

The role of historical research within the Shroud studies

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What does writing the history of the Shroud mean? I believe it is not possible to answer this question without dealing with a far more crucial aspect: what is the Shroud? Many are the elements that can be taken into consideration. The subject here discussed, therefore, will get significantly larger. Consequently, the answer cannot be either simple nor leading to one option only. If we assume the point of view of the relation between the people and the Shroud – which is what mostly concerns us here – we will find vary different positions.

Many consider it a relic, namely the most important relic of Christ's passage on Earth, on which the one and only image of the Savior was imprinted, together with his own blood. Some others go even further, dangerously attempting to find on it the body traces of his glorious resurrection.

Someone else, apart from personal ideas about its origins, underlines the importance of it as an object made unique by the undeniable reference to Christ's passion. Unique from the religious point of view, with its huge pastoral and spiritual potential, but also capable of attracting the interest of scholars of many disciplines.

Some others consider it a fake, antique or not, certainly not worthy of being studied but just being displayed in some imaginary museum of history fakes. Such positions often intertwine and shade one into the other or confront each other or oppose each other, all testifying that the Shroud can leave nobody indifferent.

It is possible to notice that most of these answers imply the issue of the so-called "authenticity". This is a term which is often misleading. We will use its most common meaning here, which defines the Shroud as a part of Jesus' grave goods. Starting from the picture of the Shroud taken in 1898, scientific research made on the cloth has aimed to observe its characteristics and define its origins. In doing this, it has somehow monopolized the attention, risking to overshadow the meaning and the message that the image can transmit.

Historical research itself has very often been used in this way, to prove or deny the tradition stating that the Shroud was Jesus' funerary cloth. Personally, I do not think that this is the best approach, and, most of all, not the most fruitful. The frustrating attempt to recreate a two thousand-year-long sequence of events, just like the destructive critique to every single hypothesis, do not give any significant contribution, as both positions move from the concern – defined by scholar Odile Celier as the "obsession" - for authenticity. It is necessary to let direct research on the cloth answer the questions, legitimate indeed, about the origins of this mysterious Cloth. Straight to the core of our subject, concerning the most profound essence of the Shroud, I have repeatedly stated that, in my opinion, two precise assumptions are needed. The Shroud has been put – by providence, for those who have faith - on the route of history so that men and women could face it: literally looking at it, as it is an object that must be observed with the eyes of the body, and contemplated with the eyes of the mind. Without them, men and women, the Shroud cannot exist in its complexity and completeness. On the other hand, the Shroud would be nothing if it were not the "mirror of the Gospel", mentioning

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the effective expression used by St. John Paul II in 1998, such extraordinary reference to Christ. Without Christ the Shroud would not exist.

I must confess that following these reflections, more than once in so many years of studying the history of the Shroud, I myself have wondered the same question asked in the beginning: what does writing the history of the Shroud mean? I am not going to deny the little fascination I feel for the issue of authenticity – indeed very attractive as an intellectual subject – especially from the historical point of view. I often recall Paul Vignon's laconic statement – after 35 years of work and research – about the reconstruction work of the history of the Shroud made to clarify its origin: "If it were just for that, you would not even start the journey". Not trying to prove the authenticity of the Shroud, or lack of it, through historical investigation – which, once again, is not its main purpose – it is necessary to orient the sense of research into this field towards the role of the Shroud inside the complex scenario of the history of men.

Many events about the Shroud can only be explained through this history. From this point of view, the studies of the history of the Shroud need to recognize that, to people of faith, it represents a little but not irrelevant fragment of the great providential picture of salvation, an object whose religious importance is undeniable. It is vital to reconstruct, through studying documents of any kind, if and how the Shroud has played such a role thanks to its presence and its message, and how much it has affected the people who have encountered it in different and complex historical, cultural and religious contexts. This has to be done when sources allow it, without stretching the point or rising any sterile polemic.

