

THE SHROUD OF TURIN AND THE FACE OF CHRIST
IN PALEOCHRISTIAN, BYZANTINE
AND WESTERN MEDIEVAL ART*
PART I

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The Incident of Anablatha

It is common opinion among historians that St. Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315-403) wrote to Bishop John of Jerusalem in 393, telling him that at the entry to a church he had found a veil with the image of a man resembling Christ or some saint. This is the first known mention of a probable image of Christ on a veil. According to this letter, Epiphanius, on a pilgrimage to Bethel, came upon a church in a locality called in Greek Anautha, in Latin Anablatha. Entering the church to pray, at the doorway he saw the veil with the image. He tore it down because it was against the authority of Scripture to hang an image in a church. To the custodians of this place, who were indignant at his iconoclastic behavior, he promised to send a new veil of the best quality, without the figure of a man. And he advised the custodians to use the veil he had torn down for the funeral of a pauper. If this incident really refers to Epiphanius, then it is the first notice of an image on a veil which can be associated with Christ.

There are strong doubts that Epiphanius was the protagonist of this iconoclastic act. The letter could also have been written by an iconoclastic forger of the VIIIth century. The story, however, is so vivid that it could not have been *totally* invented.

Almost all scholars mention this iconoclastic act attributed to Epiphanius when they wish to confirm the thesis that the earliest Christians would not have permitted the use of images in their churches. However, as they do not always report all the details described in the letter, their evaluations are incomplete.

Whether or not it was Epiphanius, three points of the incident merit our special attention:

1. The church was in Palestine, not too far from Jerusalem;
2. The image was on a cloth; not a mural or panel painting;
3. The cloth was so large that it could be used as a burial sheet.

The animosity against the use of images was inherited by many Christians from the Jews, who were more bound by tradition and were more rigorous observers of Mosaic Law. The Old Testament

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prohibits every material image of God, not images in general. But in the last centuries before the birth of Christ, there were currents among the Jews which interpreted the biblical prohibition of images of God as a prohibition of every material image, even those which were not meant to represent a divinity. In the IInd and IIIrd centuries after Christ, Jews of the diaspora, not of Palestine, decorated their synagogues with figured frescoes, as we see in the synagogue of Dura Europus.

The writer of the letter attributed to Epiphanius belongs therefore to a rigorous current hostile to the use of images in a church. He declares that he does not remember if the picture at Anablatha was an image of Christ or of some saint. As far as can be understood from the Latin version of the letter, his argument appeals only to the authority of Scripture in general, without indicating any specific commandment. All this part of the letter shows the writer to be a fanatical enemy of images, one who has not learned to distinguish between image and idol. Furthermore, it seems that the letter was written to excuse himself for tardiness in sending a new veil to replace the one he had torn down, since he says that he had not had an opportunity to buy a cloth of good enough quality.

Up to this point, the letter is comprehensible. However, it contains some very strange elements. The image is on a veil. The passage sounds as if the figurative image was something completely out of the ordinary. That makes us think that no images of any kind existed in churches between Cyprus and Palestine, particularly not in the zone near Jerusalem, where Anablatha is located. This very fact poses a big question. Images on cloth are never primary, but derive normally from mural pictures or from reliefs. It is scarcely probable that a church would be decorated only with a figured veil and not with some other image—a fresco, an icon ... Even stranger is the advice that the iconoclast gave to the church custodians, that is, to use the veil with the figure of Christ or of a saint for the funeral of a pauper. Finally, if we have to suppose that no other images existed in that church, it would seem that the image was hanging there at the entrance like something quite extraordinary. Precisely in surroundings where an image must be considered exceptional and not accepted by everybody, one would certainly not expect to find a veil with an image exposed to public view. Is the whole story invented by an iconoclast of the VIIIth c., as George Ostrogorsky believes? But can one invent a detail so bizarre as the advice that, according to the letter, St. Epiphanius gives to the custodians, to use the veil for the burial of a pauper? Is it not more likely that the story of the torn-down veil with an image "like Christ", found in a church not very far from Jerusalem, really happened? There is something hiding in this incident. Is it not a remarkable coincidence that from the VIth c. onward, all the legends which tell how the true portrait of Christ was produced, say that this true portrait was on a veil and not on a panel? Perhaps we wonder even more about another coincidence; that a veil, or rather a linen, which was used for a funeral and carries the imprint, so very clear, of a man,

has been preserved until our own days?

