

THE HOLY FACE OF LAON

by Pierre de Riedmatten (France)

In Laon Cathedral (Aisne - France), in the north transept chapel, lies a very old and still venerated icon named the "*Holy Face of Laon*". André Grabar, professor at College de France, who wrote numerous books on icons and on the iconoclastic period, said that "it is highly interesting on an archaeological level"¹. In fact, it is one of the very few surviving icons whose history can be traced back for eight centuries or more.

Highly famous in the Middle Ages (it supposedly worked miracles), it was at the centre of daily prayer for peace during the First World War 1914-1918.²

It presently belongs to Laon City, but also depends on the Ministry of Culture, since it was classified as a historical monument in 1908.

It was displayed in 1988 at the Bismarck Foundation in Paris, for the millennium of Russia's baptism, and in the Metropolitan Museum in New York from May to July 2004.

Observing it closely (fig. 1), the reader will quickly understand how we can link it to other ancient icons and with the "Holy Mandylion", an image "*not made by hand*", solemnly transferred from Edessa to Constantinople on 15th August 944³, which might well be the Shroud now kept in Turin.

1 - Description

The Laon Icon is nearly square, since it is 44 cm high and 40 cm wide. In his 1931 study, A. Grabar described it at length and very precisely; we cannot reproduce it all here, but it would probably enable specialists to compare its details with what can be seen today (principally a slight alteration of colours is not impossible). According to the ancient icon making technique, it is carved in the form of a basin with edges 2.5 cm thick, whereas the inside is only 2cm thick. It is covered with a very thin coating (to form a support for the paint), where we can sometimes see the print of the image outline, traced with a punch. According to ancient tradition it is not signed, since artists in the Middle Ages placed more importance on the message delivered by the icon. The back side bears neither description nor mark.

The Laon Icon depicts:

- the Face of Christ, of a very dark tint, wide open eyes, hair parted in two on top of the forehead, and a forked beard; hair with a parting at the middle of the head, falling down in two symmetrical oblique groups, again split in two at the end; a dark bar crosses the forehead, and falls in a triangular shape down to the top of nose which is slightly pinched lower down;
- an ivory-coloured cross nimbus, forked in three, with wide edges at the end, underlined with thin red double stripes; the painting depicts them set with precious stones (one ruby and nine blue pearls - ref 1);
- a suit of lozenges around the nimbus, also on an ivory background, with yellow veins (were they painted in gold?) joining in small circles; each lozenge has a small design which could evoke a decorative ornament (fleur-de-lis, bunch of grapes).
This suit of lozenges which could evoke a Damask linen or a lattice/netting

¹ "The Holy Face of Laon - The Mandylion in Orthodox art" - André Grabar - Ed. Seminarium Kondakovianum - Prague 1931 ; booklet obtained from Laon Municipal Library under reference MHL 890.

² Laon is 15 km away from "Chemin des Dames".

³ See the engraving from Jean Skylitzes manuscript (XII° c.) - B.N. of Madrid ; and article in MNTV n° 30.

- protection, going up to the face and thus hiding the neck ;
- IC and XC writings in two small circles lined in red, at the top;
- red writing, under the face, in three distinctly separated words (by small red designs);
- under the red frame, red and blue stripes ending with small circles which could evoke fringes or fixing threads ending with nails.

2 - How did this icon come to Laon?

a) Arrival in France

The booklet you can buy on the spot⁴ says that the icon was given in **1249** to the Cistercian Abbey in Montreuil-en-Thiérache⁵ by Jacques of Troyes⁶, who was still archdeacon of Laon Cathedral but already living in Rome as chaplain of Pope Innocent IV (1243 - 1254). This high dignitary of the Laon church became Pope Urban IV in 1261, the second of four Popes from the Laon bishopric.

