

The Image of Edessa and its Progeny in art and spirituality

By Andrew Willie

The catalyst for writing up this personal pilgrimage is our Editor's excellent, scholarly book on the *Image of Edessa*. This reins in all creative, imaginative, often fictive thinking where the Holy Shroud's history is concerned, to leave us with what may safely be said. Thus, legends concerning the Image are defined as the Apocryphal material they are. Similarly, the identification of the Image of Edessa with the Shroud is accepted only on the sound basis of linguistic description in the original Greek, in which both were known as, "an image not made with human hands" and in which the Image was described as on a large cloth. This cloth has always been defined in Greek in unique but numerically ambiguous terms, as *tetradiplon*, that is a "cloth folded [4 x 2 or possibly 4 x 4 times]"; thus giving support to Ian Wilson's idea of how the body on the Shroud was reduced to being simply a facial image. The origin of the term, *Mandyllion*, a generic word for cloth, by which the Edessa image is generally known, is shown by Mark Guscin to be rooted in a number of languages, not just in Arabic as often commonly thought.

This article is a personal exploration of the image and of some of the images which can be seen as being inspired by the original. Behind it are not only reactions to Mark's book, but of three sets of recollections: firstly, of holidays many years ago: secondly of the experience of being at the exposition of the Shroud in 2010 in Turin: and also, thirdly, of three encounters in 2011; with the **Treasures of Heaven Exhibition** in the British Museum, the **Leonardo da Vinci Exhibition** at the National Gallery and the great **Sutherland tapestry** in Coventry Cathedral. What the article does not contain is any reference to shroud copies found throughout Europe.

Three Mediterranean holidays gave me sight of different visions of Our Lord holding a book and in Judgement as *Christos Pantocrator*, *Christ Almighty*: these were at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople the monastery at Daphni, near Athens, in St Mark's Venice, Monreale Cathedral near Palermo and in the Cathedral at Cefalu. Secundo Pia's photographs of the shroud as a positive and even clearer as a negative image, entered the public domain as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. As a result, Paul Vignon, Professor at the Sorbonne in Paris, noticed fifteen ways in which features on the portrait of Christ in Orthodox icons coincided with features found on the Turin Shroud and how images of injury were often interpreted to give the icon a strength and severity. This is especially true of the Christos at Daphni. Copying the Shroud also has strange results where Our Lord's hairline is concerned. Slightly off centre there appears to be the number "3", on the negative as normal, on the positive in reverse. The cause on the shroud was almost certainly a flow of blood from the crown of thorns, caught in the furrows of a pained and troubled brow. On the icon the 3 becomes a double-stranded quiff of hair. In addition, eyes closed for burial, their lids held in place by coins, as evidenced on the shroud itself, are portrayed as open, large and exuding power on the icon, eyes which look at the beholder as the beholder looks at them. In the context of a whole series of mosaics the Pantocrator still stands out, though as part of a mixture of mosaic and sound designed to gather the observer, as W.B. Yeats put it in *Sailing to Byzantium*, "into the artifice of Eternity." However, when we look at icons of the Pantocrator on their own, as Archbishop Rowan Williams writes in his exquisite, *The Dwelling of the Light, Praying with the Icons of Christ* [page 79] ".....we look at him looking at us, and try to understand that he looks at us as he looks at the Father. In other words, when he sees us, he sees the love which is his own source and life, despite all we have done to obscure it in ourselves. When we look at him looking at us, we see both what we were made to be, bearers of the divine image and likeness and what we have made of ourselves." This very much

echoes my experience at the Cathedral at Cefalu in Sicily, where under the gaze of the Pantocrator in a mosaic of great subtlety in the apse, I paced an empty Church. There, I felt exposed and convicted, and yet at the same time, understood, accepted and forgiven.

Many years later, my wife and I travelled to Turin for the exposition of the Mandyllion in another guise, indeed its earliest guise as the Holy Shroud. We queued until we found ourselves in a large industrial shed where a simple DVD pointed out, in languages denoted by the appropriate flag, the marks on the shroud of the wounds Our Lord experienced. There we saw quite clearly the nail wounds in the wrist and not the hands, the ankles and not the feet. Both of these subverted the traditional medieval artist's ideas on crucifixion. We were then shown into the Cathedral where the Shroud was on display. We were part of three single-line tiers of folk, all transfixed with a wide range of emotions, as we tried to take in the picture "not made with human hands." Leaving, we sat in the body of the nave, from where we viewed the shroud, for twenty minutes: ours was a state of rapt devotion, with our doubts overcome and with the Apostle Thomas's final verdict on Jesus ringing in our ears, "My Lord and my God."

