

# PBS 'Secrets of the Dead' Buries the Truth about Turin Shroud

JOE NICKELL

Although science and scholarship have demonstrated that the Shroud of Turin is a medieval fake, die-hard shroud enthusiasts continue to claim otherwise. Just in time for Easter 2004 viewing, a PBS television documentary that aired Wednesday, April 7, gave them a forum to state their conviction that the image on the cloth is a first-century picture—miraculous or otherwise—of Jesus' crucified body.

As part of the *Secrets of the Dead* series, the "Shroud of Christ?" presentation was a study in pseudoscience, faulty logic, and the suppression of historical facts. Omitted were mention of the contrary gospel evidence, the reported forger's confession, and the microanalytical analyses that showed the "blood" and "body" images were rendered in tempera paint. Unsubstantiated claims were presented as fact, and the radiocarbon results—which dated the cloth to the time of the

forger's confession—were treated in straw-man fashion: presented as virtually the sole impediment to authenticity. Knowledgeable skeptics were avoided.



Instead, viewers were subjected to the astonishingly absurd notion of an art historian named Nicholas Allen that the image was "the world's first photograph." (The technique was supposedly invented to make a fake shroud and then conveniently lost for subsequent centuries!)

The intellectual incompetence or outright dishonesty of the show's producers is matched only by that of the PBS executives who foisted it on a cred-

ulous Easter-season audience. The following facts are an antidote to that scientific and historical revisionism:

- The shroud contradicts the Gospel of John, which describes multiple cloths (including a separate "napkin" over the face), as well as "an hundred pound weight" of burial spices—not a trace of which appears on the cloth.

- No examples of the shroud linen's complex herringbone twill weave date from the first century, when burial cloths tended to be of plain weave in any case.

- The shroud has no known history prior to the mid-fourteenth century, when it turned up in the possession of a man who never explained how he had obtained the most holy relic in Christendom.

- The earliest written record of the shroud is a bishop's report to Pope Clement VII, dated 1389, stating that it originated as part of a faith-healing scheme, with "pretended miracles" being staged to defraud credulous pilgrims.

- The bishop's report also stated that a predecessor had "discovered the fraud and how the said cloth had been cunningly painted, the truth being attested by the artist who had painted it" (emphasis added).

- Although, as St. Augustine lamented in the fourth century, Jesus' appearance was completely unknown, the

---

Joe Nickell, Ph.D., is CSICOP's Senior Research Fellow and an expert on the Shroud of Turin. He is author of *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin* (Prometheus 1983, 1998) and numerous articles, including "Blooming 'Shroud' Claims" (*SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Nov./Dec. 1999) and "Pollens on the 'Shroud': A Study in Deception" (*SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Summer 1994).

shroud image follows the conventional artistic likeness.

- The physique is unnaturally elongated (like figures in Gothic art), and there is a lack of wraparound distortions that would be expected if the cloth had enclosed an actual three-dimensional object like a human body. The hair hangs as for a standing, rather than reclining figure, and the imprint of a bloody foot is incompatible with the outstretched leg to which it belongs.

- The alleged blood stains are unnaturally picture-like. Instead of matting the hair, for instance, they run in rivulets on the outside of the locks. Also, dried "blood" (as on the arms) has been implausibly transferred to the cloth. The blood remains bright red, unlike genuine blood that blackens with age.

- In 1973, internationally known forensic serologists subjected the "blood" to a battery of tests—for chemical properties, species, blood grouping, etc. The substance lacked the properties of blood, instead containing suspicious, reddish granules.

- Subsequently, the distinguished microanalyst Walter McCrone identified the "blood" as red ochre and vermilion tempera paint and concluded that the entire image had been painted.

- In 1988, the shroud cloth was radiocarbon dated by three different laboratories

(at Zurich, Oxford, and the University of Arizona). The results were in close agreement and yield a date range of A.D. 1260–1390, about the time of the reported forger's confession (ca. A.D. 1355).

Defenders of the shroud's authenticity have rationalizations for each damning piece of evidence. For example, they assert that microbial contamination

allows the preponderance of evidence to lead to a conclusion: the shroud is the work of a medieval artisan. The various pieces of the puzzle effectively interlock and corroborate each other. In the words of Catholic historian Ulysse Chevalier, who brought to light the documentary evidence of the Shroud's medieval origin, "The history of the shroud constitutes a

### The intellectual incompetence or outright dishonesty of the show's producers is matched only by that of the PBS executives who foisted it on a credulous Easter-season audience.

might have altered the radiocarbon date, although for an error of thirteen centuries, there would have to be twice as much contamination by weight as the cloth itself! Beginning with the desired answer, they work backward to the evidence, picking and choosing and—all too often—engaging in pseudoscience.

In contrast, the scientific approach

protracted violation of the two virtues so often commended by our holy books, justice and truth."

For more information on the Shroud of Turin and other allegedly miraculous images of Jesus of Nazareth, visit the new "Miraculous Self-Portraits of Jesus?" Feature Exhibit on the Skeptiseum ([www.skeptiseum.org](http://www.skeptiseum.org)). □

## A Once-in-a-Lifetime Experience— Cruise the Caribbean with Secular Humanists and Skeptics!

**December 11–18, 2004**

Onboard Holland America's *Zaandam* out of Pt. Canaveral, Florida, visiting the British Virgin Islands, U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Bahamas.

There'll be guest lecturers and surprises galore. Enjoy a grand vacation in grand company, while you support the Center for Inquiry. For itinerary, pricing, and reservations contact Center for Inquiry—Florida

at 800-398-7571

or e-mail [cruise@cfiflorida.org](mailto:cruise@cfiflorida.org).

