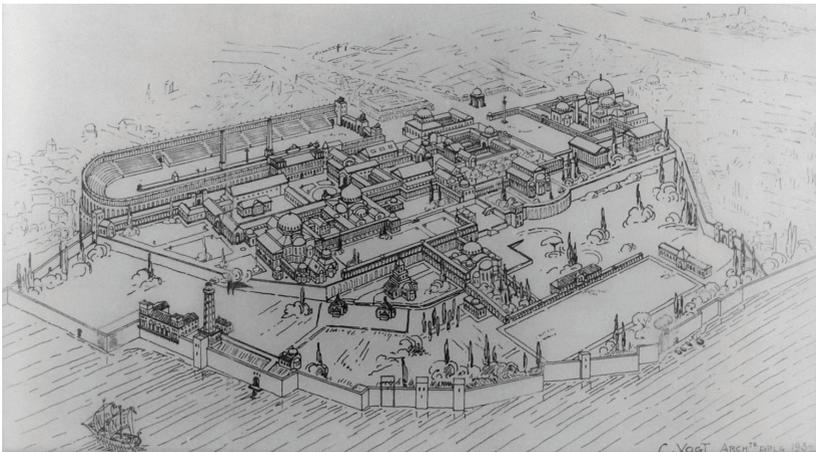
We must bear in mind that our view of the Shroud today would not be viewed in the same way by the people of Constantinople or of Edessa. The legend of Abgar obviously came from somewhere, although its early history is blurred and probably incorrect in detail. Its arrival in Edessa probably occurred at a later date than is portrayed. However the Mandylion was in Edessa and was described as a full body image. It can only be supposed that the facial image was thought to have been created by direct contact and somehow the burial cloth image miraculously appeared on the folded cloth at the same time.

There is also no mention in this Abgar legend that Thaddaios brought the cloth with him. It is strange too that all of the important relics in Constantinople had their own feast day.

The Mandylion's being August 16<sup>th</sup>. However the burial shroud which is also mentioned has no feast day, neither does any record exist of its appearance in the city. Surely a relic of such importance as our Lord's burial shroud would have had a special place and a special day.

One very clear eyewitness account and description of the burial shroud was given by Robert de Clari a crusader who was there in 1204 to describe the scene.

*“But among the rest there was also another of the ministers, which was called the Church of My Lady Saint Mary of Blachernae, within which was the shroud wherein our Lord was wrapped and every Friday that shroud did raise itself upright so that the form of our Lord could clearly be seen (for form read full body image). And no one knows - neither Greek nor Frank- what became of that shroud”.*<sup>3</sup>



*Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors, Constantinople, ca 340-1200 (reconstruction)*

The Mandylion was therefore historically recorded as being in the city from 944 to 1205 upon its capture and ransacking by crusaders. From whence it disappeared. A total of 261 years.

The question is then, were the Mandylion and the burial shroud both one and the same cloth, and was the burial shroud the cloth we know today as the Shroud of Turin? It would certainly appear from looking at only these fragments of evidence (and there are many more such as the Hungarian Pray Codex and the writings of John Mesarites amongst others), that this could probably be the case.

The Shroud remains a mystery which brings together faith, science and history.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert de Clari, *The Conquest of Constantinople* (trans. McNeal, Edgar Holmes), p. 112