

Fig. 1—The Holy Face of Genoa, in the Church of St Bartholomew of the Armenians.



Fig. 2—Copy of the original Veronica of St Peter. This copy is in the Church of Jesus, Rome.

WAS THE SO-CALLED ACHEROPITA OF EDESSA  
THE HOLY SHROUD?\*

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Reading the reports of Ian Wilson: *The History of the Turin Shroud*, and of Piero Cozzola: *The Holy Face and the Sudarium of Christ Plascanica in Russian Religious Art*<sup>1</sup>, presented at the International Congress of Sindonology, 1978, one is surprised to find no references to the Faces of Christ which are famous for their distinctive characteristics and for the questions which arise on their origin and on the relationships they might have to each other, to the so-called Face of Edessa, and to the Holy Shroud. The following works are meant:

1. Face of Edessa in the Church of St Bartholomew of the Armenians, Genoa
2. Face of Edessa in the chapel of the Countess Matilda in the Vatican Palace
3. Holy Face of Laon, in St Martin's Cathedral, Laon, France
4. Holy Face of Veronica, in St Peters Basilica, Rome

The first two, those of Genoa and of the Matilda Chapel, were considered copies of a primigenial original which, according to the legend, was miraculously made. In the iconography of the Face of Christ, all four gained fame as copies.

For all the affirmations that the copies were just like the original, there was never any certainty or proof, because the prototype—according to the legend—disappeared leaving no historical trace, or its whereabouts was deliberately withheld from written records for motives unknown to us. Consequently, various legends arose, intertwining with the true story (completely unknown or intentionally untold) and superimposed upon it, all the while preserving the primitive nucleus of what could be the essential and specific characteristics of a reality only scarcely known, or known only under certain aspects, such as:

1. the existence of a picture of Our Lord's Face
2. on a cloth-linen-handkerchief-towel
3. not made manually by human means but produced in an extraordinary manner, considered miraculous because there was no explanation for it.

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\*Translated and abridged by permission of the author. The full text will be published in the Report of the National Congress, "Shroud & Science", held in Bologna, Italy, Nov. 1981.

In our search for some concrete link which would help clarify these legends and the origin of the copies mentioned, we will give descriptions from the more authoritative publications in Part I; then in Part II try to point out and connect some of the significant details not always considered.

The history and vicissitudes of the Edessa image were the subject of an article by Bertelli<sup>2</sup>, who delineates the possible emergence and the easy diffusion of the holy faces called "mandylion" which in time, after successive modifications, eventually became icons.

There is no point in referring to the legendary accounts. They are difficult to document, especially since some scholars declare that the history of the *acheropita* of Edessa is obscure<sup>3</sup>. To explain the term "acheropita": literally it means *not made by (human) hands*. In reference to the holy faces, it means *not a false image* (therefore a true likeness) of *Christ*.

Now one asks, why and how could a tradition of this kind arise precisely in Edessa?

From the second half of the second century, Edessa was the center of an active Christian community whose beginnings are dated, by some historians, back to apostolic times. Even if now, in the Urfa of today, nothing at all remains of that past, it will be remembered that Edessa was a flourishing cultural center where, according to some scholars, the Old Testament was translated into Syriac and where Tatian composed the Diatesseron. And, under the direction of St Ephrem (363-373), the so-called School of Edessa initiated that strict basis of studies which rendered it famous in succeeding centuries.

## I

### **The Holy Face of Edessa, St Bartholomew of the Armenians, Genoa (Fig. 1)**

This icon has been accurately and competently described by Colette Dufour Bozzo, from whose publication<sup>4</sup> we cull those explanations which interest us here.

First of all, the icon is in an artistic paleologan frame, decorated with little scenes illustrating the more salient episodes in the story of the Holy Face of Edessa. Each square (4.8cm x 4.8cm.) carries an inscription in Greek which explains the scene. The titles of the ten scenes are:

1. Abgar sends Ananias to Christ to make his portrait
2. Ananias is incapable of making the portrait
3. Christ washes his hands
4. Christ gives Ananias the mandylion and a letter
5. Ananias carries mandylion and letter to Abgar
6. Abgar, having smashed the idol, installs the image of Christ
7. The Bishop walls up the mandylion by means of a tile
8. By revelation, a [later] bishop discovers the mandylion and the tile impressed with the image

9. The bishop, pouring oil on fire, burns the Persians
10. While the mandylion is being carried to Constantinople, a man possessed of demons is healed.

The second point which interests us is that the most ancient representation was painted partly on linen which, after various retouchings and restorations, eventually became completely covered over with paint and hidden from view.