In the letter sent from Rome on 3rd July 1249 to his sister Sybille, at the time abbess of Montreuil-en-Thiérache convent, Jacques de Troyes wrote : *“To answer my dear sister’s query, we understood that your dearest wish was to see and keep near you the Face and features of Our Lord which we have in keep, exactly as he was seen on Earth when he still dwelt with us, He, the Most Beautiful of men, so that by contemplating His Face, your souls may reach a higher devotion (...). Since we wish to grant you, with a deep joy, all things which may help you obtain God’s grace in this world... we send you the Holy Face, famous above all...*

We pray that you receive it with all the reverence due to the One it represents... Treat it with piety, tenderness and honour, so that its contemplation may better you all...

... Do believe that we deemed it right to treat it with the maximum honour and veneration amongst the devout men who gave it to me.

*The year of Grace 1249, on the third day of July,
during the octave of the feasts of Saint Peter and Saint Paul” .*

Unfortunately the original of this letter given to the cathedral in 1807 is lost, probably well before the outbreak of war in 1939, since all research by A. Grabar to find it remained unsuccessful⁷. He nevertheless esteems that the date of 1249 for its arrival is trustworthy, in view of the style of the icon itself (see hereafter) and from another text (15th century) which mentions the temporary stay of the icon in 1262 in the neighbouring Cistercian monastery called “the Dunes” (in Belgium).

b) Origin

In 1979, when the ambassadors of Yugoslavia came to France (ref 4) and visited Laon, the chief keeper of Belgrade Museum, a specialist in Serbian icons was *“persuaded that the painter was Serbian”* and said that the icon certainly came from Bari, in the south of Italy, where there was in ancient times an Orthodox monastery with Serbian monks.

Although we can find no text with this location and no mention by Grabar either (ref 1), it would have been quite normal for Jacques de Troyes to visit the Orthodox monks of Bari (which is not far from Rome). In fact, Pope Innocent IV had noticed his gift for

⁴ “The holy Face of Laon and its story”- Suzanne Martinet - 1988 - Courrier de l’Aisne Print. This booklet has been used partly in this article, in agreement with the Association of the Friends of the Laon Cathedral.

⁵ Also named “Montreuil-les-Dames”, about 50 km from Laon, near town “la Capelle”.

⁶ Jacques Pantaléon, named “Jacques de Troyes” since he was born in Troyes in 1185 ; archdeacon of Laon in 1240.

⁷ The text quoted here comes from the first copy of this letter, edited in 1624 - A. Grabar (ref, 1).

conciliation, and had entrusted him with several important diplomatic missions, notably in Poland and Pomeranian lands. Let us also recall, that after the sack of Constantinople (in 1204, during the 4th crusade), the Roman Church was able to weave very active affectionate ties with Orthodox churches, liberated from the Byzantine Emperor's authority. At the same time, Serbian princes from the Nemanjic family organized an autocephalic Church⁸ and Etienne I received solemnly from Pope Honorius III the crown of Serbia, in 1217. His brother, Saint Sava, became metropolitan of Serbia and according to the above-mentioned keeper of the Belgrade museum, he was renowned for having developed Serbian monasteries, and for having offered precious icons to numerous religious homes, notably to Nerezi (near Skopje in Macedonia), and in Bari in Italy. The papacy therefore tried to entertain frequent⁹ relationships with Orthodox and Slavonic countries; in this context, Jacques de Troyes could have been sent on a mission to Bari monastery and there received a gift "*from these devout men who gave him the Holy Face*"¹⁰.

The hypothesis by Grabar in 1931 (ref 1) does not really exclude this: for him, "*the importation of an Orthodox icon to Rome ... during the first half of the thirteenth century can well be imagined ... The faultless Slavonic inscription could only have been written in one of the three Slavonic countries which used the Cyrillic alphabet at the time: Serbia, Bulgaria or Russia*". And Jacques de Troyes stayed "*a long time in Central Europe in 1248, just before the icon was sent to Laon*".

c. From the Cistercian monastery to the Laon cathedral (ref 4)

