

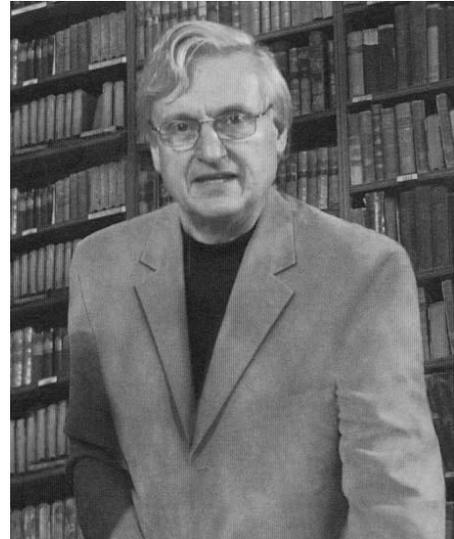
'Shape-shifting' the truth?

A New, British-made TV Documentary on the Shroud

'Treasures Decoded: The Turin Shroud'. Blink Films. *Transmitted in the UK on April 22 via Freeview Channel 38, Sky Channel 154 and Virgin Channel 172; Transmitted in Australia Sunday 24 March, SBS Channel;*

Review by David Rolfe

“Over five episodes, scientists and explorers will discover the hidden mysteries behind: the Dead Sea copper scroll mystery, the Turin shroud writing, the golden raft of El Dorado, the Jesus tablets and the death cult of the Sphinx.”



The above is how this new series from Discovery/Quest is billed. The emphasis on the “writing” associated with the Shroud is a reflection of the series title and the justification for it to be commissioned. “Decoded” is the key word that the producers have to apply to each of their chosen subjects. In the event, the claims for there to be text on the Shroud was just one of the various elements explored. “Explore” might be a misnomer in this case as the word normally denotes something being done for the first time. With one notable exception this was very much a trip around territory likely to be familiar to readers of the BSTS Newsletter.

The main focus actually proved to be on trying to identify the most likely of the various theories put forward to explain the image. Well known Shroud commentator and promoter, Barrie Schwartz, found himself cast in the role of adjudicator as well as a presenter of his own pet theory. This was a surprising and, frankly, worrying development as far as this reviewer was concerned. Schwartz has carved out an unrivalled reputation as a chronicler and impartial observer of all things to do with the Shroud. His perspective is much sought after in all the major conferences, and always greatly appreciated and enjoyed. This documentary pushed him over a line I feel sure he did not intend to cross.

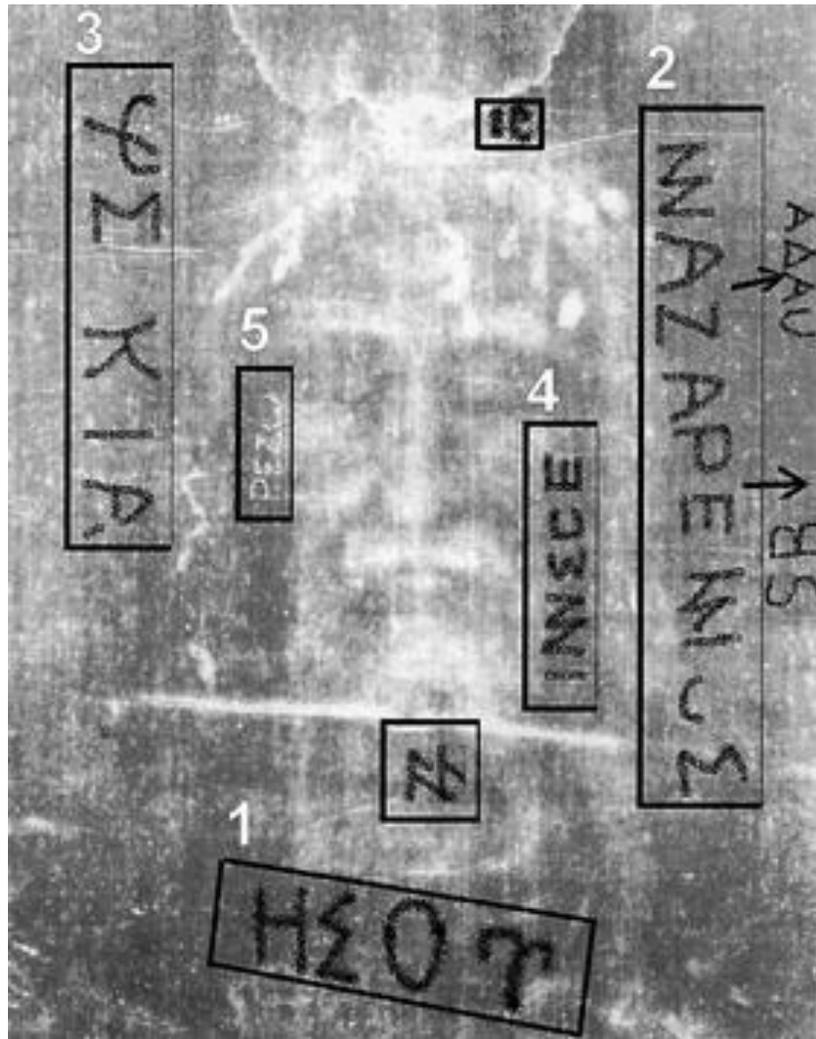
Clues to how this might have happened come from the commentary, which is an object lesson in the use of words to “shape-shift” the truth. Schwartz went from being part of the scientific team (as documenting photographer) sent to investigate the Shroud in 1978 to becoming a “scientist” in his own right – and all in one paragraph. It then gets worse. Having been elevated to being a scientist, when he is reintroduced Barrie is now one of the very few (scientists) to get close to the cloth. I suspect that one of the four separate executive producers credited on the film would have spotted that getting a humble photographer to pronounce on all matters scientific might not look very convincing. The resourceful production team came up with the verbal gymnastics that carried out the transformation.