This was our response. But the experience posed many questions. Some cannot be answered. For example, how did the image get on to the shroud in the first place [by Our Lord's placing a cloth upon his face to produce an image for Ananias, emissary of King of Agbar of Edessa, during the week of Passiontide; or by other variations of the same story, involving the image and the king's healing; or by Jesus's sweating blood in Gethsemane as another tradition states; or by his body-heat, after death, reacting with chemicals in the cloth; or by a process of radiation, seen as likely by some modern scientists; or by whatever else is considered possible?]; and what, if any, are the implications of the answer to this question for the rest of humanity?

Another question seems to require a combination of self-knowledge and common sense. How did the Shroud finish up in Edessa? Its remaining in Palestine was an unlikely prospect. As an item Jews would have regarded as unclean, possession of it would have been incriminating and it is the sort of item which many people would find repulsive and bizarre. In fact I did so, as part of my confused reaction, as I began to read Ian Wilson's seminal first book on the subject. I suspect that some of the scientists engaged in the carbon dating had such a reaction of distaste – hence their vehemence. I suspect too that some members of the general public shared this attitude and were relieved that, after the carbon dating result, they no longer had to take the Shroud seriously.

I would speculate that such distaste was in the first century the reason for disguising the Shroud as something else, a portrait; and also for giving the creation of that portrait a unique and special story. There was a good reason also for sending it where its survival would be more likely, outside the Roman Empire, to Edessa. Here it would be away from the possibility of prying eyes and destruction by Roman or by Jew and its survival would be properly in the hands of Providence. Yet this most precious icon carried for Christians and still carries evidence not only of Jesus's death and resurrection, but also in the blood that stained it, of his incarnation as ordinary flesh and blood. My personal unease was slowly overtaken by a growing fascination which eventually led to my accepting it, along with Scripture, the experience of the Holy Spirit and of the Sacramental life of the Church, as prime evidence for Truths of the Christian faith.

The Treasures of Heaven Exhibition at the British Museum was centred on reliquaries rather than relics, themselves, but it climaxed with a really wonderful exhibit, the Mandyllion, properly painted on linen and showing the face of Christ, from the Pope's own private Chapel in the Vatican. I watched as two orthodox priests gave it the same attention as my wife and I had given to the Shroud. But neither

of us felt the same veneration as the orthodox for this exhibit. The baroque mount was something of a distraction. It was heavily gilded, angels framed the sides, a large crown the top, perhaps giving the overall impression of the gates of Heaven. The picture itself was very dark, and therefore difficult to view, as if within the veil. However on page 199 of the catalogue, HLK clearly gives the reasons for the veneration of this rendition of the Edessa image, describing it as “a portrait which seems to be dyed into the cloth without clear contours except those made by the gold mat superimposed upon it. Like a shadow, the Mandylion reminds the viewers that Christ was once present and visible on earth, but has returned to his Father; in doing so, it conjures up both the human Jesus and his ineffable divinity.” This is what the priests appreciated.

The particular image they were looking at, is more or less an exact copy of the rather brighter one in Genoa, the gilded frame of which was engraved with the story of the Edessa icon. It was highly unlikely that this would have been allowed to travel from Genoa for the Exhibition, given that there it is exposed only once a year. However, it is a pity that the Exhibition omitted the seventeenth century image from the Royal Collection. This too has a frame telling the story of the Edessa image and in the centre, a picture of Jesus, facing the front, on the background of a linen cloth, as if itself a Veronica, painted upon wood. The Christian religion is not only about the being and presence of God. It is also concerned with stories and with history.

There was a Veronica in the exhibition, but it was part of a presentation printed upon a board concerning particularly the Veronica in the Vatican. The Veronica illustrated was generic and with strong, severe features like those of a pantocrator. There was great disappointment in discovering later on that the Vatican Veronica, damaged and on show only on the fifth Sunday of Lent, had a different appearance altogether. In fact it is very much like that of the Mandylions, already at the Vatican and in Genoa. They all have the same elongated face, the same long nose, the same hair-style and beard to frame the expressionless face.