Concerning this linen cloth, Dufour Bozzo writes: "The linen . . . covers only about 2/3 of the panel and must be considered primarily as a "symbol" of the original "mandylion". A whole literary tradition, born of the *Narratio* attests that the "mandylion" was stretched on a panel and covered with gold; it is well known that it was the custom to enclose particles of relics in the icons. At this point, it does not seem arbitrary to propose that the cloth could have been considered a *brandeum*\*. We do not mean to say that this was itself the "true" relic, but that it is *truly a relic* by merit of the original element, around which the whole composition of the "Holy Face", even to the paleologan frame, is structured. This latter pivots on the merits of the *brandeum*, which is the element authorizing and authenticating the frame's message."

The third point which deserves attention is the unexpected results of tomography\*\* and X-ray examinations. Tomography reveals that in the more ancient representations, the Face of Christ has the eyes closed. (Fig. 4) The X-rays revealed a face quite different from the present one; more lifelike, less stylized in iconographic canons (Fig. 3).

In the conclusion of her study, the author observes: "One fact emerges unequivocally: the vitality of the "Holy Face" as a relic. As such, the genesis of the Edessa Image of Genoa is quite complex. The various phases of its itinerary are documented in its composite structure, from the panel with the so-called *brandeum*, central nucleus and more ancient than the icon, to the painting which represents the relic under the sign of "mandylion" and structures the face in various renovations up until the iconographic codification of Faces of Christ."

### **The Holy Face of Edessa** in the Vatican (Fig. 5)

Rev. Ammann published an articles on this holy face which he had found in the ambry of the Matilda Chapel in the Vatican.

As to when and where it was made, Bertelli<sup>2</sup> gives this opinion: "I dare not say—especially in the actual conditions of study and visibility—that this is the same image which was at Edessa, but certainly we must recognize here an example so close to the original as to betray the unusual style and to allow us to estimate the aspect, and maybe even

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\*A *brandeum* is any object which had been in contact with a holy relic, a martyr's body, a living saint, etc. Objects touched to a *brandeum* were also honored as holy relics, by merit of the original. Ed.

\*\*Tomography consists of making X-rays at successive levels. Ed.

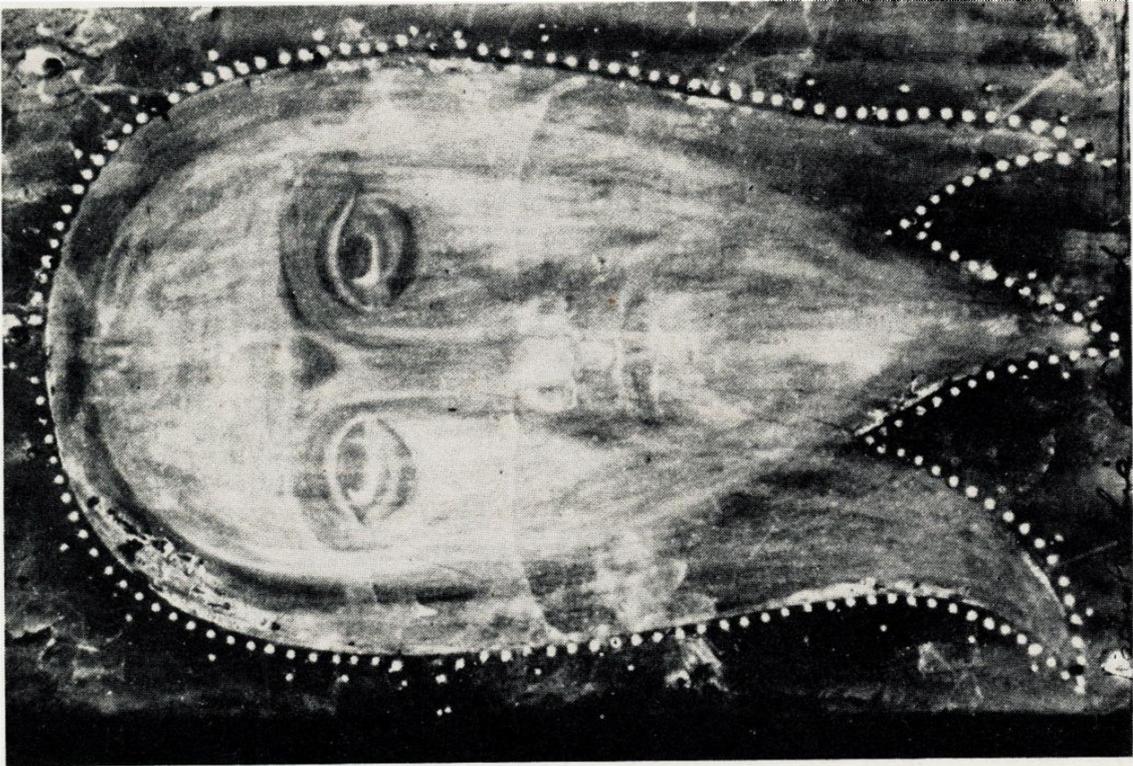


Fig. 3—The Genoa icon by X-ray.

