



# Scandals and Follies of the 'Holy Shroud'

The Shroud of Turin continues to be the subject of media presentations treating it as so mysterious as to imply a supernatural origin. One recent study (Binga 2001) found only ten credible skeptical books on the topic versus over 400 promoting the cloth as the authentic, or potentially authentic, burial cloth of Jesus—including most recently a revisionist tome, *The Resurrection of the Shroud* (Antonacci 2000). Yet since the cloth appeared in the middle of the fourteenth century it has been at the center of scandal, exposés, and controversy—a dubious legacy for what is purported to be the most holy relic in Christendom.

## Faked Shrouds

There have been numerous “true” shrouds of Jesus—along with vials of his mother’s breast milk, hay from the manger in which he was born, and countless relics of his crucifixion—but the Turin cloth uniquely bears the apparent imprints of a crucified man. Unfortunately the cloth is incompatible with New Testament accounts of Jesus’ burial. John’s gospel (19:38–42, 20:5–7) specifically states that the body was “wound” with “linen clothes” and a large quantity of burial spices (myrrh and aloes). Still another cloth (called “the napkin”) covered his

face and head. In contrast, the Shroud of Turin represents a *single, draped* cloth (laid under and then over the “body”) without any trace of the burial spices.

Of the many earlier purported shrouds of Christ, which were typically about half the length of the Turin cloth,



Image on the Turin Shroud.

one was the subject of a reported seventh-century dispute on the island of Iona between Christians and Jews, both of whom claimed it. As adjudicator, an Arab ruler placed the alleged relic in a fire from which it levitated, unscathed, and fell at the feet of the Christians—or so says a pious tale. In medieval Europe alone, there were “at least forty-three ‘True Shrouds’” (Humber 1978, 78).

## Scandal at Lirey

The cloth now known as the Shroud of Turin first appeared about 1355 at a little church in Lirey, in north central France. Its owner, a soldier of fortune named Geoffroy de Charney, claimed it as the authentic shroud of Christ, although he was never to explain how he acquired such a fabulous possession. According to a later bishop’s report, written by Pierre D’Arcis to the Avignon pope, Clement VII, in 1389, the shroud was being used as part of a faith-healing scam:

The case, Holy Father, stands thus. Some time since in this diocese of Troyes the dean of a certain collegiate church, to wit, that of Lirey, falsely and deceitfully, being consumed with the passion of avarice, and not from any motive of devotion but only of gain, procured for his church a certain cloth cunningly painted, upon which by a clever sleight of hand was depicted the twofold image of one man, that is to say, the back and the front, he falsely declaring and pretending that this was the actual shroud in which our Savior Jesus Christ was enfolded in the tomb, and upon which the whole likeness of the Savior had remained thus impressed together with the wounds which He bore. . . . And further to attract the multitude so that money might cunningly be wrung from them, pretended miracles were worked, certain men being hired to represent themselves as healed at the moment of the exhibition of the shroud.

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recumbent figure, and the physique is so unnaturally elongated (similar to figures in Gothic art!) that one pro-shroud pathologist concluded Jesus must have suffered from Marfan's syndrome (Nickell 1989)!

STURP lacked experts in art and forensic chemistry—with one exception: famed microanalyst Walter C. McCrone. Examining thirty-two tape-lifted samples from the shroud, McCrone identified the "blood" as tempera paint containing red ochre and vermilion along with traces of rose madder—pigments used by medieval artists to depict blood. He also discovered that on the image—but not the background—were significant amounts of the red ochre pigment. He first thought this was applied as a dry powder but later concluded it was a component of dilute paint applied in the medieval *grisaille* (monochromatic) technique (McCrone 1996; cf. Nickell 1998). For his efforts McCrone was held to a secrecy agreement, while statements were made to the press that there was no evidence of artistry. He was, he says, "drummed out" of STURP.