By now we are certain that this linen, the famous Shroud now conserved in Turin, was once in Palestine. It is tempting to look for some analogy between the incident of Anablatha and the Turin linen with its figures "like Christ". How could one possibly hang at the door of a little country church, a veil so long that it could be used—if one cared to carry out the advice of the iconoclast—to cover the length of a human body, back and front? The writer of the letter either was not familiar with Jewish customs or he had not understood the true nature of this "veil" which he must have read about without understanding all the details. Maybe St. Epiphanius did commit some iconoclastic act. However, it is unlikely that he would have written the letter which goes under his name, at least not in the form of the two versions [Greek & Latin] so far known. But to suppose that the torn-down veil was the Shroud—which by its very nature would explain perfectly the advice of the iconoclast to use it for a pauper's funeral—would not be a solution admitted by critical reason. His uncertainty whether it represented Christ or some saint only adds to our doubts.

One thing, however, is explained by the incident of Anablatha; it was indeed risky to publicly display the Shroud with its figurative imprints and one understands the almost absolute reticence, during all the first millennium, to explicitly mention the existence of an image on the Shroud which, if we are to interpret the story of the Bishop Arculph in this sense, was venerated as the funeral linen of Christ.

Another Notice of an Image on Linen at Jerusalem

During his return from the Holy Land, St. Arculph, a bishop of Gaul, was shipwrecked and was given hospitality by Adamnanus, abbot of a convent on the island Iona, one of the Hebrides along the west coast of Scotland. The pilgrim told Adamnanus about his voyage to Jerusalem, and among other things told him that he had seen the linens there. On one of them was the figured image of Christ. All that the bishop related, Adamnanus wrote down on tablets of wax, and then in the final draft arranged the material into three books with the title: *De locis sanctis*. In Book I there are two chapters about the linens Arculph saw at Jerusalem: "*De sudario illo quo Domini caput sepulti contectum est*" and "*De alio sacro linteo quod sicut fertur Sancta Maria Virgo Mater Domini contexerat*". Writing of this linen, Adamnanus not only mentions that it had been woven by the Madonna and that "the formula of the twelve apostles" was embroidered on the fabric,* but also on this linen, he says, one sees "the figured image of the Lord himself". In the preceding chapter about the sudarium, he does not mention any image. It would be easy to conclude that there were two objects: 1) The sudarium from Jesus' tomb and 2) a linen woven by the Madonna, having nothing to do with the

* Many authors have interpreted this phrase, "duodecim apostolorum formulae" on the "linteramen maius" as images of the apostles. In all probability it refers instead to the Creed, the so-called Symbol of the Apostles.

funeral linens. An easy conclusion if it were not for the fact that the abbot of Iona leaves evident signs that in editing the material he had not understood very well the narrative of his shipwrecked guest. Writing of the sudarium, he says in one place that it covered the face of Jesus in the tomb, and he uses the terms "sudarium" and "lindeolum". Neither term indicates a large piece of cloth. He finishes the chapter saying that St. Arculph had indicated the length of the sudarium as not less than 8 feet. Consequently, the sudarium could not be the same object as the linen which measured 8 ft.; or Adamnanus, editing the narrative, did not understand the true nature of the "sudarium" Arculph described. Immediately after mentioning the 8-foot length of the sudarium, Adamnanus adds that chapter about "aliud quoque lindeamen maius". Now how could he have written about "another big linen" if the linen St. Arculph spoke of was only a "lindeolum", a handkerchief? How can we interpret "maius", and how interpret "aliud"? Do we see "aliud quoque lindeamen maius" in opposition to the small sudarium which covered Jesus' face, or in opposition to the big sudarium which measured 8 feet? Did Adamnanus fuse two objects, one small and one large, into one single object? Must we see, consequently, in the "lindeamen" in the following chapter, a third item? or did St. Arculph refer to only two objects, or maybe even only one single thing? It will never be possible to give a satisfactory answer to all these questions.

