

Images, Vernicles and Shrouds: a critical note

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In his article on the Image of Edessa, in the *Cambridge Historical Journal* (1931:238-52), Steven Runciman wrote "Historians should not be so much victim to their scepticism as to dismiss a legend as false unless they can suggest how it was that the false legend arose." Runciman's article explains elegantly the fostering and dissemination of the story of the *achaeropoietos* image, but conspicuously not its origin. He does account for its spread in particular localities and at particular periods of theological and political crisis. Gibbon had covered all this well in Chapter 49 of his *Decline and Fall*." But Runciman after all does not explain how it all began.

The true explanation, the real origin, is almost straightforwardly philological. The scholar Dindorf, in his Praefatio to the (Ravennas) scholia [commentaries] on Aristophanes, quotes examples of vocabula Graeco-barbara *sudarion* and *phakiolion* referring to the scholia on Plutus 729. The complete entry bristles with "shroud" words familiar from Ian Wilson's original 1978 book on the Turin Shroud, particularly with reference to the mediaeval accounts of the Mandyllion with Fringes and Tassels. The key word in the scholium is *ekmageion*.

It may be assumed that one of the series of scholiasts [commentators] had seen and known in Constantinople a relic, whether Shroud, Vernicle or Mandyllion, presumably (if fringed and tasselled) bearing a picture. The dates of the scholia collections range from pre-10th to 14th centuries. The word *ekmageion* was for one scholiast at least a recognisable (*hoion*) example of what he was describing.

In Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* the word is explained as (1) *kheiomaktron* a napkin (Timaeus 72) or (2a) that on or in which an impression is made (Theaetetus 191,196) or (2b) the actual impression made: an impress, mould (an interesting example of this is *ekmageion petres*, a man described as the image of a rock) or (2c) a model, Laws 800B 801D, cf *ekmageia* a model, an impression on wax (Poll 7-131 late 2nd century et al). The lexicon takes the original meaning of *masso* as "to touch, handle" but adduces only one example and that from Anth.Pal. It gives the root as `mag' cognate with the Slavonic farina, flour.

The main meaning is given as to knead, to make dough. The secondary meaning, given without examples, is to wipe; which could perhaps have originated in a particular use of touch, as in "to touch one's wet forehead."

It is useful to list some compounds of *masso* under the headings A, to knead, and B, to wipe:

	A	B
<i>anamasso</i>	knead bread (often in med. voce) receive an impression; Plat. Timaeus	wipe off blood, etc wipe up
<i>apo-</i>	take an impression of, as a sculptor, copy from one another Philost. 256 cf <i>apomagdalia</i> and <i>apomaktron</i> <i>apomagma</i> is both dirt wiped off (B) and impression of a seal (A) <i>apomaxis</i> in Plularch is wiping, in Theodorus (c.900) is Impression	wipe off (tears or dust) wipe one's mouth crumbs from the loaf kept on the table for wiping greasy hands a strickle
<i>dia-</i> <i>ek-</i>	knead thoroughly, Ar.Eq 8 Av exprimere Rep 396 to mould one's self make pills - Hipp 682	no B to wipe off, dry Homer. Soph. Hipp etc Arist. M.A. 9:40 - of a bee wiping his forefeet B=Napkin Timaeus 72C
cf <i>ekmageion</i>	A=impress, mould Theast 194 D,E a model. Laws 800B 821 D "He was the image of his master' Alciphro <i>exemaxata ton didaskalon</i> "His very image" Cratinus	
<i>em-</i> <i>epi-</i> <i>kata-</i> <i>peri-</i>	to knead bread in Ar. to knead again (med) no A no A	press upon, inflict - A or B? to stroke, ag the head. Anth Pal. wipe off. Malalas. 8th century wipe all round, Plut. 2 976 B <i>spongol</i> Galen
<i>pros-</i> <i>hypo-</i>	knead, plaster closely, lips, "Theocr	smear or rub underneath, Theocr Suidas; lying close under rocks

This list shows clearly two quite different meanings and treatment of *masso*, which are usually, but not always, distinguishable in context. This means, of course, that as well as being distinguished they could also be confused.

Eusebius in 325 has the earliest references to the Abgar correspondence, but as Gibbon gently pointed out makes no mention of a portrait of Christ. The first account of an *acheiropoietos* image seems to be in connection with Edessa (Lipsius p174). In this, Ananias is desirous of taking a likeness of Christ, as Abgar had ordered, but found it impossible. The reason given in the (amplified) V text seems to be His changing and supernatural appearance. Christ however apprehended his difficulty and asked to wash. He was given a *tetradiplon* (*V rhakkos tetradiplon*) *kai nipsamenos apemaxato ten opsin*. From what has been said earlier, it is quite clear these five words could mean two very different things:

a) and having washed himself he wiped his face (having washed his face he wiped it).

b) and having washed himself he impressed his face ("on it", *en auto*, or more idiomatically "by it").

The V text writes more fully, later obviously and painting the lily, "he impressed his immortal and holy countenance on it" (possibly "by this medium"). Whereupon His holy appearance and visage being stamped (*entupotheises*) on to the cloth he gave it to Ananias, Abgar's *takhdromos*.

On the surface nothing could have been more innocent than these five words underlined. But no Greek could have distinguished in isolation "he wiped " from "he impressed." So too any *ekmageion* is either a "napkin" or an "image": the two notions are inseparable.

This passage of the *Acta Thaddaei* is later than the first rise of the Vernicle/ image legend. Already the natural desire of converts or sympathizers to know something of Christ's appearance had developed. In the *Acta Thaddaei* version of the Abgar story, it is the rather touching reason for the despatch of the Abgar letter *poiaseideas ten te elikian kai trixa* - how he looked, how tall he was, what colour hair?

We must assume that earlier than 5/6th century AD some innocent description of washing and wiping had been confused and taken to mean that Christ impressed His portrait on the cloth.

And so we reach the next stage. Where is the cloth? Where did it happen? When did it happen? Was it an *ekmageion* or *rhakkos* or *sindon*, a higher quality cloth? So begins an aetiological legend.

The *Acta Thaddei* story duplicates the epistula Abgari story of the miraculous portrait. The Vernicle legend may be taken to be older than the Shroud legend. It is interesting that the Epistula Abgari account introduces a *Sindon*, not a shroud by the way but a piece of fine cloth.

Veronica had "happened" to have a suitable bit of linen/canvas with her in one version, a handkerchief in another. One problem for anyone starting or developing a cloth/image story is how to get the cloth into the act - or scene. Runciman suggests the rise of the Vernicle legend was in the 4th century (the same date as the Death of Pilate) and thinks that what had been an "icon" now became the Mandylion in the time of Leo VI, the Iconoclast. The Veronica legends confuse both the persons, Haemorrhissa etc and the occasion. (1) Crucifixion, subsequently the 6th station of the Cross, (2) Gethsemane, (3) Christ's friendly gift of a souvenir to Veronica who happens to be carrying a suitable piece of cloth.

I have not pursued all the appearances and disappearances of the cloth so patiently chronicled by Wilson. I merely point out the most likely origin of all the stories of images on cloth - a simple howler. After all, not all the Fathers were good Greek scholars - Augustine, according to some.

What confirms me in my view is the absence so far as can be traced of any similar story in a non-Greek-speaking culture. The error and the subsequent paronomasia work only in Greek. Translated, *aponipsamenos apemixato* is no longer a verbal trap.

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