After its arrival in France, this venerable icon, usually celebrated for the feast of St Peter and St Paul, acquired rapidly a great renown, and was displayed on numerous "Monstrances" in the north of France, Brabant and Flanders; it was even said to cure those who suffered from ailments of the eyes, and it was taken from village to village during epidemics. In Montreuil-en-Thiérache¹¹, it was taken in procession yearly and venerated by pilgrims; and several confraternities were created to honour it. It remained there until the 1636 Spanish invasion compelled the Cistercian sisters to leave their abbey to find shelter in different places. Finally, the Bishop of Laon welcomed them in 1650 with their precious treasure at "La Neuville-sous-Laon", in an ancient leprosarium which they renamed "Montreuil-sous-Laon". Pilgrimages started again, and pilgrims could buy a medal in the new abbey¹². In 1679, the precious image was enshrined in a crystal reliquary¹³, set with precious stones and silver. Popes granted indulgences to pilgrims in 1681 and 1684. An "*Office of the Holy Face*" was written in 1719 and celebrated regularly. "*It seems, says A. Grabar, that nowhere else did an Orthodox icon play such a role in a Catholic country*" (ref 1). The image then became an important source of profit for all merchants and inn keepers who welcomed the pilgrims at the abbey's entrance; and rivalries flared up.

During the French Revolution, the Cistercian sisters' belongings were confiscated as early as 1790; the last pilgrimage took place in June 1791 (protected by the army, to avoid riots); and in autumn 1792 the sisters had to leave the place, leaving "*the*

⁸ They had already endeavored to break free from Constantinople at the end of the 12th cent, taking advantage of Manuel I Comnene's death (in 1180) to spread their authority in neighbouring territories.

⁹ Notably innocent IV had crowned one of Russian princes by a pontifical legate.

¹⁰ Later, as he had become Pope Urban IV (right at the time of the Latin empire's fall in 1261), Jacques de Troyes endeavored to go on with this mission of conciliation amongst Christians by sending four peace messengers to Constantinople to the new Byzantine Emperor Michel Palaeologus.

¹¹ Which was then in "Hainaut".

¹² A piece of these "sportelles" in lead, found in La Seine, is in the Cluny Museum in Paris; another one was found in Milan.

¹³ Given by the Abbess Catherine de Longueval.

miraculous relic" in the empty abbey. A fiery legal contest arose amongst the inhabitants¹⁴ to obtain the icon (with the financial advantages it procured). Each group of petitioners claimed territorial ownership of the icon, since the abbey church was not in the same parish as the convent¹⁵. Diverse decrees, orders, and agreements from civilian authorities, followed by protests, contests or new petitions from inhabitants, which even reached Paris, mentioned "*the risk of bloodshed, since the inhabitants are very keen on obtaining this image*" said the Attorney General in November 1792. Finally, the crystal reliquary was transferred to the Saint-Nicolas-de-la-Neuville church, and placed under lock and key.

During "la Terreur", in order to comply with the municipal instructions "*to destroy monuments which could entail equality*"¹⁶, the crystal reliquary of the "*«ci-devant» church Saint Nicholas*" was destroyed in December 1793; its precious stones were ripped off and its silver-gilded covering melted; since "*the effigies of the «ci-devant» Christ, saintly men and women*" should be "*taken away from the eyes of republicans who become indignant on seeing these grotesque images which remind them of centuries of slavery and ignorance*". But, against all prevision (or probably from fear of very probable retaliation from the people), the icon was not destroyed: taken to the tribunal, the district of Laon administrator prudently put it in a cupboard under a heap of files, to avoid arousing recent passions. It remained there for two years until the (very relative) religious appeal brought up by the "Directoire" allowed the Holy Face to be taken out of hiding and solemnly placed, in December **1795**, on top of the main altar of the cathedral¹⁷.

In August 1807, in the presence of the new bishop of Soissons, Laon and Saint-Quentin, it was officially recognized by the ancient Cistercians of Montreuil-sous-Laon, who were still alive, as being the icon exposed for the longest time in their monastery. The Abbess then gave the oldest member priest in the cathedral the original letter (which is now lost) concerning the giving of the icon by Jacques de Troyes in 1249.

If one can smile today at those strong rivalries enumerated here above, they reflect mainly the large affluence of pilgrims and the strong devotion still alive in this region for this Holy Face.