One detail, however, reveals with some certainty the way Adamnanus edited St. Arculph's original narrative. With all probability the confusion between the "lindeolum" and the "sudarium" which measured 8 ft. stems from the fact that the abbot knew the word "sudarium" only from the Gospel of John (11:44, 20:7), especially Jo 20:7, where one reads in the Vulgate "sudarium quod fuerat super caput eius". Arculph, though, had used the word "sudarium" for the Shroud, which was probably folded in half since he had measured the length as 8 feet. If Adamnanus confused the sudarium which was on Jesus' head with the Shroud, in which the whole body was wrapped, his editing can be interpreted this way: Re-reading his notes on the wax tablets, he did not understand that when St. Arculph mentioned the figured image of Christ, he was thinking directly of the sudarium which measured 8 ft., and not of some other linen, an "aliud quoque lindeamen maius". Considering all this together with the arrangement of the material into two chapters, very unequal in length, it seems to me that in the editing Adamnanus tried in vain to clarify for himself a detail of the narrative that he had not understood too well.

We can conclude that the narrative of the shipwrecked bishop was transmitted through an editing which was not always accurate or clear. Thus Arculph's report about the "sudarium" in Jerusalem cannot be used as a certain document assuring us that the Shroud with its figured image was known in Jerusalem around the year 670. Still, the fact remains very probable.

The other detail, mentioned by Adamnanus with an "ut fertur" (it is reported), was that the Madonna had woven the big linen, that is, the

funeral Shroud of Jesus. This at least finds some accord with a tradition—much later than Arculph's narrative—which reports the fact that in this Shroud the image of the body of Christ Crucified remained imprinted. Gervasius of Tilbury wrote between 1212 and 1214 that the Madonna, at the behest of Joseph of Arimathea, had bought (not woven!) the Shroud, that is, a "linteum mundissimum tam amplum et extensum, quod tota crucifixi corporis effigies in linteo est expressa, cumque deponeretur pendentis de cruce apparuit totius corporis effigies in linteo expressa". Here we have a testimonial which is most explicit and which certainly must be considered an echo of the fact that the Turin Shroud with its image was known in the XIIIth century.

Despite resemblances and points of contact between Arculph's narrative and the Turin Shroud, the nature of Adamnanus' document—which is only the written version of an eye-witness account, edited by a person who was unable to understand all the details of the narrative—does not permit us to identify the "sudarium" and the "linteramen maius" with the Shroud of Turin.

Iconography and the Shroud Imprints

Dr. Max Frei's research in palinology has ascertained that the Shroud was once in Palestine and that it passed through Anatolia to Constantinople before it came to France. There is nothing to indicate that the voyage from the Orient to the Occident took place before the Fourth Crusade (1204) when the western knights assaulted Constantinople and afterwards carried countless relics back to the west. The Shroud must have reached the byzantine capital before 1204. When? We have to admit that we do not know precisely. If we wanted to identify the Turin linen with the famous Mandylion of Edessa, we could date the transfer to 944, the year in which a Mandylion was taken to Constantinople.

Starting from the fact that the Shroud had been in Anatolia and Palestine as well as Constantinople, scholars of Christian art history must ask themselves whether or not the image on the Shroud influenced the iconography of the face of Christ. If this could be established, one might possibly be able to ascertain the authenticity of the Turin relic by this means. It is enough for us to find out if the funeral linen with the figure of a man already existed before 1204, and could have been seen successively in a region which extends from Palestine to Constantinople, and if this big piece of cloth was considered as a most precious relic, not merely as a representation of some saint, but of Christ himself.

The Fundamental Problem: The Similarity between the Sindonic Image and the Classic Type of Christ in Art

An attentive observer cannot fail to see the similarity between the image of the Man of the Shroud and the overwhelming majority of pictures of Christ which are known in the east and in the west. Such a resemblance could be pure chance or it could be the result of a dependence, direct or indirect, from one image to another or of both from a

third common source. If we do not want to admit pure chance, the resemblance between the Man of the Shroud and the type most commonly known of Christ in art—the so-called classic type—must be explained either as a dependence of the Shroud image on iconography or as a dependence of iconography on the Shroud image or of both from a third source common to both.

