

FUNGAL DECAY IN ROME'S PONZIANO CATACOMB - A SERIOUS LOSS TO SHROUD STUDIES by Ian Wilson

One of the least-known of Rome's catacombs is that of S. Ponziano. So much so that few even of the residents of Rome's Trastevere district realise that an insignificant-looking locked door at the junction of the Via Alessandro Poerio and Via Carlo Pisacane marks its entrance. Or that behind that door, and literally beneath their feet, lies a fascinating early Christian world that includes a near pristine baptismal pool, some unique frescoes, and numerous bones...

For Shroud studies the importance of the catacomb is that it contains a Christ Pantocrator fresco from no later than the 8th century, particularly notable for its so-called Vignon markings [detail above]. As argued by the pioneering French scholar Paul Vignon in his 1839 work *Le Saint Suaire de Turin devant La Science, L'Archéologie, L'Histoire, L'Iconographie, La Logique*, the portrait's strikingly geometric topless square between Christ's eyebrows seems unmistakably to have been derived from a similar feature in an identical location on the Shroud.

For access to the catacomb, special advance permission has to be obtained from Rome's Pontificia Commissione de Archeologia Sacra. Accompaniment by one or more paid guides is obligatory, and because of the bureaucracy and costs, very few of those interested in the Shroud have even set eyes on the original, which included myself up until this year. This summer, however, it was decided to film the fresco for the Dutch-made television documentary mentioned in my Editorial [p.2].

Upon gaining access, by torchlight, and facilitated by some very kind on-the-spot help from Rome banker and sindonologist Mario Fusco, the shock was to discover the degree of effacement the whole fresco has suffered since it was last photographed in colour. Amidst the general erosion the topless square is now all but invisible, the damage, according to our guide, being due not to any human vandalism but to a fungal eating away of the very fabric of the catacomb's walls. Sadly, although the Pontificia Commissione insisted on a huge deposit plus a fee of 700,000 lire for allowing the briefest of filming within the catacomb, they appear never to have contemplated conservation or any other preventative measures.

To a non-specialist eye at least, the damage to the fresco looks irreversible, and besides the general loss to early Christian art, represents a particularly sad blow to Shroud studies. Which surely makes a matter of even greater urgency the need for very carefully considered conservation measures in the case of the Shroud itself...