

Professor Giovanni Riggi di Numana  
1935-2008

Few people in history have ever been privileged (or brave enough), to take a pair of scissors to the Shroud. Giovanni Riggi was the notable exception. He was the man who on April 21, 1988, personally cut from the Shroud the thin 7 x 1 cm sliver of the linen that would be used for carbon dating purposes.

Giovanni Riggi di Numana – he liked to be referred to by his full name – was born in Turin in July 1935, and the Shroud was far from his sole strong interest. Beginning his late twenties he earned among his fellow-Italians a distinguished reputation in the field of philately, or stamp collecting, and was inspirational in promoting the teaching of this subject in Italian schools. He was President of the SubAlpine Philatelic Union up to the time of his death.

Having acquired some considerable skills as a microscopist, in 1978 Riggi participated in the STURP scientific examination of the Shroud, a privilege that was arguably facilitated by his close friendship with the then Cardinal of Turin's scientific advisor, Professor Luigi Gonella. Conspicuous in the Shroud test room for his spotless white coat and his meticulous methodology, Riggi quickly attracted the attention and admiration of the American scientific team, and despite his very limited command of English became formally enlisted him as one of STURP's members.

One of the procedures agreed for the 1978 testing work was the partial unstitching of one side of the Shroud from the backing cloth to which it had been sewn ever since 1534, and this made possible one of Riggi's most important on-site experiments on that occasion. Deploying a mini-vacuum cleaner he painstakingly extracted into this some of the dust that had accumulated between the two cloths over the centuries. Subsequently analysing this dust microscopically, he became fascinated by the various mites that this included, also the wealth of other debris such as pollen grains and distinctive limestone crystals. In the case of the mites, he made some useful comparisons with similar creatures that he found to have infested the fine collection of ancient Egyptian mummies in Turin's Egyptian Museum. (With typical generosity he subsequently gave me a small album of the black and white photographs that he had taken of this aspect of his work.) And his careful reporting of the fungi and bacteria he found among the Shroud's dusts would be directly helpful to the future conservation measures taken to protect the Shroud.

Another of Riggi's 1978 experiments involved the insertion of an endoscopic camera, complete with its own light source, between the Shroud and its backing cloth. This enabled the first-ever rudimentary photographs of the Shroud's underside. When the American team saw how well the camera's sub-surface light showed up the bloodstains, in the manner of a colour slide on a light-box, they became inspired to photograph the Shroud in its entirety in much this same manner, an experiment not previously included in the programme. As STURP photographer Barrie Schwartz recalls: 'Those are amongst the most important photographs I made in 1978'.

Ten years after the STURP examination, Riggi again became a key player in Shroud matters when on April 21, 1988 the Shroud was secretly taken out of its storage container for samples to be cut from it for carbon dating purposes. Besides Riggi's arranging the only videotaping of the event – at his own personal expense – it was he

who throughout much of that day was in direct charge of everything that required some direct handling of the Shroud. Closely watched by the representatives of the three appointed carbon dating laboratories, he personally cut from one corner the agreed 7 x 1 cm sliver, then divided this into the portions already agreed as sufficient for each laboratory's needs. .

This left over one significant-size portion kept back under Cardinal Ballestrero's control as 'reserve', and also three fragments that he had trimmed away as unsuitable for, and superfluous to, the needs of the C14 testing. These he placed in a Petri dish, which he then put into a manila envelope (fastened with string sealed in red sealing wax impressed with his and Gonella's personal seals), subsequently to be stored in a bank vault. Later that same day, in the presence of some twenty witnesses, he also took samples from the bloody area in the back of the head section of the Shroud imprint. These too he arranged to be stored in a bank vault under his personal control. As he and Gonella subsequently insisted, Cardinal Ballestrero had given them full permission to take such initiatives for the benefit of future Shroud research, and in the light of the open, official manner in which they took the samples and documented these, there is no reason to doubt this.

Thus when in May 1993 American physician Dr. Garza Leoncio-Valdes arrived in Turin looking for samples of the Shroud to examine in pursuance of his idea of how the C14 date might have been skewed, Riggi readily volunteered samples from both the 'superfluous' fragments that he had trimmed away from the C14 sample, also from the back-of-the-head bloodstains.

Very sadly, however, the publicity that became aroused by Garza-Valdes's subsequent 'unofficial' usage of these materials, including his arranging for the back-of-the-head blood samples to be DNA tested at a laboratory in San Antonio, Texas, led to some serious questions being asked by Cardinal Ballestrero's immediate successor as Archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Giovanni Saldarini. Saldarini asked for the return of all such samples of the Shroud held by outsiders, and from about time on Riggi and Gonella would play less prominent roles in Shroud matters.

From as early as the 1970s Riggi was associated with Italy's Fondazione 3M, and entrusted extensive archive of his Shroud materials. into their care, a collection which apparently remains available to all bona fide Shroud researchers. When Luigi Gonella died in August of last year Riggi began planning to incorporate his friend's equally extensive Shroud materials into the same archive. Last Christmas he was granted a long sought interview with Turin's current Archbishop, Cardinal Severino Poletto, a meeting which may have been to discuss such matters. However Riggi himself died suddenly on January 5<sup>th</sup> of this year. His funeral Mass, celebrated by Don Giuseppe Ghiberti, was held on Tuesday January 8<sup>th</sup> in the chapel of Turin's Mauriziano Hospital.

My personal copy of Riggi's beautifully illustrated 1988 book *Rapporto Sindone (1978/87)*, a gift that he made to me the year of its publication, carries this handwritten message: '*a Ian, con grande stima*' (to Ian, with great respect, Giovanni). Rest in peace, good Giovanni, the respect is mutual...

Ian Wilson