

A Review of the 2017 International Conference on the Shroud of Turin

By Charles Huneycutt

The Shroud of Turin has been a periodic item of interest of mine throughout the last 15+ years. I don't remember exactly when I first heard about the Shroud, but I do have a somewhat vague memory of seeing it on the History channel quite some time ago. I think what intrigued me most about the Shroud were various aspects of the relic that seemed to challenge the narrative of technological advances. One such challenge is the negative image in the cloth before the invention of photography.

In 2015, while reading various papers on evidences for the resurrection of Jesus, I discovered that Dr. Gary Habermas had written two books on the Shroud. I was familiar with Habermas' writings, but I didn't know that he had published two books on the Shroud. Since he is a prominent figure in the discussion on the historical evidences for the resurrection, I promptly purchased both versions. After the first version arrived, I began reading and skimming the portions I was interested in. I did the same for the second book. Reading these two books lead me to doing more research online that brought me to Shroud.com.

Initially, upon arriving at Shroud.com, I was a bit overwhelmed by the sheer volume of academic material being presented. After clicking many different links and having way too many browser tabs opened, I closed them all, tucked my tail so to speak, and went back to the home page and started again with the link that said "ALWAYS START HERE!" I spent some time reading various updates that were mentioned and realized that this interest was going to take a while to digest and that I needed to come back to the site at least once a month, and so I put a reminder in my calendar to visit the site on the first of each month. But, as such things are in life, I didn't always follow up with that reminder. However, in late January of 2017 I saw the announcement that the International Conference on the Shroud of Turin was going to be held in Pasco, WA. I remember thinking, *why Pasco?* As I later found out from Robert Rucker, Pasco has a significant portion of highly skilled scientists and engineers in the area, and it was for this reason that Pasco had been chosen. This shouldn't have been too much of a surprise since Pasco is not far from Hanford (nuclear production), nor is it too far from the LIGO site (gravity wave detector). The most significant factor about the conference being held in Pasco in my mind was this: It was four hours from where I live! From that moment on I knew that I would be attending.

The four hour drive seemed to go quite quickly on July 19th. I was pretty excited to see what new things I would learn about the Shroud. Three of my friends joined me on this adventure as well... we had no idea what awaited us.

The first night of the conference, Wednesday the 19th, seemed to be geared for non-specialists in the Shroud. Robert Rucker started things off at 6:30 p.m. with a short introduction and outline of the conference. Robert Siefker was the first presenter for the evening, and he covered some of the basic history and characteristics of the Shroud. He was followed by the lively Russ Breault. Russ dove a bit more into detailed characteristics of the Shroud: microscopy, blood features, etc. He finished up just after 9:30 p.m. Both presentations had given me tantalizing pieces of information that I had not been aware of. Things looked promising.

That Thursday morning came a bit early. The hotel bed was a bit uncomfortable and waking up at 6:30 a.m. to get ready was not my standard routine. But the conference started at 8:00 a.m., and the others and I didn't want to miss a thing, so it was grab some coffee and hit the road!

The presentations that day dealt with the history of the Shroud. The various presentation headings had material I was not aware of. Titles like *The Mandylion*, *Geoffrey de Charney*, and *The Simony Theory* piqued my interest. I could tell that this was going to be an interesting day of presentations.

In all sincerity, I was not prepared for the information cascade that swept over me throughout the day. I tried to take notes as quickly as I could — and I can type about 50 words a minute — but I struggled to keep my notes clean and coherent; I know there were quite a few

nuggets of information that got past me.