3- The writing under the Face (ref 1)

This writing in three words surprised many scholars. The learned Benedictine Mabillon himself¹⁸ was not able to interpret it, after having reproduced (with mistakes) the signs unknown to him which he attributed to heretical magic formulas engraved by Gnostics on their talismans. Father La Chaise (the famous Jesuit, confessor of Louis XIV) entrusted a reproduction, also full of mistakes, of this inscription to a learned Jesuit, Father Hardouin¹⁹, who persisted in believing it was written in Greek, and imagined the missing letters or "*voluntarily inverted to make it difficult to read*"; which ended up in a very obscure and whimsical text, which he interpreted elaborately in "*the Learned Paper*" 1707 March edition: "*the painter means that for a Christian, the Holy Face, in this sad figure is a very sad topic, that he would rather paint Our Lord, whole, in His now glorious state, or in*

¹⁴ Those of St Martin (on the plateau, near "Notre Dame" cathedral), and those of the suburbs of "La Neuville" and "Vaux".

¹⁵ A petition dated from September 1792 states: "*If the relic was granted to St Martin or Notre-Dame parish, it would keep and uphold the superiority the city vicars always believed to have over these suburbs (...). It would be unfair not to grant to the citizens of the (suppressed) parish of Saint-Marcel the means of profit detained by those from the city*".

¹⁶ The arches of the "*«ci-devant» cathedral*" were destroyed and the towers remained only because one of the workers in charge of their destruction was killed (and also because there was a risk of damaging neighbouring houses). The 228 reliquaries of the cathedral were destroyed and all the paintings burnt.

¹⁷ It was later placed in the Cathedral Treasury.

¹⁸ French founder of archaeology, died in 1707.

¹⁹ Historian of the councils.

another one of the mysteries from His Passion".

We had to wait until 1717 to find out that the text, written in Slavonic²⁰ and in Cyrillic letters, simply said: "*Imago Domini in Sudario*", that some translate today as: "*Our Lord's Face on the cloth*". Suspecting that the inscription was in Russian, and with help from Moscow, a Carmelite father²¹ managed to decipher the three words (ref 4): *OBRAS* = *image*; *GOSPODEN* = *of Our Lord*; *NAOUBROUSE* = *on the cloth*. Nevertheless this translation aroused a French scholar's indignation!

According to A. Grabar (ref 1), the last word should be split in two: NA OUBROUSE ; the voluntary link in one word was just meant to reinforce the central position (and its theological character) of the word GOSPODEN (Lord).

4 - Expert appraisals and restorations

The Laon icon was painted on two thin small boards joined together, which, according to a recent expert appraisal²², are made of poor quality cypress (and not pine or fir tree as we had believed until now).

Different appraisals evidenced the archaic techniques used, not only as concerns the preparation of the sub-layer (paste made of a mixture of carbonate and calcium sulphate) the pictorial layer (using an egg binding), and the pigments (like the vermilion of the writing). Let us remember mainly that apart from a very slight retouching at the corner of the lips, the Face of Christ underwent no restoration.

At the end of the 20th century, the state of the icon had become critical, due to damp in the Cathedral Treasury room, where its long stay had constrained the wood (soaked with water), and tainted the varnish with moisture, and lifted the pictorial layer up in places.

The last restoration effected in Versailles²³, from 1988 to 1991, consisted mainly of:

- enabling the wood to breathe again (by eliminating the constraints);
- re-fixing damaged pictorial elements;
- suppressing, according to the modern usage for "Primitifs", what preceding restorations had added to stop external apertures;
- building a water-proof glass case, with stabilized and controlled humidity to keep the icon away from damp.

As shown in fig.1. the icon appears therefore today freed from these additions, particularly from matter which hid the marks of nails, which can be seen clearly now, particularly on the right side. The presence of these nails on both vertical sides had been evidenced by an X-ray carried out in 1979. You can also see other thinner nails, at several junctions of the lozenges delimiting the nimbus. For A.Grabar (ref 1.), the icon "*was coated with a metal covering, except for the face of Christ; there remains very small marks of nails, particularly numerous around the head of Christ: two different kind of nails, some in gilded copper in perfect state, the others in iron eaten by rust*". For H. Leynen²⁴ "*the icon [of Laon] no longer has a "risa"²⁵ or metal covering attested nevertheless by numerous marks of nails.*"

One should not perhaps nevertheless mistake this metal covering (which you can now see

²⁰ Slavonic is an archaic language which evolved into modern Bulgarian.