The two fundamentally opposite theses were already stated at the beginning of our century. Weis-Liebersdorf, for example, writing about the image of Christ and of the apostles, declared that the Shroud image was a medieval creation. This could explain the similarity between the classic images of Christ, and how the classic type of portraits of Christ in art could have influenced the creation of the face on the Shroud. The opposite thesis, that the image of Christ as presented in art must derive from the Shroud, was formulated by Paul Vignon, fervent defender of the authenticity of the Turin relic. From the first publication of Secondo Pia's photograph in 1898, Vignon, basing himself only on the positive and negative photos of the relic, began to study all the questions posed by the Turin linen. To him goes the credit to have blazed almost all the trails to be followed in studying the problems of the Shroud and its historical documentation.

A third position is assumed by almost all historians of art and iconography; they are silent about the problem and behave as if the Turin relic did not exist.

Weis-Liebersdorf follows de Mely when he says that the sindonic image was produced from a wood block. The marks of the wounds would presumably have been touched up with paint. To this thesis one can reply immediately that all research and experiments exclude with absolute certainty every hypothesis of an artificially produced image on the Shroud. If an artistic production of the sindonic image is excluded, then the only alternative is that art-images are dependencies on the sindonic image.

Paul Vignon was the first to attempt to establish a connection between the Shroud and the image of Christ in art. He proposed that Christian art had been influenced by the Turin relic. Vignon was a scholar of the natural sciences, of chemistry and biology. His iconographic arguments in regard to the Shroud therefore lack a bit of exact methodology. He was not sufficiently acquainted with the very vast range of the diverse images of Christ nor the variety of details they show. Vignon is right when he affirms that a resemblance exists between the classic type of the face of Christ and the Shroud face. He is right when he says that certain deformities on the Shroud face are due to the maltreatment Christ suffered during the different stages of his passion. If identical traces are found in art works representing Christ, Vignon reasoned, then these art works must be seen as dependent on the Turin relic. These same disfiguring marks seen on the Shroud face are indeed found on images of Christ but, Vignon added, they are found also on other personages. This, for art historians, is the weak spot in Vignon's argument. In establishing a connection not only between the Shroud and images of Christ, but also with images of

other persons, Vignon went beyond the limits of a method of certainty. He was the first to compare the sindonic face with the diverse art images, the first to introduce a method fundamentally sound, but he did not realize its limitations. Therefore, even though we owe so much to Vignon, we will take a different path.

The Face of Christ on Paleochristian Sarcophagi

The earliest sculptures showing a similarity to the Shroud face are found on various sarcophagi of the Theodosian era, a period that goes from 370 to about 410. A group of sarcophagi of this period portray Christ with a narrow and majestic face, a medium-length beard, moustaches and long hair which falls upon the shoulders, sometimes showing a center part.

This type of bearded Christ differs from that of a young Christ, beardless and often with the round face of a child. The youthful type is found on almost all the sarcophagi antecedent to the Theodosian era, and in most of the catacomb pictures before the IVth century.

We know of several examples of a bearded Christ before 370, but none so majestic as those on several sarcophagi of the Theodosian era. Only in this period do we find the characteristic long face, long nose and hair falling to the shoulders.

While the first examples do not yet have beards, the face is already a bit lengthened, the long hair falls symmetrically, however without a part in the middle. For example, the Christ of the "sarcophagus with the little columns" in the hall of the University of Perugia, dated around 350 to 360; and the sarcophagus #174 of the Lateran collection now in the Vatican. A statuette of Christ of the youthful unbearded type with long hair falling at the back is found in the Museum of the Terme, Rome. (Fig. 1)

The classic type is found for the first time in the following sarcophagi: A fragment of a sarcophagus with small columns in St. Sebastian Outside the Walls, Rome, of ca. 370; the "sarcophagus of the eleven niches" of the Lapidary Museum of Arles, dated before 370; the "sarcophagus of the doors of a city" dated 380-390, in the church of St. Ambrose in Milan; and the Sarcophagus #151 of the Lateran collection in the Vatican, dated near 400. (Fig. 2) In all of these works the face of Christ, in the essential traits of the head, beard and hair, corresponds to the face on the Shroud. As Gerhard Egger recently demonstrated, this type conforms to the precise requirement to present a true portrait of the Savior.

