

The Shroud of Turin and the Shroud of Rabat, Malta

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The Collegiate Parish Church of Rabat (Malta) is privileged indeed to possess an imitation copy of the Holy Shroud of Turin. It should consider itself even more privileged because this reproduction is a relic.

The Holy Shroud of Turin is reputed to be the Shroud in which the dead body of Christ was wrapped before He was laid in the tomb¹. Matthew specifies that the Shroud was 'new and clean'; John says that "Jesus was buried in the manner of the Jews"²; Matthew adds that Joseph's tomb was his own, and hewn in the rock³.

In a recent talk on "The Healing Mystery and the New Testament", Dr Wolfgang C. Schuler, expressed his firm opinion that the Holy Shroud was in Malta, albeit for a brief time. He said: "Let me show you a few pictures of this outstanding document, the Shroud of Turin, the burial cloth of Jesus....Later it was transferred to Edessa (today URFA, in TURKEY) a flourishing community, of that time, where it became famous as the "Mandylion" or the "Picture of Edessa". Under dramatic circumstances it came to Constantinople (Istanbul) in 944, where it mysteriously disappeared in 1204 a. Ch. French knights, of the Crusader Order of the Knights Templar, the "Poor knights of Christ of the Temple of SOLOMON", brought it to French (**France**); *on the way they must have stopped at Malta to take fresh water and food*. Today it is kept in Turin, Italy. It really is the first photograph about 1900 years before the invention of photography, because it actually is a photographic negative..."⁴

Scientists, Christian, non-Christian and unbelievers alike, by their research and findings have lately been confirming the facts held by Christians and devotees about the Turin Shroud. Pope John Paul II has recently given permission to use the carbon 14 dating test to determine how old the Shroud is⁵. On this Shroud, one can easily see imprinted the figure of a Man who has suffered atrociously before He died. All the details described by the Evangelists about the Crucifixion and Passion of Christ can be traced on the Shroud; the scourging on the back and the chest of the Man, the crowning with thorns, the piercing of His side with a lance, the slap on the face etc...⁶

The Catholic world has always shown eagerness to obtain reproductions of the Shroud of Turin. Whenever such a reproduction was obtained the Shroud was held in veneration by the faithful. We find such reproductions in several countries: there is one in Belgium and another in Argentina; two in France and two others in Portugal; thirteen in Spain and nineteen in Italy, besides the original one in Turin⁷.

¹ Mt 27:59; Mk 15:46; Lk 23:53; Jn 19:40

² Jn 19:40; also The Turin Shroud, Ian Wilson, pg 39

³ Mt 27:60

⁴ Talk given at the Corinthia Hotel in 1996. Ms copy pg24

⁵ II-Hajja; 8-10-86 p1. Also Catholic Herald, 10 October 1986

⁶ Cf The Turin Shroud op,cit. Ch IV: The Shroud and N.T. Archaeology, esp. Pp35 to 37; La Sindone Ultimo Reporter, by JL Carreno Etxeanda SDB p.50-78; Alla Ricerca dell' Uomo della Sindone, by Baima-Ballone, pg 10

⁷ Shroud Spectrum International, No12 and 13; Don Luigi Fossati SDB.

One of these reproductions held in Spain interests us specially. It was obtained through the good offices of a Grand Prior of the Knights of Malta. Fr Domenico Leone writes:

“Francesco Lucas Bueno, Bishop of Malta and Grand Master of the Religion of St John⁸ in the year 1650, obtained a copy (of the Shroud of Turin) from the Royal Savoy family. On October 8, 1652 he sent the Shroud to Saragossa to the Lord Receiver of St John, who in turn entrusted it to Antonio Bueno and Andres Martinez of Compillo de Aragon. These (Bueno and Martinez) gave it to the people of Campillo, this relic is kept over the altar in a chapel constructed for the purpose and is guarded by two strong doors in gold”⁹.

Lucas Bueno had been the Grand Prior of the Knights of Malta from 1650 till 1663 when Bishop Michael Balaguer (1635-1663) died; Bueno was chosen to succeed him; his appointment came from Rome in February 1664¹⁰. However he refused the appointment as “he would not accept the imposition of a heavy pension on the episcopate in favour of the Sicilian Crown”¹¹. Hence the Diocese of Malta remained without an effective Bishop for three years. Bueno was Bishop from 1666 to 1668.

