

EDITORIAL

Have We All Developed Too Blind a Faith in Science?

Offering some striking parallels with the current state of confusion regarding the Shroud, on 28th December 1994 the British Channel 4 television documentary 'Incredible Evidence' highlighted several examples of serious errors associated with scientific techniques hitherto assumed to be near-infallible. For instance, seemingly conclusive fingerprint evidence caused one individual to be arrested for a particularly brutal rape. He might well have been convicted of this but for the fact that the true rapist bungled a second offence, was caught, and confessed to the first. It was shown that fingerprint 'matching' can rely too heavily on fallible human judgment. A much-vaunted technique for computer-matching the face of a suspect with footage from a video camera recording of a robbery was shown similarly to be seriously unreliable.

In Scotland a police officer was convicted and served a full prison sentence for a rape of which the officer's wife, his closest associates, and even the victim herself, consistently maintained his innocence. The jury found him guilty almost entirely on the basis of the purported infallibility of 'genetic finger-printing', and it has taken an American lawyer to discover that flaws in this method are much more common than most scientists care to admit. The recent case of the athlete Diane Modahl, although not featured in the Channel 4 programme, may be yet another example of a purportedly reliable scientific test somehow having been mishandled.

All the above might be used for yet another polemic about the purported infallibility of carbon dating, but the true lesson is more subtle. There is nothing wrong with science and scientific techniques, whether these take the form of genetic fingerprinting, carbon dating, or whatever. What is wrong is for scientist and layman alike to assume that the efficacy of any one test or type of test should be accepted without question. Scientists are human, and like all human beings can and do mis-interpret their evidence.

As we begin 1995 the conflict of scientific evidence for and against the Shroud's authenticity has never been more intense, or more bewildering for the non-scientific lay-man. In this Newsletter we feature new scientific evidence put forward by Texas microbiologist Dr. Leoncio Garza-Valdes (see page 4), that could be the key to how the Shroud carbon dating of 1988 erred, if indeed it did err. But it cannot be emphasised enough that every scientific claim on the Shroud, whether this be for or against the authenticity, needs to be regarded with equal caution...