So, with Barrie Schwartz put in this invidious position, they turned to Prof. Luigi Garlaschelli to put forward his medieval forger theory; Prof. Nicholas Allen to have another go at his medieval photographic theory (with a twist), and Barrie to advance his own new “Decomposition” theory. All three would seek to come up with something to be tested and evaluated at the end of the film.

Things did not get off to a promising start when the commentary told us that the Shroud came to light in the possession of a minor nobleman who “claimed to have brought it back from the crusades”. (Such a claim is non-existent). “Immediately, a Bishop declared it a fake”. Well, that would be true if you classify 40 years under the heading of “immediate”. Clearly, this was going to be a broad-brush approach to the subject.

The fourth main element was the new discoveries of French geophysicist, Thierry Castex, of previously unseen lettering. The team went to “Vatican Researcher” Barbara Frale for her opinion and to combine it with her own identification of previously hidden text to come up with a “translation” of Jesus’s death certificate as, apparently, written on the cloth (see right). Because one of the words identified was “Nazarene” this was proof positive of authenticity, as no medieval forger would have de- scribed Jesus in this way.

The film does not include anything about Frale’s publications on the Shroud’s Templar connections as, presumably, this would have involved them in revealing that she is something of an unreliable witness. It does, however, cite the phenomenon of pareidolia (seeing faces in clouds etc) as a balancing factor to this particular sequence.

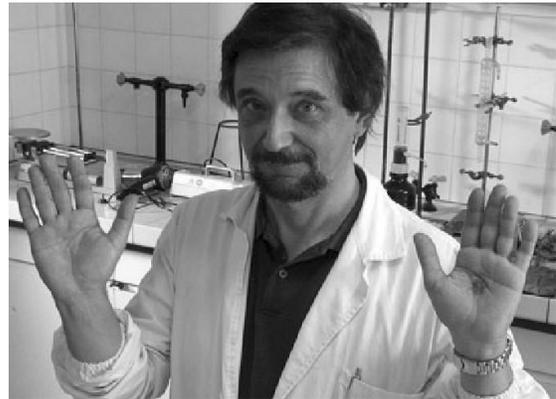


The death certificate of Christ on the Shroud as ‘seen’ by Dr Barbara Frale.

1. (I)esou(s) "Jesus" 2. Nazarennos "Nazarene"; 3. (o)pse kia(tho) "taken down in the early evening"; 4. in nece(m) "to death"; 5. pez(o) "I execute"
 From Barbara Frale’s book *La Sindone di Gesu Nazareno*

Faced with a plethora of stuff “out there” about any subject, especially one so full and complex as the Shroud, jobbing documentary makers never really have enough time get to grips with it. Everything is piecemeal and the only unifying element is the constant vacuous music that ripples and shimmers in a constant attempt to make you think some- thing REALLY IMPORTANT is happening on the screen. It’s like the salt in a Big Mac and disguises the fact that what you are taking in is actually bad for you. Good wholesome meat well prepared and cooked is ex- pensive which is why dodgy restaurants fill you up with nibbles and bread first. But there was some meat to come in this film and it was saved for the end.

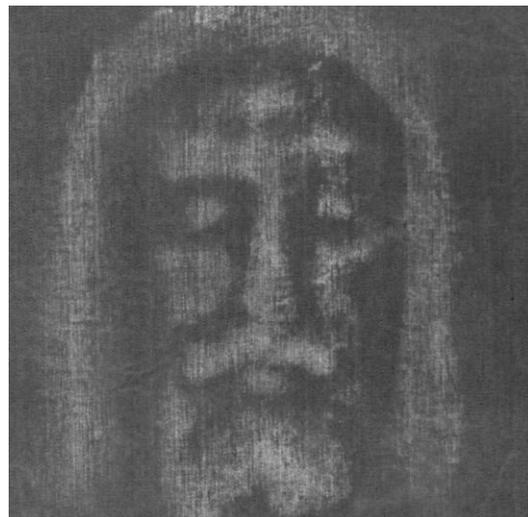
To stick with food for a moment, as a filmmaker myself, I did learn something of interest. The derivation of the word “lens” comes from the Latin for “lentil” - *Lens culinaris* because of its shape. This “Italianate” derivation was cited in evidence that medieval Italians were pioneer photographers centuries ahead of their time. Mmm... Nicholas Allen did, apparently, succeed in creating a face from a Christ-like bust. The last attempt by Allen to create a medieval photograph in this way resulted in the History Channel fudging the results so dramatically that the film’s producer felt obliged to disassociate themselves from the final programme. We only got a very brief shot of the “camera” in this film and even less of the practical process so we must be trusting that no significant corners were cut. The “twist” from Allen was that he did not believe the “photographed” shroud was an intentional fake but an attempt to give the world an artistic take on the actual person of Christ and his suffering.