There is in Rabat (Malta) a large reproduction of the Turin Shroud. It measures 293.5cm (115.6 in) and is 101cm (39.8 in) large; the frame is 7cm (2.8in) wide¹². Unfortunately little is known of this Rabat Shroud. What we know for certain is that the Archbishop of Turin, Michael Beyamus, testifies in 1663 its authenticity. This is what he states:

“To all and every person living at present or in the future We attest and in truth declare that on the fifteenth day of last May, when the Most Sacred Shroud in which the Most Sacred Body of Christ had been placed by Joseph of Arimathea (which without any doubt is kept in our Metropolitan Church in the Royal Chapel) was being shown to the large number of people frequenting the church in the presence of the King of the State of Savoy, the above drawn image herewith attached, was moved near the original Most Sacred Shroud and we made it touch it (i.e. the original) and We guarded it”.

And, continues Archbishop Beyamus on the same document:

“This is the truth. We therefore ordered that these our (letters) signed by our own hand, be made and signed and strengthened by our usual seal.”¹³

This authenticated document kept in Rabat bears the date of June 20, 1663; it is signed by Archbishop Michele Beyamus and countersigned by Neromi, probably Notary of the Archdiocese of Turin. Two important facts arise from this document:

1. The date of the “Ostensione” (public showing) of the Shroud of Turin is given as May 15, 1663;
2. The reproduction (or the Rabat Shroud) was brought near the Turin Shroud and made to touch it (admovimus – eamque tangere fecimus).

⁸ El Santo Sudario en España, 1959 p125. Don D. Leone is mistaken. Bueno, in 1650 was Grand Prior of the Order of St John ; he became Bishop of Malta in 1606. He never was Grand Master of the Order.

⁹ Op. Cit. 125

¹⁰ Registro degli Atti Priorali, A.O.M. – 1937 National Library, Valletta, Malta

¹¹ A. Bonnici: History of the Church in Malta, Vol II p.13

¹² The Turin Shroud measures 4.36m by 1.10m or 14ft by 3ft 7in

¹³ Archives of St Paul’s Grotto, Rabat (Malta). cf photocopy of Certificate

The author of the present article, through correspondence, sought for information in Turin. Don Piero Coero Borga¹⁴ made research and kindly forwarded the following information:

- Michele Beyamus (of Beggiamo) die Signori di S. Albano e di Carere, was Bishop of Turin between 1662 and 1689. Before he had been bishop of Mondovi.
- The records of the various “Ostensioni” testify that in 1663 this solemn Ostensione was not held at the usual date, i.e. May 4. The recent death of the Duchess of Parma caused the postponement; it was held on the 16/17th May of that year, 1663. This agrees with the date given by the Archbishop Beyamus on the certificate, i.e. 15th May, 1663.
- This particular Ostensione is specially recorded because it coincided, perhaps intentionally, with the solemn wedding of the Duke of Savoy, Carlo Emmanuele II with Francesca d’Orleans. Don Piero remarks that the ‘solemn Ostensione’ and much more the Royal wedding were described in great detail by Count Abbot Emmanuele Tesaure¹⁵.

This is all we know so far about the Rabat Shroud when it was still in Turin. Now, when was it brought to Malta? By whom? How was it received? Who received it? What veneration was it given? More patient research may give the answer to these and similar questions. Nothing is known about the Rabat Shroud for the next nineteen years.

The relations between the Savoy Royal family and the Knights of St John were then, as for many years after, excellent. In the National Library of Valletta (Malta) there are letters sent by Duke Carlo Emmanuele II and after his death by other heads of the state of Savoy to Grand Master Nicholas Cotoner. In 1663, the year of the certificate of the Rabat Shroud by Archbishop Beyamus, on April 30, Carlo Emmanuele II wrote to Cotoner to announce his forthcoming marriage; on June 24th, 1664, Carlo informed Cotoner of the birth of his first child, “il primogenito”. He added that he hoped for “che il figlio sara erede anche dell’ effetto mio verso la Religione.”¹⁶