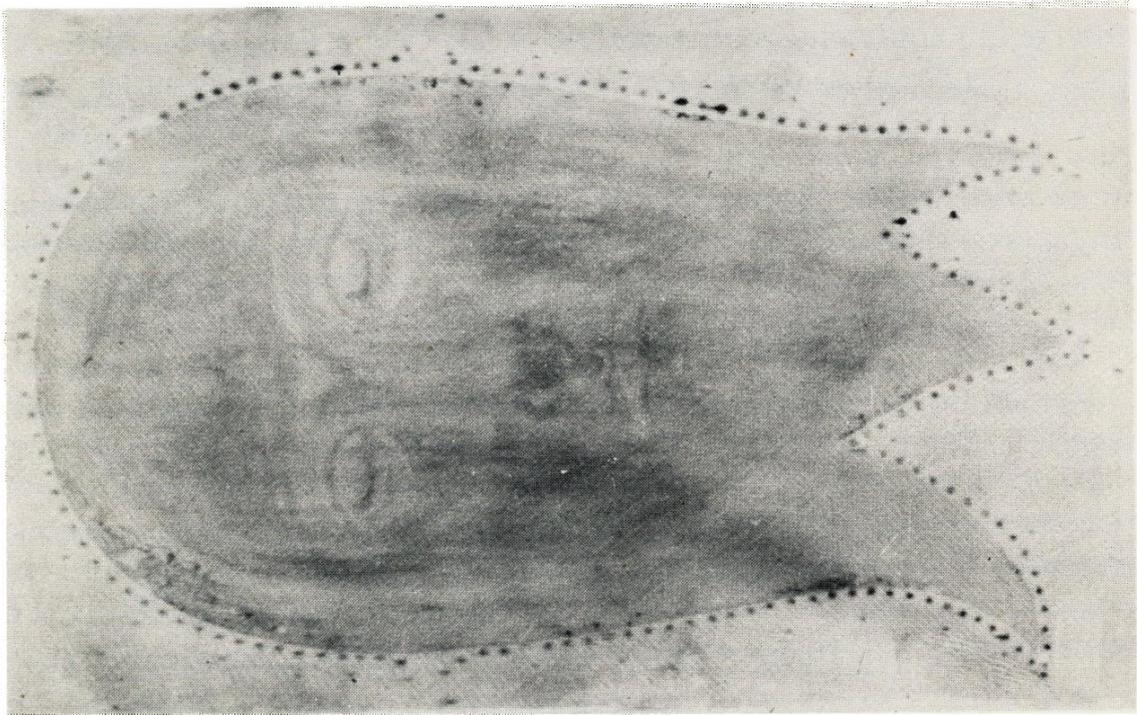


Fig. 4—The Genoa icon revealed by tomography.

the date, of the Abgar painting. The author of the Doctrine of Addai discovered the mention of a portrait of Christ amidst the papers of the Edessan archives, the same papers which Eusebius had consulted around 320, even though, for his well-known diffidence regarding images of Christ, he abstained from mentioning it in his History. Now contrary to the legend, that portrait was not associated with the king who was a contemporary of Christ, Abgar V; but instead with Abgar IX, the first Christian king of Edessa, who reigned from 175-214. It should not surprise us to find a portrait of Christ in the palace of a third-century sovereign, since Alexander Severus had a similar portrait, along with others of Abraham, Orpheus, Apollonius of Tiana ..."

Particularly interesting are Bertelli's remarks about the cloth on which the Face is painted: "Where the paint has flaked off, one sees the cloth very well. It seems very light and fine, with a weave recognizable as herringbone. If this were examined under the microscope, some useful information about its provenience and its date might be furnished."<sup>2</sup>

It is very difficult if not impossible to examine the backside because the cloth has been glued to the wood panel which, in turn, is sheathed, on back and front, with laminated silver secured with an infinity of tacks. This information and the photographs (Fig. 6) were courteously given me by Rev. Umberto Fasola, rector of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archeology, along with these other remarks (letter from Rome, 2 July 1977): "To judge the type of weave, there are only those few small spaces where the paint has flaked off. The largest space is on the forehead (10cm x 8cm, measuring together the uncovered spots). Another small area is at the edge of the left eye, (Fig. 6) (4cm x 3cm, measuring the two spots together). A third is at the left point of the beard (12mm x 12mm). I dare not make a statement on the weave. It seems to be herringbone, similar to that of the Shroud, but I do not feel sure."