Luigi Garlaschelli—argues for the Shroud being the work of a medieval artist

I nearly forgot, there was more food to come. When Garlaschelli came to do his own version by applying pigmentation on a cloth impressed upon a bas-relief he used a pizza oven to “cook” it and provide the necessary artificial aging. He, too, not surprisingly came up with a “contender”.

Now we came to the main course which was to be pork – or more accurately – a dead pig. There is a famous establishment in the States known as the Body Farm where bodies donated for medical research are left in various types of environment to establish exactly what happens during decomposition. The data obtained is then used to calibrate actual victims of suspicious deaths. UK sensitivities stop short of real bodies and limit experiments on our closest “analog” as the film told us – the pig.



Convincing? - One of Garlaschelli’s replications of the Shroud image

So it was that Barrie Schwartz, the Shroud’s most prominent Jewish advocate, found himself dressed in forensic whites heading into the undergrowth to drape a piece of linen prepared in the traditional way over

a dead sow. Having done so, he retired with his white-coated assistant while the time-lapse camera kept a record. We were never going to expect much of a resolved image from this experiment as within a relatively short time the corpse began to bloat – as they do – and the linen slid to accommodate the resulting increase in the pig's girth.

Three days later, the linen was removed and Schwartz returned to the lab to examine all three experiments under the microscope. Garlaschelli, while creating a recognizable image was dismissed because "particulate" matter was observed. Allen's was next up and it, too, had a recognizable image, and it also passed the next test by having no perceivable particulate matter. However, Schwartz recalled that STURP had not found any of the necessary silver-based chemicals on the cloth that Allen's experiment required so this could safely and scientifically be ruled out. Helpfully, the film then edited in a piece from Allen saying that all the silver would have been washed out any- way so - we were not much the wiser.

Then came Barrie's examination of his own experiment. This had no image at all but Barrie became excited when he saw "some coloration". "I am amazed", he said, "Exactly what I saw on the Shroud". Well, that pleased the filmmakers. A result! However, just when we might have thought we knew the answer, up popped Dr. Robert Maniura, Senior Lecturer, Birkbeck University who told us that whatever the outcome of the scientific investigation as there was no history of the Shroud prior to the Middle Ages it was all a bit of a waste of time anyway.

As someone who has made three documentaries on the Shroud I plead guilty to having made plenty of my own mistakes in the process. However, the blatant ineptitude and scurrilous bending of the facts employed by Treasures Decoded reach a new low. Above all, perhaps, is the blindness to the fact that the image on the Shroud is not just a portrait-sized affair obtained from one angle but a full dorsal and ventral body that was at one time wrapped in the cloth itself. Perhaps by some far-flung stretch of the imagination, Prof. Nicholas Allen could come up with proof that the first ever photograph was taken in the Middle Ages he would also have to show that this remarkable innovation was not the equivalent of a simple snap but the most complicated picture ever taken even to this day. Similarly with Garlaschelli's bas relief. Where is the original or anything like it? He did have the honesty to say that his explanation only has validity if you accept the C14, which many Shroud researchers no longer do.

During the preparation of this film news was released from ENEA about their attempts to create a version of the image using a form of radiation and attested in peer-reviewed science. It was conspicuously absent from consideration in this film despite the fact the budget to include it was clearly there. This was a missed opportunity to explore something new and tangible and the whole film was an object lesson in the pitfalls that face anyone considering putting themselves in the hands of documentary makers. Even someone as experienced and of integrity like Barrie Schwartz can find themselves starring in a rickety and shallow project, and I am sure he will have something to say about it in due course.

The 'Treasures Decoded' documentary on the Shroud is currently bootlegged on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmNk6LxUPiA>

(More)

[BSTS Editor's note: According to Barrie Schwartz, he is indeed currently writing a 'behind the scenes' account of how he came to be involved in the documentary, and played the part that he did in the 'dead pig' experiment. This will be put on the Internet in the next update of Barrie's website www.shroud.com.]

[Shroud.com Editor's Note: Read Barrie's May 2013 article, ["Behind the Scenes of a New Smithsonian Channel Shroud Documentary."](#)]

Further details of David Rolfe's interest and involvement with the Shroud can be found at his website: www.shroud-enigma.com