The Burial Shroud in the Carmina Burana

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The Carmina Burana are probably best-known today thanks to the dramatic classical music adaptation by Carl Orff (I say classical, but it is more like heavy metal compared to Mozart or Bach). Those who look at the lyrics realize that they are in Latin; those who read a translation realize that the songs are mainly about women and alcohol (there is a nineteenth-century translation of some of the poems called "Wine, women and song", which appropriately reflects the content of a good part of the collection).

What fewer people realize is that another part of the collection of poems known as the Carmina Burana is made up of deeply religious poetry. The widely ranging collection of poems (some of which are in German) dates from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and is known as the Carmina Burana as the manuscript was found in the Bavarian abbey of Benediktbeuern, although many of the poems are also present in numerous other manuscripts in other archives.

The text that contains a mention of the burial shroud of Christ is a play based on the passion. There are various relevant passages, given below in both Latin and English[15]. The first significant scene (from the perspective of the burial cloths) is when the two disciples come to the empty tomb:

Tunc Petrus et Iohannes properant ad monumentum, et praecurrens Iohannes et inveniens sudarium cantat:
Monumentum inveni vacuum
nec in eo video mortuum.
Miror quidem si resurrexit
an aliquis eum abstulerit.
Postea venit Petrus tollens linteamina. Revertuntur ad omnes apostolos cantantes:
Monumentum vidimus vacuum
nec in eo vidimus mortuum;
sed nescimus si resurrexit
an aliquis eum abstulerit.

Then Peter and John hurry to the tomb. John gets there first and finding a headcloth sings:
I found the tomb empty
and saw no dead body in it.
I wonder if he has risen again
or if someone removed him.

[15] Text and translation from *Carmina Burana* Volume II, edited and translated by David A. Traill (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 2018). I have adapted some of the translations.

After this Peter comes, picking up the burial cloths[16]*. They return to all the apostles, singing:*
We saw that the tomb was empty
and saw no dead body in it.
But we do not know if he has risen again
or if someone has removed him.

The next scene is staged after what is traditionally known as the harrowing of hell (the descent of Christ into hell):

Item apostoli videntes eam eminus in talem vocem prorumpunt cantando:
Doc nobis, Maria,
quid vidisti in via?
Maria respondit:
Sepulchrum Christi viventis
et gloriam vidi resurgentis,
angelicos testes
sudarium et vestes.
Surrexit Christus, spes mea;
Pracedet suos in Galilea.
…
Deinde omnes apostoli et mulieres veniunt ostendere linteamina populo. Cantant:
Cernitis, o socii, ecce linteamina et sudarium, et corpus Iesu in sepulchro non est inventum.

The disciples, seeing her at a distance, burst into song as follows:
Tell us, Mary,
what did you see on the way?
Mary replies:
I saw the tomb of the living Christ
and the glory of our risen Lord,
and the angelic[17] witnesses of this,
the headcloth and the other cloths.
Christ, my one hope, has risen;
he will precede his followers to Galilee.

16 The published translation has the mistaken "strips of the shroud"; apart from the possible ambiguity (it could mean that the burial shroud has been torn up), "linteamina" does not mean "strips".
17 Again, I have modified the printed translation of "the angels who are witnesses of this"; the Latin "angelicus" is better taken as an adjective, referring to the burial cloths. Describing them as "angelic" means they are holy or sacred.

Before we look at these texts in more detail, we should clear up the terminology used for the burial cloths in the gospels. This has been analysed on numerous occasions, sometimes by non-linguists, and the conclusions are more often than not completely mistaken, twisted to fit in with personal theories. We should start with the gospel text referenced in the above passion play, i.e. John 20: 5-7. The text in the New Jerusalem Bible (in general the best translation) reads as follows:

> They ran together, but the other disciple, running faster than Peter, reached the tomb first; he bent down and saw the linen cloths lying on the ground, but did not go in. Simon Peter, following him, also came up, went into the tomb, saw the linen cloths lying on the ground and also the cloth that had been over his head; this was not with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.

The word translated by "linen cloths" is τὰ ὀθόνια (in Latin "linteamina"). This most emphatically does not mean "strips" (there is a specific Greek word for the linen strips of burial cloths, used in John 11, in reference to the raising of Lazarus; the word is κειρία – used in John 11 in the dative plural). Any translation that talks of linen strips in John 20 is quite simply wrong; such theories are often repeated by people with no knowledge of Greek (it is all too common for people involved in Shroud research to come up with theories outside their field of study).
τὰ ὀθόνια is used in John 20:7 as the equivalent of the Synoptic σινδών (the usual term for the shroud cloth and the origin of all words related to "sindonology")[18]. Luke 24:12 also uses τὰ ὀθόνια as the equivalent of σινδών. It is true that this verse is not found in some of the better MSS of the Gospel, although it is ancient and this does not affect the linguistic argument.

The word sudarium is Latin in origin, and its root is linked to its use, not what it was made of or where it came from. The Latin sudor means "sweat", which relates the cloth to a use of cleaning or wiping sweat from the face or hands. Its uses in classical Latin are, however, manifold, including a bath towel, a cook's cloth to dry his face, a cloth in which a woman hides her face, a cloth the emperor Nero used to cover his mouth and protect his voice and a towel used at the barber's.