To conclude our discussions of the Genoa and Matilda Chapel images, let us note the opinion of Rev. Ammann: "Neither of these two representations could be the original of the so-called Holy Face of Edessa. But both seem to be copies of the same original image bearing this name and preserved for a long time in the imperial city."<sup>5</sup>

### **The Holy Face of Laon** (12th century) (See cover photo)

This beautiful icon has always attracted the attention of critics for many reasons, but especially for the paleo-slav inscription. To date, the most accurate publication on the argument is probably in Andre Grabar's *The Holy Face of Laon; the Mandylion in Orthodox Art*<sup>6</sup>.

Grabar translated the paleo-slav inscription as "Imago Domini in Sudario", thus sharing Jean Hardouin's interpretation. Various other more or less fanciful versions are also given.

In 1922, Noguier de Malijay<sup>7</sup> gave this translation: "Image of the Lord on cloth"<sup>8</sup>.

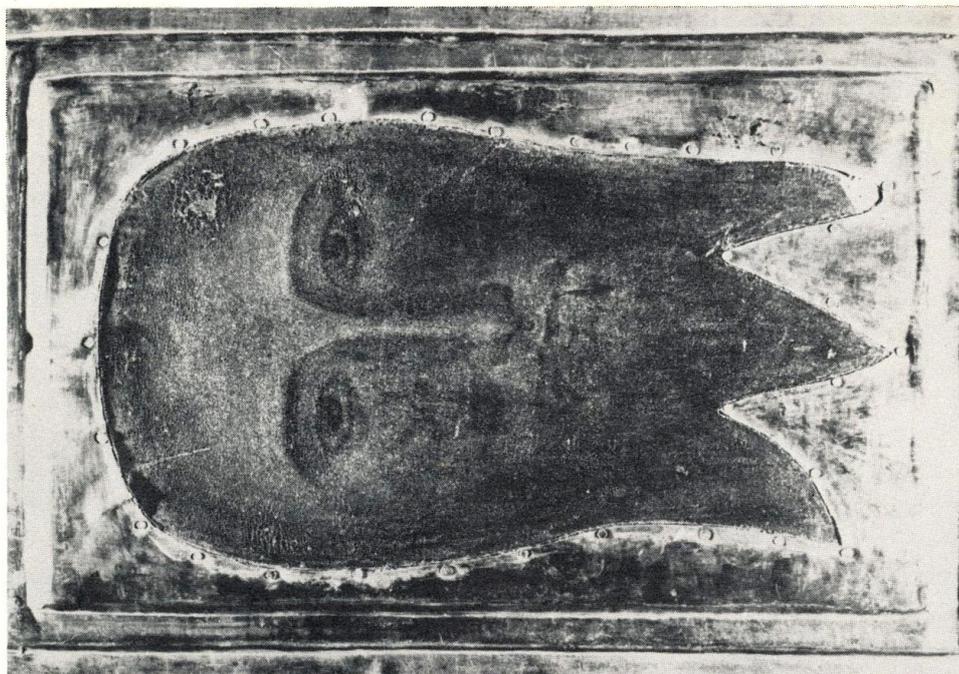


Fig. 5—The Edessa image of the Vatican, in the Matilda Chapel.