STURP representatives paid a surprise visit to McCrone's lab to confiscate his samples, then gave them to two late additions to STURP, John Heller and Alan Adler, neither of whom was a forensic serologist or a pigment expert. The pair soon proclaimed they had "identified the presence of blood." However, at the 1983 conference of the prestigious International Association for Identification, forensic analyst John F. Fischer explained how results similar to theirs could be obtained from tempera paint.

A more recent claim concerns reported evidence of human DNA in a shroud "blood" sample, although the Archbishop of Turin and the Vatican refused to authenticate the samples or accept any research carried out on them. University of Texas researcher Leoncio Garza-Valdez, in his *The DNA of God?* (1999, 41), claims it was possible "to clone the sample and amplify it," proving it was "ancient" blood "from a human being or high primate," while Ian Wilson's *The Blood and the Shroud* (1998, 91) asserted it was "human blood."

Actually the scientist at the DNA lab, Victor Tryon, told *Time* magazine that he

could not say how old the DNA was or that it came from blood. As he explained, "Everyone who has ever touched the shroud or cried over the shroud has left a potential DNA signal there." Tryon resigned from the new shroud project due to what he disparaged as "zealotry in science" (Van Biema 1998, 61).

### Pollen Fraud?

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only have originated from plants that grew exclusively in Palestine at the time of Christ." Earlier Frei had also claimed to have discovered pollens on the cloth that were characteristic of Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) and the area of ancient Edessa—seeming to confirm a "theory" of the shroud's missing early history. Wilson (1979) conjectured that the shroud was the fourth-century Image of Edessa, a legendary "miraculous" imprint of Jesus' face made as a gift to King Abgar. Wilson's notion was that the shroud had been folded so that only the face showed and that it had thus been disguised for centuries. Actually, had the cloth been kept in a frame for such a long period there would have been an age-yellowed, rectangular area around the face. Nevertheless Frei's alleged pollen evidence gave new support to Wilson's ideas.

I say *alleged* evidence since Frei had credibility problems. Before his death in 1983 his reputation suffered when, representing himself as a handwriting expert, he pronounced the infamous "Hitler diaries" genuine; they were soon exposed as forgeries.

In the meantime an even more serious question had arisen about Frei's pollen

evidence. Whereas he reported finding numerous types of pollen from Palestine and other areas, STURP's tape-lifted samples, taken at the same time, showed few pollen. Micropaleontologist Steven D. Schafersman was probably the first to publicly suggest Frei might be guilty of deception. He explained how unlikely it was, given the evidence of the shroud's exclusively European history, that thirty-three different Middle Eastern pollens could have reached the cloth, particularly only pollen from Palestine, Istanbul, and the Anatolian steppe. With such selectivity, Schafersman stated, "these would

be miraculous winds indeed." In an article in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* Schafersman (1982) called for an investigation of Frei's work.

When Frei's tape samples became available after his death, McCrone was asked to authenticate them. This he was readily able to do, he told me, "since it was easy to find red ochre on linen fibers much the same as I had seen them on my samples." But there were few pollen other than on a single tape which bore "dozens" in one small area. This indicated that the tape had subsequently been "contaminated," probably deliberately, McCrone concluded, by having been pulled back and the pollen surreptitiously introduced.

McCrone added (1993):

One further point with respect to Max which I haven't mentioned anywhere, anytime to anybody is based on a statement made by his counterpart in Basel as head of the Police Crime Laboratory there that Max had been several times found guilty and was censured by the Police hierarchy in Switzerland for, shall we say, overenthusiastic interpretation of his evidence. His Basel counterpart had been on the investigating committee and expressed surprise in a letter to me that Max was able to continue in his position as Head of the Police Crime Lab in Zurich.