Nineteen years after the Turin Certificate we find another mention of the Rabat Shroud. The “Account Books” preserved in the St Paul’s Grotto Archives reveal that:

“On April 13, 1682 two men transported the frame of the most holy Shroud from Valletta to Rabat; they said they were paid 4 scudi. On the following day, April 14, Master Guglielmo Alfart was paid 5 scudi for measuring and fixing the above mentioned frames in the Sacristy of St Publius.”¹⁷

The ‘Inventario Generale’ under the section ‘Mobili della Sacrestia’ in 1756 records the presence of “Un ritratto del SS. Sudario con cornice indorata.”¹⁸ This attestation is repeated in the subsequent ‘Inventario’ of 1779 and 1811¹⁹. The ‘Inventario’ of 1811 enters this queer mistake: “Un Ritratto del SS Rosario...” The scribe inadvertently states ROSARIO for SUDARIO.

The place where the Shroud was placed, in the Sacristy, high up against the wall, under a window and opposite another window has allowed much damage to be done to the picture;

¹⁴ Don Piero Coero Borga died since (24th September 1986). He was the Rector of the Holy Shroud Museum; he was himself a great Sindologist.

¹⁵ Letter dated 10 March 1986, to the author

¹⁶ Records of the Archives of St John Vol.III p271 kept at the National Library Valletta, Malta

¹⁷ Libro dei Conti f.21. Archives of St Paul’s Grotto.

¹⁸ Inventario Generale, Archives St Paul’s Grotto - Rabat

¹⁹ Op. Cit. 1756 f.15; f.43; 1779 f.74; 1811 f.135

dampness, rain and strong light during the summer months, disfigured the image of Christ considerably, especially at the centre where the head of Christ is. At one time, it seems, someone amateurishly and awkwardly tried to patch up a torn hole at the centre and the lower part of the reproduction. Also, wood worms through the soft wood of the inside frame onto which the cloth reproduction is stretched, has worn out some of the cloth which is in contact with this frame. Everyone agrees that the real value of the Shroud of Rabat is not its artistic merit. There is little art in it; nor its antiquity, in spite of the fact that the picture is over 300 years old. The real value of this Shroud is its religious and sacred aspect. Not only does it represent something sacred as any other picture or statue which has been blessed for veneration; it has more than a blessing – it has touched the Shroud of Turin.

The Holy Shroud of Turin has always been regarded as “Most Sacred” and a relic. If this shroud is that in which Jesus was laid in the tomb, as tradition has constantly claimed it to be and science is gradually confirming it, then the Turin Shroud is a first class relic (Reliquia Insignis). Blood has been detected on it and classified of the AB group.²⁰ It follows then that this blood is, in all probability, the Blood of Christ. Then, also since the Rabat Shroud has been in contact with the original of Turin, it could therefore be considered as a second class relic and it therefore deserves respect and veneration, and for that matter, more respect than any other picture or statue that is blessed for veneration.

It is greatly to be regretted that those responsible for the Shroud in Valletta or in Rabat immediately after it was brought here, seem to have shown little concern to carry out the intention of those who donated the privileged Shroud; Archbishop Beyanus and Duke Carlo Emmanuele II. And history will record forever the credit and foresight of the present Canons of the Collegiate to have made it their honourable duty to remove the Shroud from its place of oblivion and certain gradual destruction, and to have restored it properly and placed in a place accessible for the piety of the faithful and for their veneration, as it deserves.

Whenever such or similar reproductions were obtained from Turin, special shrines or chapels were constructed in their honour and for the Christian devotion. And let it be emphasised – these reproductions were not privileged, or very few were, to my knowledge as the Rabat Shroud which has been in contact with that of Turin²¹. People in ‘great numbers’ gather to pray before these reproductions that remind them the Shroud in which the Sacred Body of Christ was placed after His death during the burial until His resurrection. Christ left us this unique Remembrance of His last hours – and terrible hours! – with us on earth. He left us His photo and a precious token and proof of His great love and suffering for us. And a proof, be it indirect, of His resurrection.