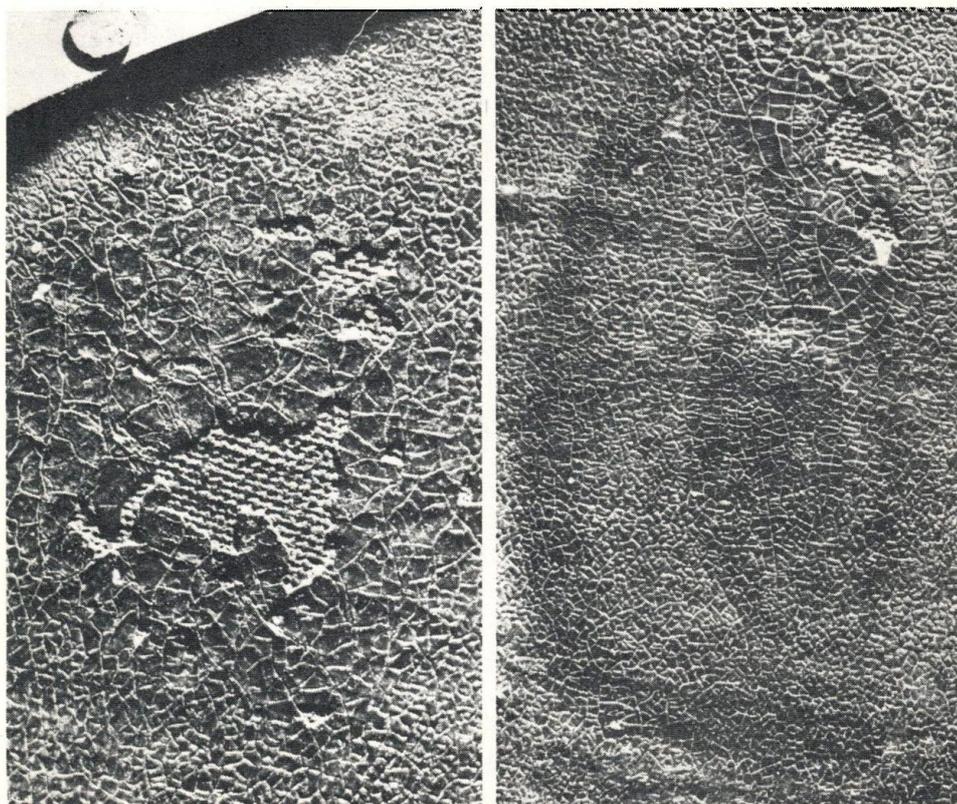


Fig. 6—Exposed areas of cloth on the right side of the forehead, and at the edge of the right eye.

In his ample study, Paul Vignon<sup>9</sup> dedicated many pages to iconography, also citing Grabar. Vignon includes a reproduction of the Holy Face of Laon but does not mention the inscription. This is rather surprising because, with a seemingly excessive complaisance, he dwells upon those factors which could have derived from imprints seen on the Shroud; dependencies which could be either real or purely accidental.

Two other quite astonishing interpretations are to be noted: the first, in the Italian Catholic Encyclopedia under 'Laon', gives "Image of the Lord on a handkerchief". The second was in a review of Suzanne Martinet's book on Laon<sup>10</sup>. The review, by Rev. Zanarini, Paris, appeared in the *Osservatore Romano*, 2 Sept. 1973. Rev. Zanarini reports this translation: "Image of Christ on the Shroud". Surprised by this, we contacted Rev. Zanarini who replied (letter of 20 Sept. 1973): "So far as I know, the inscription on the icon of the Holy Face of Laon is that which I have communicated." It has not yet been possible to consult Martinet's book.

### **The Holy Face of the Veronica, in St Peters Basilica, Rome**

Our study would not be complete unless it included this famous image. In the past, its devotional renown was widespread; today the figure is practically indistinct. It is described by Amato Frutaz<sup>11</sup>: "The Veronica ... is enclosed in three silver cases protected by a glass and a curtain, or *crivelleto*. It seems that the features of the Face can barely be distinguished. Under the pontificates of Paul V and Urban VIII, it was prohibited to make copies. In fact, Urban VIII, in 1629, ordered that all copies of the Veronica be burned. Among the copies which escaped destruction, one copied from the original with the permission of Gregory XV (1621-1623) is now preserved in the Church of Jesus, Rome." (Fig. 2)

A note apposed to the back of this picture assures us of its full conformity with original<sup>11</sup>. In this copy, Jesus is shown with his eyes closed, contrary to many other holy faces dispersed here and there. Frutaz continues: "Stylistically, as far as one can judge from medieval and modern copies now extant—quite dissimilar among themselves (it has not yet been possible to study the original directly)—the Veronica is linked with the icons whose prototype is sought in the famous mandylion of Edessa, transported to Constantinople in 944 ... Nevertheless, in comparison, for example, with the Holy Face of Laon and the Holy Face of Genoa, the Veronica has a more realistic and pathetic aspect."

It should be noted that on this copy, the Face is shown with eyes closed.

In regard to the Veronica, Volback<sup>11</sup> makes this observation: "As early as the 11th century, there are certain references to the Veronica of St Peters ... True to the more ancient reproductions, this *acheropita* represents Christ with long hair and a beard and with a suffering expression. Without doubt, the original came from the East;