Egger reported on this at the II International Congress of Sindonology, 1978, explaining that after the victory of Christianity and the Peace of Milan (312), from Constantine to Theodosius a cult of Christ developed which assumed more and more the form of the emperor-cult. One of the most important objects necessary for the pagan cult was an image of the emperor, and to fulfill its function the image had to be a portrait of the deified sovereign. When the emperor image gave way to the Christ image, this too must be presented as a true and individual portrait. And this portrait, Egger concludes, must



Fig. 1: (Left) Detail of youthful Christ. Museum of the Terme. Photo by Alinari.

Fig. 2: (Right) Head of Christ, sarcophagus #151, Lateran collection. Photo Gall. Pont.



Fig. 3: (Left) Christ heals the blind man.

Fig. 4: (Right) Christ raises Lazarus.

have derived from the Shroud.

The sarcophagi which show Christ with the bearded and majestic face corresponding to the Shroud face, almost always represent the Lord in a determined iconographic context. As Geerke observed, it is the glorious Christ and of the celestial scene of the *Traditio legis*. Another type of a bearded Christ earlier than the Theodosian era is seen in the IIIrd c. sculpture of Christ Philosopher. One example is the Christ of the "polychrome fragments" of the Museum of the Terme, dated around 300. This Christ has a wide head, His hair is rumpled, whereas the majestic Christ of the Theodosian era has long hair well-combed, "like the women", as the iconoclast Epiphanius remarked, criticizing the hair style of some ascetics in iconoclastic accents which we have already encountered. Geerke says that the particular softness of the hair of this Christ is consonant with the beauty of this type of head, and contrasts impressively with the firmness of his gaze and the virility denoted by the beard. In the Theodosian era, this type is always found in the context of the majestic scene of the *Traditio legis*. In other iconographic contexts, excepting only the above-named fragment of St. Sebastian, the IVth c. represents Christ as beardless and youthful.

A century later, Christ appears with a beard in a passion scene on the wooden doors of the church of St. Sabina in Rome. In all the other scenes of his life before his glorification, he is presented without a beard. As Geerke points out, this confirms the distinction between a Christ who works miracles, a Christ always youthful and beardless, and a bearded Christ in the scenes of the passion. This distinction, observed for the first time on the doors of St. Sabina, also appears in the cycles of the public life and the passion and resurrection scenes of the mosaics in St. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, which will be discussed further on.

So we meet the classic type of Christ with the beard and a long, often majestic face, where the Lord is represented in his passion and glorification. Geerke observed that the majestic Christ of the *Traditio legis* sarcophagi was transmitted in various forms, such as the severe Pantocrator, appearing in the east as late as the byzantine and post-byzantine eras. And, we might add, also in the west wherever the byzantine influence is found. We have, therefore, a classic type of Christ with a high and majestic face, with beard and moustache, as seen on sarcophagi in the theme of heavenly glory and once, at St. Sebastian, also in a scene of the Lord's passion. In the east, this type of Christ became the canonic and only type for all figurative art, and in the west it continued to predominate.

Presenting Christ as a beardless youth was a means of expressing his divine nature. Christ is Son of God, co-eternal with the Father, and this sonship precludes a birth in time, as was affirmed by the Council of Nicea against Arius. Eternity was usually expressed, in antique times, with the image of a youth or even a child. For example, the geni of the four seasons, who return year after year and who therefore are eternal without birth in time, are portrayed as children. The figuration



Fig. 5: At the Last Supper.



Fig. 6: Christ led to prison.



Fig. 7: Christ before the Sanhedrin.



Fig. 8: Christ before Pilate.

of a youthful, beardless Christ emphasizes his divine, eternal nature, and therefore obviates any intention to give a portrait with the semblance of the man Jesus of Nazareth. But when it is a question of representing the glorious Christ, with his human nature glorified through his passion and glorious in his resurrection, it was necessary to insist upon the individual personality of Christ. If one wishes to express the totality of the Kerugma by an image, one must provide an image with individual and personal features, which make it clear that the Jesus Christ who suffered the passion, died and was buried, was the same who rose again and appeared glorified. Emphasizing the uniqueness and the individuality of Jesus Christ by means of his personal portrait is, in our opinion, a theological requirement for the obligatory insistence on the identity of Christ before and after his passion.