When speaking of the Rabat shroud, the name of Mr Joseph Cassar, the well known photographer, cannot be omitted. It has been his persevering patience and his photographic talent, plus his enthusiasm for this unique shroud that have aroused awareness and consciousness of the Rabat Shroud. Mr Cassar remembers and probably like him some Rabtin (**locals**) of his age, that some 60 years ago the figure of Christ on the

²⁰ SINDON No 34, 1985; Ricerca degli antigeni M, N ed S nelle tracce di Sangue sulla Sindone, pp 9-13

²¹ The Holy Shroud of Turin, between 1534 and 1978 was ‘exhibited’ a number of times to private persons or the public. In 1578, St Charles Borromeo walked from Milan to Turin to visit and pray before the precious relic. In 1613 St Francis de Sales was among the officiating bishops during the ‘Exhibition’. In 1639 St Jeanne Françoise de Chantal was present at that ‘Exhibition’. Occasionally reproductions of the Shroud of Turin were made and sent to prominent persons. But a striking note! On one unique occasion only, as far as the author knows, it is recorded that in 1624, 2 copies were sent to the Duchess of Tuscany. Cf ALLA RICERCA DELL’UOMO DELLA SINDONE, 1978, by P. Baima-Bollone pg37

Shroud of Rabat was pretty well clear. It had impressed him as a boy when he visited it for the first time with his class mates from St Aloysius College.

Mr Cassar's opinion, which seems to me very plausible, is that the Rabat shroud might have served as a matrix to reproduce other shrouds. The artist, suggests Mr Cassar, proud and satisfied with his good result and wishing to keep the model, probably placed some material, like soft thick paper under the whole area of his painting; then again beneath this paper a layer of soft board of blankets, soft enough to allow holing through the painted cloth and through the paper beneath it. The dotted figure would appear on the paper. Whenever the artist wanted to have another copy, all he had to do was to place this holed sketched figure onto a new cloth and applying a small soft piece of cloth over the holes and have the outline of the figure on the new cloth ready to reproduce.

The method of reproduction, i.e. the holes to form the outline of the Man on the Shroud, remarks Don Luigi Fossati SDB, a learned Sindologist, is very rare and probably unique. Don Luigi wrote to the author of this article:

"The small dots (holes) close to each other which trace out the outline of the figure are very interesting indeed. The case is unique in all copies which I have taken into consideration"²².

Don Luigi made another remark about the inscription on the Rabat Shroud. One can read in very clear words this caption on the lowest side of the Shroud: "VERISSIMO RITRATTO DEL SANTISSIMO SAN SUDARIO"²³ (True or Real Portrait of the Holy Shroud - Ed.)

"regarding the inscription I must tell you that the characteristic of that capital letter (i.e. V for U in SVDARIO) goes back to the copy of 1578²⁴ which Fantino has repeated. (See book of D. Leone p142). But that (inscription) of Malta is anterior."²⁵

One last word; May 14, 1986 will remain a red letter day for the Collegiate Church of St Paul in Rabat. On that Wednesday evening, the Collegiate Chapter and the "Group of Friends of the Holy Shroud Malta organised a religious function in honour of the Shroud of Turin and the Shroud of Rabat. The church was full to its utmost capacity. Four Reverend Canons of the Collegiate Chapter, Can. Dean Carmelo Cefai, Can. Michael Attard, Can. Vincent Galea (who died since) and Can. John Azzopardi and Fr Carmelo Bezzina, co-founder and member of the "group", concelebrated the Holy Mass of the Holy Cross. The Shroud of Rabat was placed amid flowers and light in the forefront and the left hand side of the sanctuary. Hymns were sung during the Eucharistic celebration; communions were very numerous. After mass, Fr Bezzina read a passage from the Gospel to the congregation and together they said a few prayers. Mr Carm Camilleri, another member of the group, gave a talked illustrated with slides about the Turin Shroud. Br Michael FSC, co-founder and

²² The Holy Shroud of Turin, between 1534 and 1978 was 'exhibited' a number of times to private persons or the public. In 1578, St Charles Borromeo walked from Milan to Turin to visit and pray before the precious relic. In 1613 St Francis de Sales was among the officiating bishops during the 'Exhibition'. In 1639 St Jeanne Francoise de Chantal was present at that 'Exhibition'. Occasionally reproductions of the Shroud of Turin were made and sent to prominent persons. But a striking note! On one unique occasion only, as far as the author knows, it is recorded that in 1624, 2 copies were sent to the Duchess of Tuscany. Cf ALLA RICERCA DELL'UOMO DELLA SINDONE, 1978, by P. Baima-Bollone pg37

²³ Letter dated 'Festa dell' Assunta', 1986, to the author.

