

7/6/2015. *The Turin Shroud*

After a gap of five years the Shroud of Turin has gone on display in the cathedral for two months. On this linen cloth is a faint image of a man's face and body, showing what appear to be bloodstains consistent with a crucifixion. The image is clearer in photographic negatives, which were first taken in the late 19th century and triggered renewed interest in the cloth. Some say it is the burial shroud of Jesus Christ. Belief that the Turin Shroud shows Christ's face began in the mediaeval Catholic cult of relics, but is now affirmed by some fundamentalist protestants. Neither the Vatican nor any protestant denomination has asserted its authenticity in the modern era, however. Why is that, and why is its appeal so broad?

In 1389-90 Bishop Pierre d'Arcis of Troyes, in the Champagne region of France, drafted a letter to a man he believed was the Pope, in Avignon (although the papacy is now regarded as having been restored to Rome a decade earlier; for several decades there were rival claimants in the two cities). D'Arcis' letter reported an investigation some 35 years earlier by a previous Bishop of Troyes, and states that this shroud was a forgery to which the artist had admitted. The Shroud later passed to an Italian aristocratic family and then to Turin cathedral. Here is part of Bishop d'Arcis' letter:

The Dean of... Lirey [which is in the Diocese of Troyes]... not from any motive of devotion but only of gain, procured for his church a certain cloth cunningly painted, upon which by clever sleight of hand was depicted the twofold image of one man, that is to say, the back and the front, falsely declaring that this was the actual shroud in which our saviour Jesus Christ was enfolded in the tomb... and further to attract the multitude so that money might cunningly be wrung from them, pretended miracles were worked...after diligent enquiry and examination [the earlier bishop] discovered the fraud and how the said cloth had been cunningly painted, the truth being attested by the artist who had painted it, to wit, that it was a work of human skill and not miraculously wrought.

Believers in the Shroud's authenticity have probed the context of this draft, but to doubt its claims you have to believe that it is a fake dating from d'Arcis' time or later, or that d'Arcis made up the story of his predecessor's investigation. In that case you would also have to find a motive strong enough for d'Arcis to be prepared to lie to a man he believed was the Pope. It is risky – and therefore rare – for a man in a hierarchy to lie to those at the top.

D'Arcis connects the cloth with a knight of Lirey, Geoffroy de Charny (who was killed in 1356 fighting an English expeditionary force in the intermittent '100 Years War'). Geoffroy's grandfather, Jean de Joinville, went on one of the Crusades with the King of France and wrote it up. His account does not mention any shroud, but modern authors have speculated that it could have been brought to France by Crusader knights after surviving for a thousand years as one of the images known in the Byzantine Empire comprising Christians round the eastern Mediterranean, whose capital city was sacked – disgracefully – by Crusader knights in 1204. That could put the Shroud back to Christ's time and place. So how old actually is it?

Radio-carbon dating tests have pinned the Shroud to the 130 years prior to d'Arcis' letter, with an accuracy of a few decades. The tests were run in 1988 by laboratories at the University of Oxford, the University of Arizona and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. The three laboratories also used the same techniques on materials of known age, including one from near Christ's time. The results on the other materials confirmed the accuracy of the dating procedure, and the three laboratories all agreed that the material tested from the Shroud was mediaeval.

It has been suggested that the material taken for testing was inadvertently cut from a part of the Shroud that had undergone invisible repair, as tapestries may. Patches were sewn on the Shroud to repair damage caused by a fire in 1532, but these are obvious and were avoided when samples were cut for dating. No subtler repairs were detected by the textiles experts present when the samples were cut, or by the expert used by Catholic authorities in conservation of the Shroud in 2002, *after* the claim. This expert, Mechthild Flury-Lemberg, has clarified that it would not have been possible to make a patch that large that was invisible on both sides of the Shroud. Chemical discrepancies between the sample and the centre of the Shroud have been inferred from spectra observed under irradiation, but these are consistent with the simpler explanation that the edges and corners of the Shroud appear much dirtier than the centre, due obviously to repeated handling over centuries. The samples

cut out were cleaned before the dating tests, so that the material tested was almost entirely cloth and not organic matter that had gathered on it later. Other details of the Shroud are not inconsistent with a mediaeval European origin, despite some claims to the contrary.

Moreover the unusually elongated body proportions of the image, and its overall appearance, are characteristic of mediaeval gothic art. The image has been reproduced in recent years using techniques available in the 14th century, by wet-moulding a cloth over a bas-relief, letting it dry, and rubbing powdered pigment on with a dauber, in the same way that a rubbing is taken of a gravestone. This was done by a man called Joe Nickell. Traces of pigments used in paint were found on the Shroud by a forensic scientist who was involved, Walter McCrone. Blood might also have been daubed on the cloth. The work of McCrone and Nickell does not prove that the image was made in this way, but it disposes of objections that the three-dimensional nature of the image and other features could not have been fabricated by mediaeval artists.

What of scripture? The prophet Isaiah (50:6) foresaw that Jesus would have his beard pulled out during the torments of his last hours before his crucifixion, but the figure on the Turin Shroud has a beard – and a forked beard, although forks would be the obvious thing for tormenters to pull. Moreover the gospel of John (19:23-20:7) indicates that Jesus was stripped of clothing and crucified naked; after that, more than one piece of cloth (the Greek is plural) was used to wrap his body, with preservative spices, and a separate cloth was placed over his head. It is very difficult to reconcile John's account with the claim that the Turin Shroud is a cloth placed over Jesus' entire body and head, from which it gained an imprint. If, moreover, Jesus' face was visible on the burial cloths, it is odd that the New Testament nowhere says so.

Why has this image excited interest among Christians of all denominations? Many believers have an understandable wish to know what Jesus looked like. About his appearance we have been told only that he was a normal-looking Jew (Isaiah 53:2), although obviously with no sin in his face – something visible to the eyes of the heart but which I doubt any artist could capture representationally. Jesus' words and deeds, as recorded in the gospels, are what count.