²¹ Father Honoré de Sainte Marie ; he also depended on Prince Kourakine, and on the sub-Karpatic Russian authorities. It was the first opportunity to translate a Slavonic text into French.

²² In the expert appraisal report by Caroline Piel, inspector of historical monuments - 30th March 1992.

²³ In specialized workshops of the National Museums, under the responsibility of the Direction of Cultural Affairs from Picardie, with the assistance of the Research Laboratory of Historical Monuments.

²⁴ In "As concerns the Mandylion" - Hilda Leynen - booklet published in Brugges around 1992, in the "Soudarion" Review - Cluny Museum Library (Paris), ref, 4752 ; see also Mazarine Library (Paris), National Archives, 8 - 91818 - 1.

²⁵ Probably a Russian word.

also on new icons), which could have been replaced later by a simple veil²⁶, with the lozenges painted on the icon, which could evoke a rich linen (damask) or a protective lattice/netting protection.

5 - Comparison with the Shroud of Turin

Many of the signs identified by Paul Vignon on the Shroud²⁷ can be seen on this icon :

- the blood stain on the forehead
- the horizontal bar on the forehead, and the V shape at the top of the nose
- left nostril wider than right one
- left cheek bone strongly marked, round shaped, result of a tumefaction²⁸
- forked beard
- strongly marked line below under lip.

Let us also note the thinning of the nose, maybe caused by rupture as seen on the Shroud, caused by the breaking of the nasal cartilage according to anatomists. As on most ancient icons, wide open eyes may also be attributed to Shroud influence, on which the artist could probably see only the Face of Christ: it was easier for him to ascribe this Face to a living person than to a dead one, and the eyes which appear circled in white on the Shroud, often involved an accentuation of the eye outline on icons.

It is moreover interesting to note that an artist seeing the Shroud could also interpret the **very dark hue of the Face** as caused by the sun. In his 1249 letter quoted above, Jacques de Troyes said about the Holy Face of Laon: "*Do not be surprised if you find his [Face] blackened and sunburnt, since for those who dwell in temperate and cold climates and who live all the time in pleasant places have fair, delicate skin, whereas those who are always in the fields have burnt, darkened skin. This is the case with the Holy Face, bronzed by the heat of the sun*".

6- Comparison with other ancient paintings

Amongst numerous ancient paintings resembling the Holy Face of Laon, we shall only quote three here:

- the icon of Dormition Church in Moscow²⁹ (fig. 2) which is now in Tretiakov Gallery. Its shaped, carved inside, is also practically square (77.2 cm x 71 cm), and it also depicts a strongly "sun burnt" face (with the eyes more accentuated); hair falling down in two oblique groups, again split in two at the end (but sparkled with golden lines here); forked beard, lock at the top of the forehead, a bar on the forehead, and a "V" on the top of the nose; absence of neck; and a nimbus, with precious stones which can be supposed on branches (a large one surrounded by four smaller ones);
- Codex Rossianus (fig. 3), now in the Vatican Library, also nearly square-shaped. It also shows hair parted in two, a forked beard³⁰, lack of shoulders³¹, nimbus with branches the same colour as the background; red edged lozenges probably symbolizing a trellis or a damask linen on white background, with designs very like those on the Laon icon, and threads at the bottom (and top) evoking fringes or fixing threads.

²⁶ Mentioned by visitors in 1867 (ref, 1).

²⁷ Cf. A. Grabar; these signs are mainly mentioned in Ian Wilson's book "*The Shroud of Turin*" - 2nd edition - Albin Michel - 1984 - p. 139

²⁸ In Matthew's Gospel, chap. 26 and 27, "*they took the reed and struck him on the head ;... others slapped him*".