The Christological Cycle of Mosaics in St. Apollinare Nuovo

Nowhere can one study the differences between the youthful beardless Christ and the majestic bearded Christ as well as in the church of St. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. The mosaics of the last register of the central nave, all from the time of King Theodoric in the second decade of the VIth c., represent the most complete Christological cycle known in paleochristian art. The register on the north wall is dedicated to scenes of Jesus' public life, where he is always represented as young and beardless. The register on the south wall depicts the passion and glorification, and in these scenes he is shown with a beard.

The mosaics of the public life repeat essentially the same schema; Jesus' face is juvenile or childish, sometimes round, sometimes oval. (Fig. 3) Twice—in the scenes of the resurrection of Lazarus and of the calling of Peter and Andrew—the face is rather rectangular with a low forehead; the short hair is almost like some sort of cap, covering all the scalp without the least hint of a part. In the Lazarus scene, we detect the hint of a beard on his cheeks. (Fig. 4)

The mosaics of the passion and of the post-resurrection appearances do not show the same essentially uniform character. In the scenes of the last supper and the sacerdotal prayer, the manner of representing Christ is similar to that in the scenes of his public life. (Fig. 5) The forehead is low, the hair short. In the second scene, an attentive observer can detect the hint of a part in the hair. On the mosaic of the betrayal of Judas, the Lord's face is heightened a bit more than in the previous scenes, with the forehead not quite so low. The hair seems combed and is parted. The same type of face was maintained in the scene where Jesus is led to prison. (Fig. 6) But in the following mosaic, where he stands before Caiaphas, he is shown with a round head and only a hint of a beard on the cheeks. His hair, however, is combed and parted. (Fig. 7) He still appears youthful in the mosaic of the denial of Peter, where the beard is barely sketched, the hair divided symmetrically from a center part.

The last four scenes—Christ before Pilate, (Fig. 8) Christ on the *via*

crucis, the Emmaus episode and the appearance of the Risen Christ to the eleven—are characterized by two traits: 1) In all four of these scenes the head of Christ is consistently the majestic bearded type, the face rectangular, high forehead and long hair falling symmetrically from a center part; and 2) there are more individual features detailed on these last four faces than are found in any of the other scenes. One individual feature is the little lock of hair, sometimes a double lock, in the middle of the forehead, in all but the scene of the *via crucis*. Another individual feature is seen in the moustaches, which extend beyond the angles of the mouth; another, the bipartite beard, seen in the mosaics of the *via crucis* and the apparition to the eleven; and in this latter, the slightly concave left cheek. The face of the Lord is already cast in the form characteristic of almost all the byzantine Christs of later times.

This minute description of all the details was necessary to have in mind all the elements which we need for a final inquiry concerning the reason for the diversity of the two fundamental types of the face of Christ, beardless and bearded. We notice in the entire cycle of mosaics of St. Apollinare Nuovo, but particularly in the scenes on the north wall, that the beardless type is presented in a uniform manner; the schema varies little. However, quite a few variations and details appear on the bearded faces, which are practically limited to the mosaics on the south wall. Without doubt we find ourselves before a double iconographic tradition. One tradition wants to see Christ young and beardless, the other bearded. The first tradition is concerned, as we have seen, with the desire to emphasize the divinity and eternity of the Savior. With some probability, this tendency and the corresponding iconographic tradition can be localized in Italy. The other tradition, which represents Christ with a beard, comes rather from the Orient. Both traditions meet at Ravenna in the mosaics of the Christological cycle of St. Apollinare Nuovo. On the wall dedicated to scenes of Jesus' public life, variations of the young beardless face are few and not substantial, and all the scenes are designed essentially according to the same schema. But the bearded Christ of the passion and post-resurrection cycles contain elements of the beardless Christ, particularly in the first two episodes which depict the last supper and the sacerdotal prayer. Even the Christ of the denial of Peter belongs to the iconographic type which was used in the scenes of the public life. Thus in the mosaics of the passion cycle, we notice traces of the beardless type. Although this influence contaminates the clarity and unity of the bearded type, one can reduce the models for the face of Christ in the cycle of St. Apollinare Nuovo to two types and not more. While the characteristic details of the bearded type are not all and not always found with the same clarity on all the mosaics of the south wall, one can easily perceive that all derive from a single model. If we ask which of the two types might be the individual portrait of Jesus Christ, the choice is not difficult: It is the one which shows Christ with long hair, a bipartite beard, moustaches, a high forehead,

locks on the forehead, and the concave cheek.

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