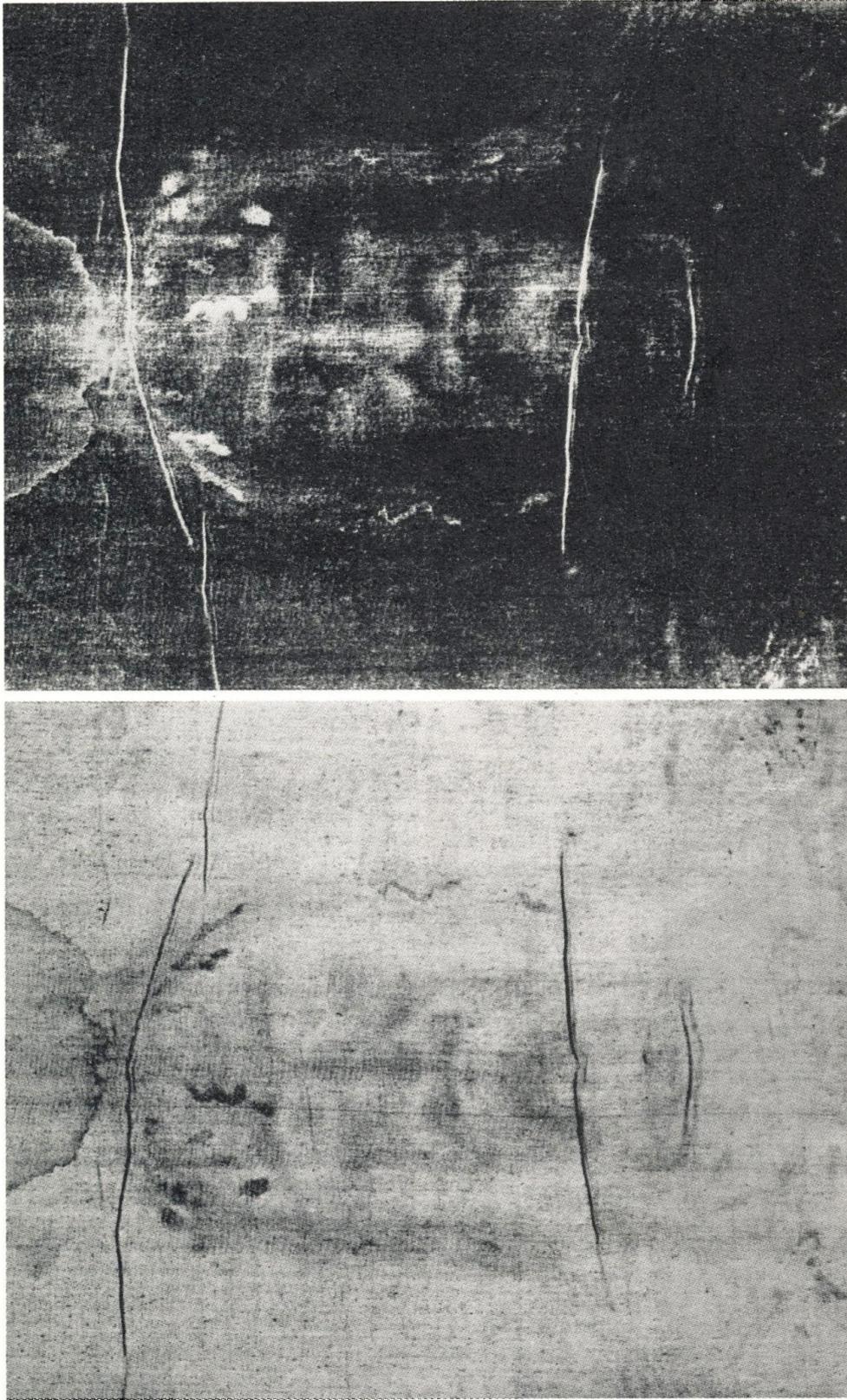


Fig. 7—The imprint of the Face as it appears on the Shroud, and in the corresponding photographic negative.

stylistically, perhaps, it resembles the icon of Edessa."

A synthesis of the information reported is not easy because the questions which arise on the above-mentioned details are many; in fact, too many.

What could be the original nucleus and the fundamental basis of the Abgar legend?

What could be the precise significance of that inscription on the Holy Face of Laon; what does it really refer to?

What explanation could archeologists and textile experts give us about the fabric on which the Vatican image is painted?

What is the nature of that piece of cloth under the Holy Face of Genoa?

What is the explanation of that strip of cloth sewn along the length of the Shroud, in a way that the two imprints appear precisely in the center of the sheet?

As for the holy faces with eyes closed; are they anterior, contemporary or posterior to those with eyes open? Could they in some way be dependent on the Shroud imprints, or are they of totally independent origin?

Confronting these questions, one must comment on the lack of adequate examinations, coordinated in a unified research project. Dufour Bozzo initiated an entirely new path, the only exact path, by the application of X-ray and tomograph exams. These have given excellent results and it is to be hoped that the method will be used on other holy faces.

## II

Observations on the **Holy Face of Genoa** (Fig. 1)

Although the Genoa icon has been amply studied, a deeper investigation could possibly reveal something about the weave of that piece of cloth considered to be the original nucleus and the true relic *brandeum*, of which the icon itself, in its various embellishments, was only the external protection.