This leads very much to the conclusion that it is not the images that are different so much as the apocryphal stories behind them. The Veronica was seen in Rome by the Welshman, Giraldus Cambrensis, in 1199: in 1204 Constantinople was sacked and it would seem that the shroud mandylion came westward. In the middle of the following century the shroud became the object of frequent expositions in France and the cult of Veronica developed in Rome after 1297, when the veronica was transferred to St. Peter's. At the same time an alternative version of the formation of the “image not made with hands” came to prominence. This concerned a woman identified by the French *Acts of Pilate* as Berenike [transliterated into Latin as Veronica.] She is also identified with the woman with a haemorrhage and is described as speaking up for Jesus at his trial. According to legend, when he stumbled on the way to Calvary, she emerged from the onlookers and gave him her head-cloth to wipe his face, which was besmirched with blood and sweat. When she returned to the crowd and unfolded her garment she found that she had his image impressed upon it. The name Veronica is often interpreted as “true image.” Is it? It certainly has difficulties with the Crown of Thorns which Jesus wore on his way to Calvary. This is present on some veronicas, and ignored on others. Yet despite discrepancies, the story has provided the Stations of the Cross with the sixth station; and at the Jubilee in 1450, the crowd, gathered upon the Ponte di San Angelo in Rome to see it, stampeded and hundreds were thrown into the Tiber and killed as a result. The story of the Veronica is indeed a powerful one, brilliantly evoking the compassion of those women who surrounded Our Lord and ministered to him. It is a story much more appealing to ordinary folk than the variants of the Abgar legend.

The British Museum made no mention of the Shroud in the catalogue to *its Treasure of Heaven Exhibition*. Neither did the catalogue to the National Gallery's *Leonardo* Exhibition, though it too was concerned with the image of Edessa. Here the key version of the Mandylion was that in Genoa, a city in the possession of Leonardo's patrons, the Sforzas of Milan at the start of Leonardo's residence there. Milan was later occupied by the French under Louis XII. Louis and his wife, Anne of Brittany, were both devoted to Jesus as *Salvator Mundi*, [*Saviour of the World*] and under this title Leonardo painted a picture accordingly. Luke Syson writing in the Catalogue, [page 303] notes features of eyes, eye-brows and nose, coinciding with the face on the Mandylion; and Picknall and Prince, in the second edition of their book on the Turin Shroud, have nicely matched Leonardo's painting with the Shroud's facial image.

To link the Edessa and the Shroud image with the great *Sutherland tapestry of Christ in Glory* in Coventry Cathedral may seem odd. There are differences: the heads, hands and feet are outside the cloth; the positioning of the nail-holes is tentative and ambiguous; the whole is dominated by egg-shapes, symbolising birth and rebirth and perhaps the stone of the tomb; the face is not that of the Pantocrator. However, Our Lord's robe is white, recalling the Shroud; and the slightly elongated, bearded face recalls the Image of Edessa. Sutherland had a love of thorn shapes and there they are, taken from the now non-existent Crown to sit with the traditional symbols of each of the four evangelists, a lion [Mark], an ox [Luke], a man [Matthew], and a flying eagle [John]. Christ in Glory surmounts a far smaller figure of Christ crucified which provides a reredos for the Lady Chapel altar, below. There is also a chalice and within it a serpent, recalling John 3¹⁴. These are beneath Christ's feet, between which is the figure of an ordinary human being. With so much symbolism from the natural world, it is perhaps unsurprising that the basic colour is green. However both the white robe and the shape of the Lord's face refer back to Edessa image. The Redeemer is in Glory.

This account of a pilgrimage has the Edessa image both in full bodily terms and simply as a face. Traditionally, the Litany of the Shroud is addressed to the face. In these days of Facebook and Skype, we may well be more aware of the importance of the face in defining human identity. The Shroud bears the marks of blood, but as Mark Guscini writes, no blood is to be found as such on the facial image, even one might add, on the Pantocrator, which at least indirectly takes some account of Jesus' injuries. What we have in the Shroud and its progeny are witnesses to two totally different concepts of mystery, the one as mystery **to be explored**, scientifically, forensically and historically; the other as mystery **to be experienced** in spiritual terms in art and in worship. It is to explore, promote and encourage the latter that this survey has been written. As a survey it is both personal and incomplete. It would be wonderful if it could be part of an on-going process.

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