[18] The word σινδών is also used in the enigmatic passage unique to Mark's Gospel, in which a young man clad only in a σινδών flees naked, leaving the cloth behind (Mark 14:51-52). For an analysis of this difficult passage, see Harry Fledderman, "The Flight of a Naked Young Man", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 412-418, and Raymond E. Brown, "The Relation of the 'Secret Gospel of Mark' to the Fourth Gospel", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36 (1974): 466-485. For linen cloths as a symbol of life as opposed to wool, which represents death, cf. Kathleen Corrigan, "Text and Image on an Icon of the Crucifixion at Mount Sinai", in *The Sacred Image East and West*, ed. Robert Ousterhout and Leslie Brubaker (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 55: "Linen … is made from a plant and therefore has nothing of death in itself".

The Latin sudarium was adopted in a transliterated form into Greek, the Hebrew of the Talmud (sudar) and Syriac (sudara). The English language does not possess an exact equivalent of the word – all translations leave something out or suggest something that is not inherent in the original word, as such a cloth is no longer in use in the English speaking world. The word in Greek appears four times in the New Testament. It can be found twice in the fourth Gospel, first in the account of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:44): ἐξῆλθεν ὁ τεθνηκὼς δεδεμένος τοὺς πόδας καὶ τὰς χεῖρας κειρίαις καὶ ἡ ὄψις αὐτοῦ σουδαρίῳ περιεδέδετο ("The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a sudarium around his face"). Then again in the account of the burial cloths (although it is not the main burial cloth) seen in the tomb on the Sunday morning after the crucifixion.

The word appears again in the parable of the pounds, in the Gospel of Luke 19:20: καὶ ὁ ἕτερος ἦλθεν λέγων, Κύριε, ἰδοὺ ἡ μνᾶ σου ἣν εἶχον ἀποκειμένην ἐν σουδαρίῳ ("Then another servant came and said, Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a sudarium"). As a loan word in the Hebrew of the Talmud, the word is given a very similar use: Rabbi Abba keeps money in his sudar, which he wore on his shoulder. The fourth time the word appears in the New Testament is in the Acts of the Apostles. Speaking of the cures that God carries out through Paul, we are told (Acts 19:12) that ὥστε καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀσθενοῦντας ἀποφέρεσθαι ἀπὸ τοῦ χρωτὸς αὐτοῦ σουδάρια ἢ σιμικίνθια καὶ ἀπαλλάσεσθαι ἀπ' αὐτῶν τὰς νόσους ("so that even sudariums and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them").

According to José O'Callaghan, who studied in detail the meaning of the term sudarium in ancient times[19], the cloth was made of linen and used mainly by villagers.
The sudarium in the fourth gospel was most emphatically not the full-length shroud (despite confusion in the use of terms derived therefrom in modern Romance languages for full-length burial shrouds). Σινδών is the main Greek word used in the New Testament for the burial shroud; it means "good quality cloth", in a very general definition. Herodotus employs the word to describe the cloths used in the process of mummification; κατειλίσσουσι πᾶν αὐτοῦ τὸ σῶμα σινδόνος βυσσίνης τελαμῶσι κατατετμημένοισι (they roll the whole body up in fine linen cut into bands) and again to mean a surgeon's bandages; καὶ σινδόνος βυσσίνης τελαμῶσι κατειλίσσοντες (and wrapping him up in bands of the finest linen).

In ecclesiastical Greek the word is also used of the linen cloth covering the altar, while in the New Testament it immediately brings to mind the burial shroud of Jesus in the synoptic gospels (John prefers τὰ ὀθόνια, which Luke also uses as a synonym of σινδών, as stated above). The word can also be found twice in the Septuagint: in Judges 14:12, when Samson offers a reward for anyone who can solve his riddle: δώσω ὑμῖν

19 "El sudario en los papiros griegos de época romana", *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 22/23 (1973): 147-150.

τριάκοντα σινδόνας, and again in Proverbs 31:24, in the context of the activities of the perfect wife : σινδόνας ἐποίησεν. The underlying Hebrew word in each case סָדִין, which is translated somewhat unfortunately as "under-garment" by Lisowsky[20] and as "linen wrapper" by Brown, Driver and Briggs[21], who relate it to a possible Assyrian influence (sudinnu, meaning "garment"). The Vulgate is of no help in understanding the word here, as it opts for the simple transliterations *sindones* and *sindonem* respectively. The Hebrew סָדִין is also used in Isaiah 3:23, where the Septuagint opts for τὰ βύσσινα and the Vulgate maintains *sindones*. As with sudarium, the Old Testament use of the word does not lead to a very specific meaning, while the predominating influence from the New Testament suggests the burial cloth of Christ.

So back to the Carmina Burana. What immediately stands out from this text is how the cloths were seen and used as proof of the resurrection. In the fourth gospel this possibly makes more sense; the two disciples saw the burial cloths just as they had been left but no body, i.e. if someone had stolen the body they would not have bothered to take it out of the burial cloths and then left them tidily where they had been. This is what they "saw and believed", but the author of the passion play in question did not understand this, or more likely did not even think about it. In the play, even when they see the cloths in the tomb they are still wondering whether the body might have been stolen.

Showing people the shroud and sudarium decontextualized from the tomb and Easter morning as proof of the resurrection does not seem to make much sense. It could be that quite simply the author is writing a play and did not even think about such possibilities; he just took the gospel verse that the disciples saw the cloths and believed without considering why. On the other hand, the text could contain a reference to some other reason why the burial cloths could constitute proof of the resurrection, at least to the author's mind. At the same time, I am aware that this could be reading too much into a text; but at the very least, as I explained in a previous article, the text gives the lie to the oft-repeated falsehood that the shroud is silent and has no history before the fourteenth century.

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20 *Concordantiae Veteris Testamenti Hebraicae et Aramaicae* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1958).

21 *The Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004).