²⁴ One wonders why SAN after SANTISSIMO?

²⁵ Don Luigi mistakenly gives the date as 1578; this is evidently an oversight since he refers to Leone's book which states 1674; 1574 would make no sense when he says that this is anterior to the one in of Malta which is 1663.

member of the group, spoke about the Rabat Shroud, its history and its message to us. He emphasized its true significance and its sacred value. Many persons lingered around for a closer look and a last prayer.

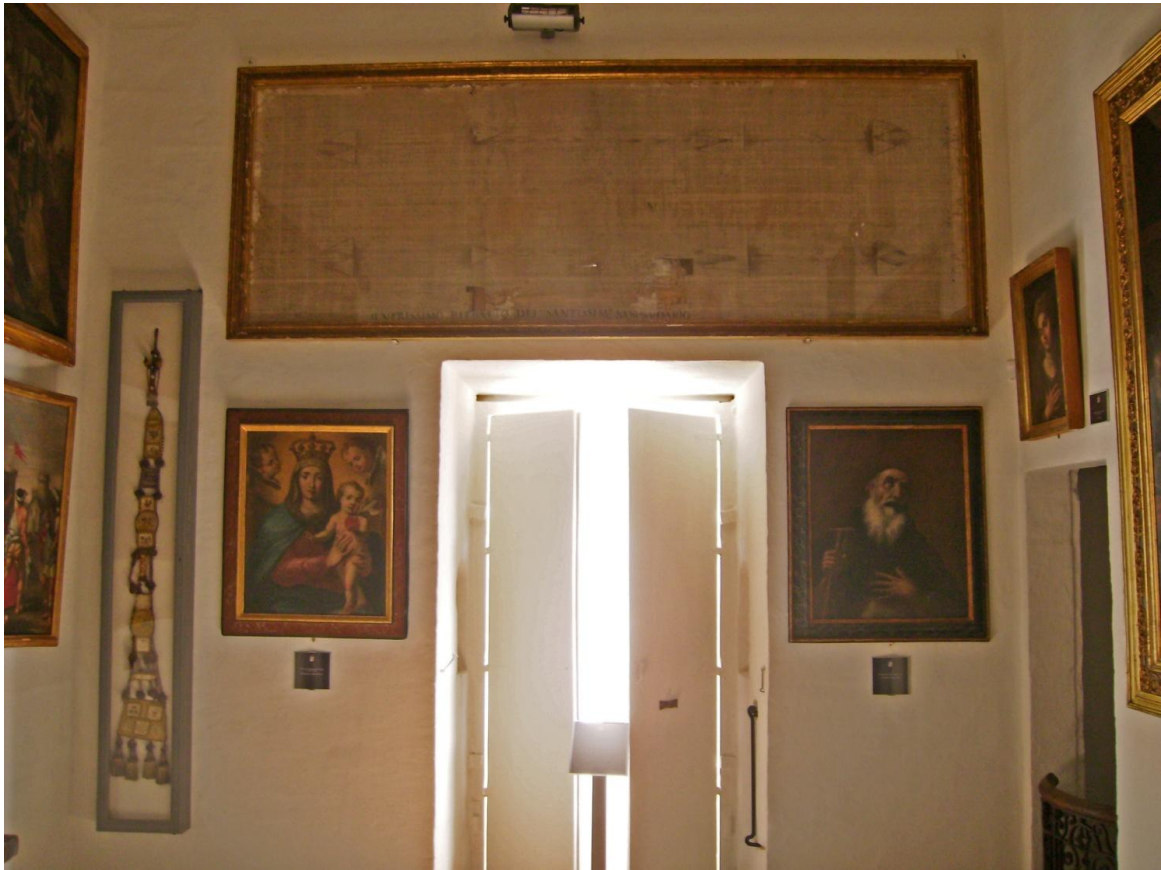
It is hoped that the feast of May 14 will be an annual celebration and that it will not be long before the sacred Rabat shroud finds its honourable place where the faithful will have the opportunity to venerate and pray before this Shroud. The effort being made by the Collegiate chapter, especially by Can John Azzopardi, the Curator of the Grotto Museum, are a sure guarantee of the fulfilment of this hope and wish. The people of Rabat and of Malta, especially those who for some reason cannot afford to go to Turin, will satisfy their devotion to the loving and suffering Christ before the precious relic-reproduction of the Most Holy Shroud of Turin.