This approach can represent an excellent criteria to evaluate the church potential of the Shroud, in order to let that providential plan be fruitful.

Assuming that an historian, try as he may to be objective, always ends up providing an interpretation upon which to base his method, I will state mine. As my studies go on, I am more and more persuaded that the Shroud has historically played a role – certainly providential – in developing the sense of pity towards the mystery of Christ's humanity. This has led me to focus mainly on the meaning acquired by the events involving the Shroud, rather than a narration of the events themselves. Therefore, not only, and not particularly what a document says, but why it says it, and how it says it, implying the reasons for the document itself.

Studying the Shroud also implies retracing the history of pity towards an object which is image and relic at the same time (the balance and relation between the two has alternated in time and represent one of the most interesting topics to understand the role of the Shroud in history). The Shroud is image and relic of Christ at the highest point of the mystery of the incarnation, therefore participating to the history of pity and devotion towards fundamental elements of faith. From this, an essential characteristic will be evident. The Shroud has travelled through different times, cultures, crisis, without stopping being meaningful and carrying a message. I believe that this is the result of that mediating function and references that I have mentioned before and that expose to the people of faith the providential picture of the existence of the Shroud.

This is not obviously regardless of the necessary, preliminary analysis of the sources, in order to evaluate their reliability and consistency, without isolating them from their context and from research.

I must say that the results of such strategy seem to have satisfied the original requirements, even though it is necessary, through this field of investigation, to reconsider elements that had been given for granted.

Traditionally, the history of the Shroud is divided into two great periods. Their breaking point is traced in the mid-14th century, when the Shroud appeared in France. Since then, we have had an official history enabling to align its identity with the one preserved in Turin, tracing its events. The previous period is characterized by lack of any type of documentation, so any identification with the objects thought to be associated with the Shroud is uncertain. As a consequence of this overview, the Shroud has too often been something “extra-historical”, something that has or needs to have its own story, outside history.

Let us assume the perspective which I have pointed out, where the history of the Shroud, or even better, the very essence of the history of the Shroud, its worship as expression of its relationship with the people of faith and as a part of the wider picture of the history of the Church and sense of pity within it. Through this perspective, the traditional periodization is too general and misleading, as too tied to the issue of authenticity. If the Shroud has to be considered in its relation to the history of men and Church in particular, it is essential that we refer to it. I managed to highlight some phases within important moments of the history of the Church, specifically intended as spiritual history of the Church, that enable to notice different approaches to the Shroud.

Leaving aside the two traditional periods above mentioned, I will provide a different periodization of the history of the Shroud, identifying links to the relation between the Shroud – as image and relic – and men, and their history, which can be seen as: **research for a face, tolerated presence, welcomed presence and allowed worship, promoted presence and worship, scientific debate.**

Chronologically, starting from the most ancient time, I believe that it is possible to agree that in the Church, and in the pity and devotion manifestations within it, there were sources about the preservation of Christ’s grave goods, the Shroud included, as a fundamental element of Jesus’ burial mentioned by the gospels. Some of this information, although complex, enable to evaluate the hypothesis of the existence of a figurative shroud, and that images of Christ were circulating and worshiped.

A new perspective opens up within the theme of the image, as I have tried to demonstrate in some other essays. If documents that can identify the Shroud of Turin with that, or those, mentioned in ancient times do not exist, there is although a strong link with it and it is very important. It is about the history of devotion and pity. It is necessary to turn upside down a strong theory. Devotion and pity towards the Shroud have not necessarily based the tradition of the Church since its origins, but they were its results, becoming paradigm later on. This has been evident from the catechesis of Cyril in Jerusalem, to the defense of images by Giovanni Damasceno, from the devotion to Christ’ humanity, characterized by St. Bernard and St. Francis, through the Trento Council and its systemization, to the new perspectives greatly described by John Paul II in 1998 and Benedict XVI in 2010.