Intimately tied to this is another study which could be conducted to find out why the more primitive face, revealed by tomography, had the eyes closed. If the same type of face were to be discovered under the icon of the Matilda Chapel, then the relationship and the interdependence of the objects in question, and their relation and dependence on the Holy Shroud would be increased. The Veronica would not need to be included in the study because the only authentic copy we possess, in the Church of Jesus, shows a face with eyes closed.

Finally, we must ask what value to give to the Abgar legend, illustrated in the ten scenes of the silver frame. Besides the supposedly miraculous origin of the Genoa icon, the legend seems to establish these other certain points:

1. the existence and disappearance of the original

2. the existence of copies made manually and/or believed miraculous
3. the transfer from Edessa to Constantinople of a mandylion-icon.

On the third point, one could consult Georges Gharib's exhaustive report to the International Congress of 1978<sup>12</sup>. The author outlines the uninterrupted liturgical tradition which commemorates, on the sixteenth of August, the "Transfer of the Holy Mandylion from Edessa"<sup>13</sup> and the "Commemoration of the Transfer of the Holy Mandylion from Edessa"<sup>14</sup>.

Professor Gharib observes: "The relic was designated in the texts by more than one name. We have encountered these names: sindon, tetradiplon (piece of cloth folded in four) and mandylion (Syriac and Arabic word signifying towel, handkerchief, sweat-cloth). One must acknowledge that these names do not tell us the precise shape of the relic."

Therefore it is difficult to determine which mandylion or which icon was transferred to Constantinople; if it was the original, which had seemingly disappeared long before; or a copy, for instance the Genoa icon which had become the Holy Face *par excellence* in Constantinople, even before it arrived in Italy.

There is no doubt that, of all the copies, the two most famous are the Holy Face of Genoa and the Holy Face of the Vatican. Rev. Ammann<sup>5</sup> clearly affirms: "The Christ of Edessa is probably the original of the two copies we have just mentioned."

It is possible that the Genoa and the Vatican icons were the first copies; both were believed miraculous, true relics because they were copied from the original and both contained pieces of it. After the first copies were made, there was no longer any reason to publicly expose the priceless original itself and it disappeared.

Although this original disappeared, the fact of its existence will be recalled in what was set forth above, i.e.;

1. the existence of a representation of the Face of Our Lord
2. on a cloth-linen-handkerchief-towel
3. not made by human hands but obtained in a manner which was beyond explanation; hence miraculous; as ascribed to the Shroud.

The three characteristics coincide very well with the Face of Christ impressed on the Shroud:

1. The imprint of the Face—with eyes closed—is exactly centered when the sheet is folded in four.
2. No doubts exist about the fabric; it is linen. The dimensions are ample enough to seem to be a large handkerchief or towel\*.

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\*The full length of the Shroud is 14'3"; it is 3'7" wide. Ed.

3. As the negative imprint was not perfectly legible, there was no explanation for it, consequently the recourse to the miraculous was indispensable. This might be the reason why the representation with eyes closed evolved to representations with eyes open, in order to present the reality, the true Face of Christ, in a comprehensible way.

The existence of a unique and unusual prototype of great prestige and credibility is highly probable in the light of the circumstances: the disappearance of an object considered to be the original Face of Edessa, and, concurrently, the appearance of several copies of that original.

The truth-legend of one or of several representations of the Face of Christ not made by hands, seen and/or described, could have given rise to likenesses based on a canon which eventually became traditional. And that particular way of delineating the Face of Christ became established as being the closest to reality.

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What interests us in the legend is not so much its own development or amplification, meant to demonstrate, with real or presumed miracles, the non-human origin of the effigy; but to uncover the fundamental kernel, the core-reality on which the legend was constructed.

In our opinion, the purpose was to present a mysterious reality in credible and accredited form without altering its essential characteristics.

### **The Holy Face of the Vatican (Fig. 5)**

Here the primary question concerns the cloth on which the icon is painted. Is this cloth in fact a herringbone? The comparison of this cloth with the fabric of the Shroud could show that:

1. the cloth is totally different from that of the Shroud
2. the cloth is herringbone but not like that of the Shroud
3. the cloth is exactly the same as that of the Shroud

Obviously, if the two fabrics are identical, this fact would qualify as an important proof, even a definite proof, that the Vatican image derives from the Shroud; and the Shroud would be perceived as that primigenial relic, precious and rare, which was kept concealed while elaborate and plausible explanations were offered as assurances of its existence.