²⁹ Ascribed to Novgorod School.

³⁰ Only half of this exceptional engraving has been reproduced here (ref. 251 of Codex Rossianus or Rossinensis folio 12); the forked beard can be better seen on the other half.

³¹ With a very special neck shape which can be found on numerous icons of Christ.

- Spas Neredista fresco (fig. 4), which was near Novgorod in a church which was destroyed during the recent war. Unfortunately we have no coloured reproduction of this fresco, which also shows hair falling down in two oblique groups, forked beard, bar on forehead, with a double "V" on top of the nose (as on the Turin Shroud), a nimbus with precious stones on branches (same layout as on Dormition church icon), lozenges which could evoke a trellis rather than a precious weaving, and on both external sides³², tight thread ending with circles evoking rather a fixating device than fringes.

7- When was this icon painted?

Whether it arrived directly in Rome, or via Bari, one cannot realistically see why the Serbian orthodox monks would have offered to Pope Innocent IV's diplomatic messenger a freshly painted icon, therefore of poor value. Moreover it could not have been painted in Constantinople just after it was sacked, since, according to Robert de Clari's text "*the Sydoine which had wrapped Our Lord and was exposed every Friday*" had disappeared. And we cannot see how a Serbian orthodox painter could have gone to the Frankish community in Athens, where the presence of the "*Holy Shroud*" was mentioned in 1205³³ although very discreetly. It is therefore highly improbable that the Laon Icon could be from the 13th century.

It is much more realistic to think that this icon was already ancient when Jacques de Troyes received it, since he adds that "*it was deemed righteous to treat it with as much honour and veneration as possible by the pious men who gave it to me*".

If the Rossianus Codex engraving can be dated to the 11th century³⁴, on the other hand the Moscow Dormition church's icon and the Spas Neredista fresco, whose faces are more akin to the Laon icon are respectively dated to 1167³⁵ and 1198³⁶. The second half of the 12th century seems therefore more accurate for the making of the Laon Icon.

A. Grabar moreover states (ref 1) that from the 13th century "*fringes and trellis design become very rare*"; and that "*Christ's Nimbus (from the Laon icon) is characteristic of the Commene era*"³⁷.

8- It is a "mobile" copy of the Edessa Mandylion

The Laon icon seems to have been painted from the Edessa Mandylion "*not made by hands*", or from a copy of the Mandylion. In fact:

- the Moscow Dormition church's Icon is named "*acheropite Savior*", like other numerous other copies of this image "*not made by humans hands*";
- the Spas Neredista fresco is a copy of the "Edessa Mandylion";
- as for the (partial) engraving of Rossianus Codex "*it must have been made at the time when the two images were reunited in Constantinople*", the Edessa Mandylion and the "Keramion", therefore between 968 and 1204³⁸.

³² Fig 4 is taken from A. Grabar's study found in the Municipal Library in Laon; some reproductions do not show fresco's right side.

³³ See letter sent to Pope Innocent III by Isaac Ange, June 1205.

³⁴ In "Byzantine iconoclasm - Archeological file" - André Grabar - 1957- (1988 ed. by Champs/Flammarion p.39).

³⁵ In "The beginning of la Rouss, XI° at XIII° c. icons" - 1995 - Ed. Casa di Matrimonia - Milan.

³⁶ In "Byzantine iconoclasm" - A. Grabar - op. quoted. Moreover Ian Wilson (who often quotes A. Grabar) says 1199 - in "The Shroud of Turin" - 2nd edition - Albin Michel - 1984 - p. 156. We note an ambiguity on p. 163 same book, where Wilson writes: "*What would the Shroud look like in the 10th century*"; which does not mean that the fresco dates from the 10th century but that in the 10th century artists could see the Shroud according to this reproduction of the Mandylion which arrived in Constantinople in the 10th century.

³⁷ Whose line came to an end in 1204.

