

IAN WILSON WRITES

For at least two things we must be thankful. First, that after years of seemingly interminable uncertainty, and so much recent behind-the-scenes infighting, the radiocarbon dating is at last imminently about to happen. Whatever the end result, those of us who for so long have been pressing for such a standard archaeological test to be carried out on the Shroud will no more need to make feeble excuses as to why it has not happened. Second we can be thankful that with Dr. Michael Tite of the British Museum Research Laboratory as supervisor the project should be carried out as fairly and scientifically as is possible within the parameters of what has been agreed between the laboratory representatives and the ecclesiastical authorities. By the very act of publishing the procedures in so highly respected a scientific journal as *Nature* Dr. Tite has set a new benchmark for the scientific rigour and openness with which the project is being tackled.

Particularly commendably, Dr. Tite has been totally realistic, ahead of the work being carried out, that the "control" samples (i.e. those the laboratories will receive in addition to the Shroud cutting) will not be any fully scientific form of "blind". The Shroud is such a distinctive piece of linen that in practice anyone working on even a fragment would have little difficulty recognizing its identity. This means that an element of human bias theoretically could creep into the dating. While no-one is seriously suggesting that anyone from the three highly respected laboratories involved might deliberately falsify any result obtained, nonetheless if one laboratory happened to obtain a thoroughly confusing date, say fourth century, ninth century or sixteenth century, the temptation could be irresistible to consult with the others in advance of the raw data being forwarded to the British Museum and the Turin Metrology Institute - if for no more than a very human concern not to be seen "out of line". The scientists from the three laboratories, not least because they use the same carbon dating method, are well used to calling each other up on the telephone, so it is in fact expecting a great deal that they may not privately discuss the Shroud between themselves.

Such a situation reinforces the justice of some of the concerns that have recently been expressed over the non-inclusion of any proportional counter carbon dating laboratory such as Harwell - who would have been happy to work even from a charred sample beneath one of the patches from the 1532 fire. Had Harwell or Brookhaven been included the radiocarbon gas from each purified sample could have remained available for checking by independent laboratories even decades into the future. The chosen laboratories, all using the AMS system, can offer no such facility. Yet a recent personal plea for Harwell to be allowed even a charred sample has been abruptly refused.

As a result of such problems there are confidential diplomatic moves, even at this eleventh hour, to overthrow the plan set out in Dr. Tite's letter, and to return to the seven laboratory protocol originally agreed when the representatives of those laboratories met in Turin under the chairmanship of Professor Carlos Chagas back in the autumn of 1986. Speaking personally, I have only limited sympathy with such moves (which are in any case unlikely to be successful), because to provide as many as seven Shroud samples would effectively negate the whole advantage of using the small sample method, collectively requiring as it would the destruction of a sizeable chunk of material, far more than would be needed in any normal archaeological test. Furthermore, because of the decision to use "main body" cloth, away from charred areas, this material would almost inevitably have to come from the Shroud's edges, the very areas which have never yet been properly studied or documented because they have hitherto been hidden beneath a modern fabric surround.

But besides the non-inclusion of Harwell, another real point of concern is that there should be no ancillary Shroud testing work along the lines of that presented to the Cardinal of Turin within the last three years by the two U.S. Shroud scientific organisations STURP and ASSIST, and by ourselves of the BSTS [see BSTS *Newsletter* no. 11]. At least for ourselves and STURP, such work had originally been agreed for commencement on July 20, 1986. We were then told that this had been postponed, then as recently as January 22 of this year Professor Gonella, the Cardinal of Turin's scientific adviser, intimated that such work could be allowed shortly after the taking of the carbon dating samples, and before the results of the latter work had been publicly released. This seemed an excellent plan because effectively it would have allowed the carbon dating results to be used as a guide to further investigation of the Shroud - in particular resolving the discrepancies between the McCrone and Heller & Adler image analyses - simultaneous release of mutually supportive results from carbon dating and ancillary testing thereby carrying much greater authority than announcement of just the dating verdict in isolation. But very recently Professor Gonella has said that the Cardinal now wants to get the carbon dating test over before any decision on any other scientific work.

Accordingly, whatever date Dr. Tite and his colleagues eventually arrive at seems more likely to exacerbate rather than resolve the Shroud debate. But let's at least get the test done...

STOP PRESS In an article in *The Times* of April 18, Bernard Levin, in his usual Levinesque style, writes: "If it [the Shroud] turns out to have been woven centuries later than the life of Christ, there will be much jeering from fools who think they are rationalists; if it turns out to be of the right period, it will be greeted by the same fools doing the same jeering ... nobody, whatever the result, is going to change sides." He argues that "the Pope must be very close to wishing that the Turin Shroud had never come into existence."