As far as the most ancient time is concerned, in the light of this perspective and the data collected so far, it is interesting to trace, if not all of them, at least the most renowned hypotheses about the existence – or better, the tradition - of an object whose characteristics are compatible with those of the Shroud. In doing so, strengths and weaknesses will be

highlighted, avoiding extremist or hypercritical positions, bearing in mind that the research carried out so far cannot allow us to go back more than the 14th century, at least from the point of view of documentation. In doing this, I do not aim to elude the issue, but to release this investigation from that obsession for authenticity on which both positions seem to be based. We will notice that, in such view, a thin but strong fil rouge exists, based on the relationship between men and the physical characteristics of incarnated God. This is possible through some research that has interested the men of faith since ancient times, after the struggle of the Church to unravel the issues about “who” Jesus Christ was. Only at that point, when the coexistence of man and divine into the incarnated Son, true man and true God with his own individuality, was recognized, it was possible to think about his physical aspect. From this, the issue of reproducibility is originated, very complex from the theological point of view, more than from the aesthetic one. One should think of the iconoclastic crisis of the 8th century, correctly defined as the last great Christological controversy.

This period of time will be defined as the phase of the **research for a face**, to which the image of the Shroud fully participates. As an evidence of this, one should think that the results of such research came up in the 14th century, just when the Shroud appeared. Its arrival was neither easy nor given for granted. This was, in fact, a very delicate phase from our point of view. Right at the most tragic moment of the history of medieval Church, when the pity toward material symbols risked to be have dangerous interpretations, a complex and uncanny object such as the Shroud appeared. Its survival was possible only thanks to its fundamental characteristic as an image. This historical fact – legitimate today and back then – takes us back to the evidence that the immediate approach to the Shroud is with the imprint that the cloth holds. The issue about considering it as a relic – the “real” shroud of the gospel and the consequences that it bears – needs a rational analysis, and comes after the spontaneity of the relation to the image. In this sense, it is possible to state that the Shroud today is a paradigm of the relation between science and faith.

This first period of time into the Western world can be defined as the time of the **tolerated** presence of the Shroud. This definition originates from the reactions that followed this unusual object after it appeared, and the solutions adopted to manage such issue. Yet, this is also the time that slowly takes to the normalization of the relation between the people of faith and the Shroud. This was due to the intervention of the Church and to the permission for public worship granted by pope Julius II in 1506, after the Shroud had institutionally been placed under the management of the Savoy family. Between the memorials of Pierre d’Arcis and the prescriptions of Clement VII from Avignon – about whom we will talk later – and the interventions of Julius II there seem to be a great gap. Yet, such gap does not exist, if we consider the events in the light of the history of the Church and evolution of pity. This is the time when the Shroud is **welcomed** and its worship **admitted**, leading later on to its **promotion**, at the fertile time of the Catholic Reformation. The second half of the 18th and 19th century will mark a moment in time when some elites – church ones too, influenced by rationalism and enlightenment – detach themselves from the Shroud, with some degree of suspicion. That will not affect the hearts and sense of pity of common men and women of faith.

The photograph taken by Secondo Pia will immediately bring the Shroud back to attention. This first picture revealed the unexpected characteristic of the imprint of the Shroud as a

photographic negative. At this point, the issue becomes of scientific interest, risking more than once to overshadow the message of the Shroud. This is the time when the “obsession” for authenticity began. We have highlighted that in the first time of known history the focus was on the image, then shifted to the relic, within a relation, which is, although ups and downs, balanced. From this time on, the issue of the aspect of the “relic”, or “authenticity”, in a more laic sense, takes over. As a consequence, the very possibility and purpose of an exhibition is questioned and subordinated to such issue. The interventions of the popes, starting from Paul VI, brought the subject back to its right perspective. We are still living today in a time that can be defined as that of **scientific debate**. However, a careful pastoral work about the Shroud created the balance leading to the extraordinary results of the latest public displays.