## C-14 Falsehoods

The pollen "evidence" became especially important to believers following the devastating results of radiocarbon dating tests in 1988. Three laboratories (at Oxford, Zurich, and the University of Arizona) used accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) to date samples of the linen. The results, formally published by twenty-one authors in *Nature* (Damon et al. 1989), were in close agreement and were given added credibility by the use of control samples of known dates. The resulting age span was circa A.D. 1260–1390—consistent with the time of the reported forger's confession.

Shroud enthusiasts were devastated, but they soon rallied, beginning a campaign to discredit the radiocarbon findings. Someone put out a false story that the AMS tests were done on one of the patches from the 1532 fire, thus supposedly yielding a late date. A Russian scientist, Dmitrii Kuznetsov, claimed to have established experimentally that heat from a fire (like that of 1532) could alter the radiocarbon date. But others could not replicate his alleged results and it turned out that his physics calculations had been plagiarized—complete with an error (Wilson 1998, 219–223). (Kuznetsov was also exposed in *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* for bogus research in a study criticizing evolution [Larhammar 1995].)

A more persistent challenge to the radiocarbon testing was hurled by Garza-Valdez (1993). He claimed to have obtained samples of the "miraculous cloth" that bore a microbial coating, contamination that could have altered the radiocarbon date. However that notion was effectively disproved by physicist Thomas J. Pickett (1996). He performed a simple calculation which showed that, for the shroud to have been altered by thirteen centuries (i.e., from Jesus' first-century death to the radiocarbon date of 1325±65 years), there would have to be twice as much contamination, by weight, as the cloth itself!

## Shroud of Rorschach

Following the suspicious pollen evidence were claims that plant images had been identified on the cloth. These were allegedly discerned from "smudgy" appear-

ing areas in shroud photos that were subsequently enhanced. The work was done by a retired geriatric psychiatrist, Alan Whanger, and his wife Mary, former missionaries who have taken up image analysis as a hobby. They were later assisted by an Israeli botanist who looked at their photos of "flower" images (many of them "wilted" and otherwise distorted) and exclaimed, "Those are the flowers of Jerusalem!" Apparently no one has thought to see if some might match the flowers of France or Italy or even to try to prove that the images are indeed floral (given the relative scarcity of pollen grains on the cloth).

The visualized "flower and plant images" join other perceived shapes seen—Rorschach-like—in the shroud's mottled image and off-image areas. These include "Roman coins" over the eyes, head and arm "phylacteries" (small Jewish prayer boxes), an "amulet," and such crucifixion-associated items (cf. John, ch. 19) as "a large nail," a "hammer," "sponge on a reed," "Roman thrusting spear," "pliers," "two scourges," "two brush brooms," "two small nails," "large spoon or trowel in a box," "a loose coil of rope," a "cloak" with "belt," a "tunic," a pair of "sandals," and other hilarious imaginings including "Roman dice"—all discovered by the Whangers (1998) and their botanist friend.

They and others have also reported finding ancient Latin and Greek words, such as "Jesus" and "Nazareth." Even Ian Wilson (1998, 242) felt compelled to state: "While there can be absolutely no doubting the sincerity of those who make these claims, the great danger of such arguments is that researchers may 'see' merely what their minds trick them into thinking is there."

## Conclusion

We see that "Shroud science"—like "creation science" and other pseudosciences in the service of dogma—begins with the desired answer and works backward to the evidence. Although they are bereft of any viable hypothesis for the image formation, sindonologists are quick to dismiss the profound, corroborative evidence for artistry. Instead, they suggest that the "mystery" of the shroud implies a miracle, but of course that is

merely an example of the logical fallacy called arguing from ignorance.

Worse, some have engaged in pseudoscience and even, apparently, outright scientific fraud, while others have shamefully mistreated the honest scientists who reported unpopular findings. We should again recall the words of Canon Ulysse Chevalier, the Catholic scholar who brought to light the documentary evidence of the shroud's medieval origin. As he lamented, "The history of the shroud constitutes a protracted violation of the two virtues so often commended by our holy books: justice and truth."

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