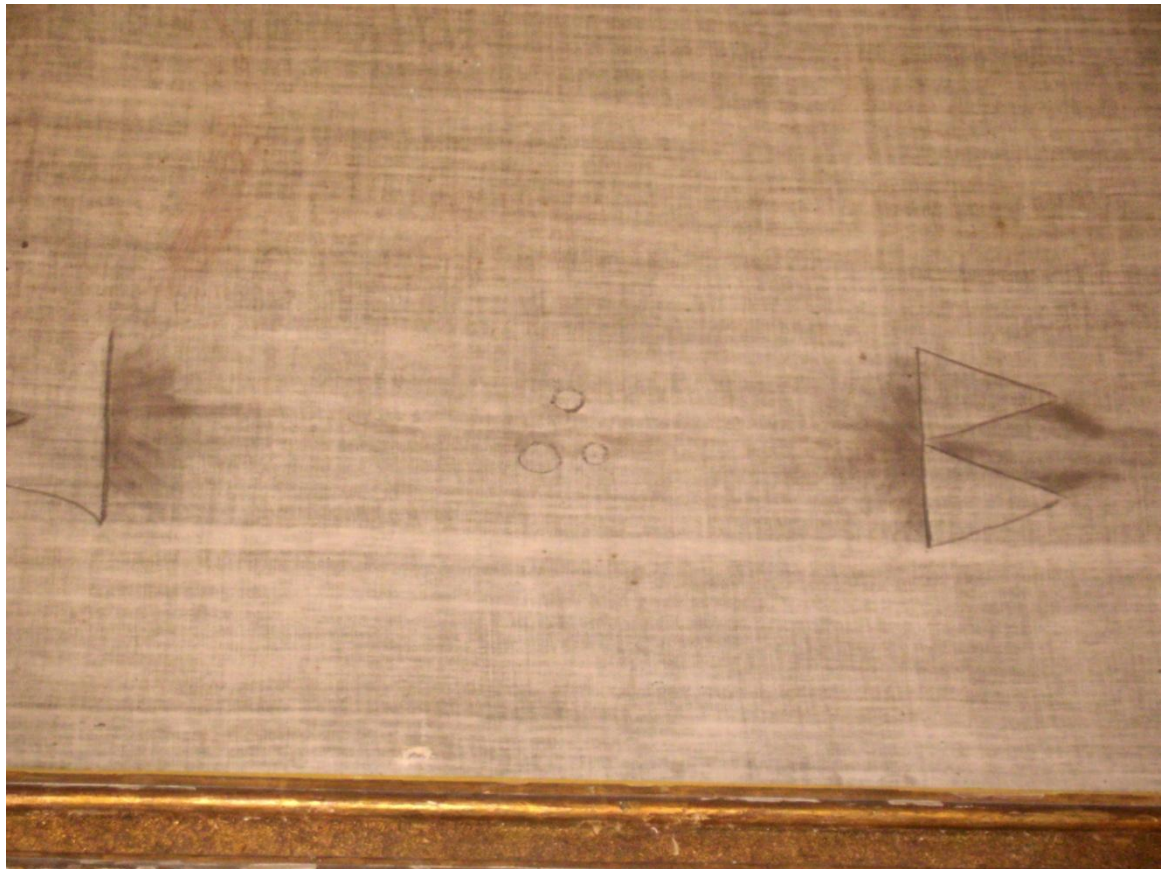
The Shroud of Rabat, Malta



Closeup of Inscription - Contrast slightly enhanced
Photographs ©2013 Patrick Mulholland



The Shroud of Rabat, Malta



The Shroud of Rabat Detail
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The Shroud of Rabat Image Detail



The Shroud of Rabat Damage Detail
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