The presentation that I remember most that day was by Jack Markwardt. The previously mentioned Simony Theory was a new theory being presented about the missing years of the Shroud. It was a very intriguing theory that suggested that Baldwin II and Louis IX were able to get around the Church prohibition against simony (the buying and selling religious relics — a violation of canonical law in the Catholic Church) by using loans from lenders as the means of indirect transfer. Jack presented a very compelling case that suggested the Shroud, the last of the Baldwin relics, was transferred to Louis in payment for freeing Baldwin's son (Baldwin had given his son as collateral on a loan!). From here Jack suggested that Louis might have exposed himself to the charge of Simony, because of the ransom that was paid, and that he secretly gave the Shroud to Jean de Joinville. Jean later gave it to his daughter Marguerite De Joinville via a dower gift. And Marguerite left it to her son Geoffrey De Charney at the time of her death. The history of the Shroud after Geoffrey isn't much disputed.

At the end of the presentation I had a sense that somehow Tom Hanks could have played a role in several scenes: Kings, treasures, the Catholic Church, and ancient religious relics! While this theory might have the feel of Hollywood, it seemed very plausible — at least to my novice ears regarding Shroud history.

The formal presentations ended that evening about 8:50 p.m. It had been a long day of presentations, but I was still excited to hear more. As we drove back to the hotel we were all buzzing with conversation on the new ideas and material presented. All of us agreed that what we had seen so far exceeded our expectations.

Friday morning came much too early. My mind had been spinning from all of the new materials presented in the presentations; I had struggled to fall asleep. Nevertheless, I wasn't going to waste my time with sleeping in and possibly miss something new. That said, I sincerely doubt my companions would have let me sleep in had I been so inclined!

Presentations this day were focused on the science and dating of the Shroud, and the presentation by Giulio Fanti on Numismatic dating of the Shroud was quite fantastic. He presented coin after coin with dates ranging from 7th -- 14th century A.D. that had eerily similar characteristics to those found on the Shroud. Later in the evening Fanti shared an additional presentation covering a mechanical test for dating the Shroud. This test used a newly created mechanical device that he suggested could provide a dating method based on the resilience of flax fibers over time. I think this particular method is very interesting. I hope that more research is done with this technique.

Joe Marino's presentation on the politics surrounding the Carbon 14 dating was particularly enthralling. I had no idea that the Shroud was embroiled with politics to the extent that Joe presented. And I was additionally surprised to learn that protocol — protocol that had been agreed upon by the participating labs — had been breached in their analyses on their respective samples. This fact was very disappointing to learn.

By the end of day on Friday I was pretty exhausted. I had found myself fading during some of the presentations due to lack of sleep and being overwhelmed with information. I simply couldn't keep up with all of it. My excitement had not waned, but my mind and body were waxing slowly; coffee wasn't helping me anymore. I had no trouble falling asleep that night.

Saturday was the last day of the conference, and the topics to be covered were image formation theories. This is where things started to get... a little strange and very, very interesting. This is the pinnacle of the controversy about the shroud. As the notable Barrie Schwartz has said, "How'd that image get on that cloth?" I woke up that morning pretty much rejuvenated, but I was not going to need the energy for the entire day of the conference. The small group of us had reluctantly decided to leave around 4 p.m. that Saturday. We had a long drive ahead of us, and none found it very appealing to drive 4 hours at 9:30 pm after another 13 hour day of presentations.

Several of the presentations that I saw on Saturday stood out to me, but the one in particular that stood out more than the others was shared by Paolo Di Lazzaro. In this presentation, Paolo

showed that he could produce characteristics very similar to those in the Shroud image by irradiating linen cloths using excimer lasers that emit in the vacuum ultraviolet. ... Yes. Lasers. While this technique could produce image characteristics very similar to those on the Shroud, lasers weren't invented until the 1960's. Again, here is just another item that seems to challenge the narrative of technological advances ... is it any wonder that a hypothesis of the miraculous is suggested by many?

Although some of the presentations had overlapping material, I left that Saturday afternoon overwhelmed with new information and curious for more answers to new questions. All in all the time at the conference was a very worthwhile investment. I don't regret attending at all, nor did my fellow travelers. In fact, I hope the next conference is as close to home as this one was, but I doubt it will be. I would highly recommend anyone with an interest in the Shroud of Turin to attend these International Conferences.