If the identification of the cloth does not sufficiently establish a connection between the Shroud and the holy faces inspired by the Shroud and dependent on it; we could turn to palinology, a science which has already given outstanding results in Shroud studies<sup>15</sup>. The test would consist of determining pollen amounts on a comparative basis. According to Wilson's hypothesis, the sheet was folded in four, leaving only the face visible. If one found on this area a higher percentage of pollen from plants specific to the region of Edessa than on other parts of the sheet, this valid demonstration would support Wilson's hypothesis.

The tomographic test could determine the weave and the nature of the fabric. It might also reveal the original face which lies under the present one, just as in the case of the Genoa icon. If a face with eyes closed should appear, we would have another proof that the holy face-mandyions derived from the only example which, from ancient times, presented this type of face: the Shroud.

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A particular study which still has not been made concerns the lateral strip which runs along the length of the sheet with a piece of cloth of different material at each end. It must be ascertained in what period that strip was added, for it is precisely that lateral addition which centers the face and the two body-imprints.

Finally, one other detail must be considered. Some Shroud scholars are of the opinion that a portion of cloth is lacking below the feet at the end of the dorsal imprints. They reason that there is no explanation for the total impression of the sole of the right foot unless the part of the sheet beneath the body was folded up over the lower legs to the knees, where one can clearly see a definite horizontal line separating two zones of major and minor intensity.

Considering how highly the Shroud was esteemed, one is permitted to think that the missing part of the cloth was used to make relics; and holy faces such as the Genoa and Vatican images could contain these traces.

### **The Holy Face of Laon** (See cover photo)

On this icon, the slavic inscription and its real significance is yet to be clarified. Some scholars suggest that the present inscription could have been superimposed over an earlier one in Greek, more consonant with the Greek letters which are seen at the top of the picture at either side of the Face.

A tomographic examination might hold as many surprises here as it did on the Genoa icon.

For obvious reasons, therefore, a re-examination of the inscription ought to be made, with maximum accuracy, by experts; from archeological as well as philological standpoints. The diversity of the translations demands this revising, to ascertain the real significance of the phrase.

## The Veronica Holy Face

This icon has never yet been closely examined to establish its nature and workmanship. Perhaps now is the moment to make decisions which could not fail to throw light upon this famous object, and to undertake a comparative study with the other holy faces of which we have spoken. To dissipate doubts and perplexities, there are recent examples of this kind crowned with gratifying success. It is enough to recall the accurate study of the Chair of St Peter and, of course, the tests made directly on the Holy Shroud.

Christians have always desired to know the human features of Christ. The early generations took recourse in pious legends to authenticate images of whose origins they knew very little. In our times, we unexpectedly find ourselves facing the portrait of Christ authenticated by the guarantees of science.

The Holy Mandylion was perhaps the Shroud, presented only in the essential part, i.e., the Face: or perhaps the Mandylion was a handmade article inspired by the Shroud, and the prototype of other copies showing a Face which has remained typical and traditional, all the while being subject to various expressive modifications. These should be attentively studied and evaluated.

I wish to thank Prof. Colette Dufour Bozzo for the reproductions of the Genoa icon, and Rev. Umberto Fasola for the photos of the Vatican icon.

The details from the Holy Shroud are from the 1931 photographs by Giuseppe Enrie.

The Veronica Holy Face in the Church of Jesus, Rome, was taken from the Enciclopedia Cattolica.

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1. Reports published in *La Sindone e la Scienza*, Ed. Paoline, 1979.
2. Carlo Bertelli: *Storia e vicende dell'Immagine edessena*, Paragon #217, March 1968.
3. W. F. Volbach: *Enciclopedia Cattolica* under "Acheropita".
4. Colette Dufour Bozzo: *Il Sacro Volto di Genova*, Rome, 1974.
5. Rev. Albert Ammann: Due immagine del cosidetto Cristo di Edessa, in *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana d'Archeologia* vol. xxxviii, 1965-1966.
6. Andre Grabar: *La Sainte Face de Laon: Le Mandylion dans l'Art Orthodoxe*, Prague, 1931
7. Noguier de Malijay: *Le Saint Suaire et la Sainte Face de N.S. Jésus Christ*, Paris, 1922.
8. "Image du Seigneur sur un linge"
9. Paul Vignon: *Le Saint Suaire de Turin devant la Science, l'Archeologie, l'Histoire, l'Iconographie, la Logique*, Paris, 1938.
10. Suzanne Martinet: *Montloo*.
11. Enciclopedia Cattolica
12. Georges Gharib: *La festa del sacro Mandilion nella Chiesa bizantina*, in *La Sindone e La Scienza*, Ed. Paoline, 1979.
13. *Evangelario*, Rome, 1880.
14. *Apostolos*, Rome, 1881.
15. Max Frei: *Il passato della Sindone*.