

Guscin, Mark, *The Image of Edessa*, Brill, Leiden & Boston, 2009, 226 pp., 15pp black and white illustrations including frontispiece, list price EUR 99/US \$147, ISBN 9789004171749, volume 82 of the series *The Medieval Mediterranean: People, Economies and Cultures 400-1500* ed. Hugh Kennedy.

In 1899 a most assiduous German scholar, Ernst von Dobschütz, then only twenty-nine years old, brought out his formidable *Christusbilder*, [The Face of Christ]. It is a masterly assemblage of the key documents on the cloths reputed to bear miraculous imprints of Christ - most notably the famous Veronica of Rome, the lesser known Image of Edessa, and certain others. But although von Dobschütz provided a German language introduction for each of the cloths in question, he left the source texts mostly in their original Greek and Latin, a state in which they have largely remained. For historians possessing only limited skills tackling these languages, made worse by the peculiarities of their Byzantine and early mediaeval forms, this situation has long been a most frustrating one. And particularly so in the case of the Image of Edessa, because of the very considerable number of documents involved, their complexity in both language and content, and the sheer length of the period of history in which the Image was a well documented historical object.

Now, exactly 110 years after von Dobschütz's pioneering publication, British-born professional linguist Mark Guscin has provided ground-breaking translations of many key texts on the Image of Edessa, including ones of which Dobschütz had been unaware. To carry out his task with full academic rigour Mark Guscin took valuable time-off from his young family and his employment in La Coruña, Spain and travelled out to Mount Athos, Greece. There he spent much time amongst the various monasteries scattered across the Athos peninsula, living the same frugal life as the monks, and patiently poring through the original manuscripts in their ancient libraries.

The result is that both specialist and layman can now view key original Greek texts, such as the 10th century *Narratio de Imagine Edessena*, with a clear English language translation alongside, together with all the scholarly apparatus detailing the textual differences between one manuscript and another. Given that even the *Narratio* alone exists in over thirty different manuscripts, this has been no small task in itself.

Among Mark Guscin's key discoveries are a number of previously unnoticed indications that the Image of Edessa was a full length cloth, rather than the face cloth normally supposed. Thus in early manuscripts of the *Synaxarion*, embodying the official rites of the Greek Orthodox Church, it is explicit that Abgar orders his messenger Ananias to bring him an image of the whole body of Jesus, not just of his facial likeness. Abgar demands to be shown 'in all detail his [Jesus's] age, his hair, his face and his whole bodily appearance'.

In manuscripts of the *Menaion*, the monthly books containing the Greek Orthodox Church's offices for the immovable feasts, for August 16, the Feast still celebrated to commemorate the arrival of the Image of Edessa in Constantinople in 944, we can read via Mark Guscin's translation:

We joyfully and enthusiastically keep the feast of the imprint of the divine *form* [italics mine], we rejoice in faith, drinking in its light. Moses wished to see you, Saviour, and saw your glory from a cleft in the rocks... You have

purified our perception and now we can all see you, God and man, the unseen one, not in a mystery but in a real image.

But besides translating all the main ‘master’ texts on the Image of Edessa, Mark Guscini has also encompassed in his study a number of lesser-known ones, among these a late 12th century Latin manuscript known as Tarragonensis 55, preserved in the public library of Tarragona in Spain. This manuscript’s content was originally written by a pilgrim who spent a relatively long time in Constantinople sometime around 1090. He clearly took quite an interest in the Image of Edessa, yet he never managed to see it because of the secrecy with which it was surrounded. This is what he had to say about what he knew:

This wonderful linen cloth with the face of the Lord Jesus, marked by direct contact, is kept with greater veneration than the other relics in the palace, and held in such great esteem that it is always kept in a golden case and very carefully locked up. And when all the other palace relics are shown to the faithful at certain times, this linen cloth on which the face of our redeemer is depicted is not shown to anyone and is not opened up for anyone except the emperor of Constantinople. The case that stored the holy object used to be kept open once, but the whole city was struck by continuous earthquakes, and everyone was threatened with death. A heavenly vision revealed that the city would not be freed of such ill until such time as the linen cloth with the Lord’s face on it should be locked up and hidden away, far from human eyes. And so it was done. The sacred linen cloth was locked away in a golden case and carefully sealed up, and then the earthquake stopped and the heaven-sent ills ceased. From that time on nobody has dared to open the case or to see what might be inside it, as everyone believes and fears that if anyone tries to open it the whole city will be struck by another earthquake.

Now for a historian one of the several great interest points aroused by this text is its reference to the Image of Edessa having been associated with earthquakes. Although Constantinople is prone to the occasional earthquake, it suffered nothing particularly untoward during the period the Image of Edessa spent in the city. However prior to 944, when the Image was in Edessa, Edessa certainly did.

In particular, in 679, the ‘Great Church’, or Hagia Sophia cathedral, in which the Image was housed, was very seriously damaged, with several after-shocks during the immediately subsequent years, followed by another major earthquake in 717, not long after the cathedral had been rebuilt. These seem to be the ‘continuous earthquakes’ that the Tarragonensis pilgrim was told of by some unknown informant in Constantinople. And it may well have been as a result of these earthquakes that the Image was construed as too holy for ordinary human gaze – thereby ensuring that whatever secrets it bore, these remained the prerogative of the emperor and (we can only presume) his very highest clergy alone.

For adherents of the Turin Shroud it might at first seem a disappointment that Mark Guscini’s book makes no direct reference to the Shroud. In actuality his book is all the more powerful for this. First because any potential hostile scholars – and there certainly are some - can hardly accuse the author of twisting his translations to suit a pro-Shroud argument if the Shroud goes unmentioned.

Second, because the Guscini translations are set alongside the original texts, enabling the translation choices to be easily identified, they simply speak for themselves. The intelligent reader is thereby enabled to draw his or her own conclusions, free of any special pleading.

In this very same regard Mark Guscini's concluding paragraph is an absolute a model of objectivity:

...it should be stressed that there are no artistic representations of the Image of Edessa as a full-body image or with bloodstains, and the majority of texts make no reference to either characteristic; but at the same time it is undeniable that at some point in the history of the Image of Edessa, some writers were convinced, for whatever reason, that it was indeed a full-body image on a large cloth that had been folded over (possibly in such a way that only the face was visible), and that it did contain bloodstains.

Because Brill, as highly respected academic publishers, have pitched *The Image of Edessa* mainly for a rather exclusive niche academic market, it is priced rather high for the general reader. Nevertheless it is a book that everyone with a serious interest in the Shroud's history should have in their library. It is easily readable by the non-specialist. For this reviewer, it is a book that he has waited over forty years for someone to write, and it is very highly recommended.

Ian Wilson