³⁸ The Keramion, which disappeared in 1204, was the tile or brick on which, according to one of the Abgar

According to A. Grabar (ref 1), one should moreover make the distinction between two different types of Mandylion copies, which after its transfer to Constantinople was "*considered as the most precious treasure of the capital of Christendom*":

- those on which the cloth is taut, with or without fringes (or fixing threads), with or without a trellis and damask cloth. The Laon Icon belongs to this category.
- those with a "floating cloth" hanging from the corners or from rings.

As concerns the first ones, older than the second ones, he says, "***It is highly probable that this icon imitates King Abgar's real Mandylion which was extended and nailed onto a board***", as noted in the *Narratio de imagine edessena*³⁹ at the time of the Edessa image's transfer to Constantinople, on 15th August 944.

The second type (hanging veil) begun to spread only on the second half of the 13th century, and seems to come from Latin West and Slavic countries (ref 1). Would it then be in Athens (and more precisely at Daphni monastery) that Frankish artists came to copy the Shroud which is now in Turin? Or in Europe, perhaps even in France, if the Shroud came there at this time⁴⁰?

As concerns the theological role of the Mandylion, A. Grabar moreover distinguishes (ref 1) between :

- paintings and frescoes in churches always far above ground level and which could not help the faithful. In cupula churches, they were placed on the tambour transverse rib, since they symbolize the mystery of the Incarnation, therein linking the terrestrial church (downwards) and the celestial church (upwards); such is the case at Spas Neredista. In only one nave church it is situated on the eastern wall above the sanctuary apse, so as to enable the faithful to see it at once, when they come in the nave axis above the altar. For Byzantines (after the long battle with iconoclasts⁴¹), "*King Abgar's Mandylion is Christ's most authentic representation, since it was obtained by direct contact with Jesus' Face ... His incarnation was not fanciful as the iconoclasts taught, but real and complete ... None of the Mandylion copies can be destined to be adored by the faithful ... like those set at wall bottoms, at height size* ;
- and "mobile" icons, meant to be worshipped, according to a very ancient use. "*Since the time of its most ancient reproductions in 12th century painting, the Holy Face also attracted the faithful as an object of prayer ... The Laon Icon and Moscow Dormition church prove that Byzantine art knew the Mandylion as a worship image from the Commene era*". Like the Holy Face of Laon which "*reproduces the characteristic classical Byzantine Saviour's head*", they often had less hard features than "fixed" icons and had a more protective role, in the spirit of King Abgar's remark – he had this inscription engraved on one of Edessa's city doors - "*O, Christ God, he who trusts in You, shall not perish*".

9- Conclusions

The Holy Face given to Laon in 1249 could have been brought to Rome in the first half of the 13th century, when the papacy entertained an active relationship with Slavonian countries (mainly Serbia) and with Orthodox monasteries (maybe Bari). But this icon most probably dates from the second half of the 12th century. At this time, as established in the

legends, the Edessa image would have reproduced itself by an unaccounted for contact. It would have reached Constantinople in 968 (ref 1).

³⁹ See the reproduction by A. Grabar (ref 1) of the Greek text translation by Dobschütz - "Christusbilder" V. 2.

⁴⁰ Some authors think that Otho de la Roche, who died in Burgundy in 1224 after having been Duke of Athens, could have taken the Shroud back to France himself; but, to our knowledge, there is no notably trustworthy text to confirm this hypothesis.

⁴¹ Ended in 843 with the triumph of Orthodoxy.

famous Pray Codex engraving, the Turin Shroud was in Constantinople⁴², and relationships with European countries often occurred⁴³. The Laon icon's characteristics, specially the strongly sunburnt face of Christ could eventually come from a direct vision of the Turin Shroud in Constantinople.

In any case it is a "mobile" copy (aimed for prayer), direct or indirect, of the Edessa Mandylion, image "*non made by hand*" whose history can be traced back to the VI° c.. The very detailed study held by A. Grabar, in 1931 (ref 1), along with documents studied since then⁴⁴, may probably help us to identify the Turin Shroud with "the Holy Mandylion" which played "*a very significant role in Byzantine life, mainly to illustrate the dogma of the Incarnation*" (ref 1).

Without being able to solve the difficult question of the "fringes", which have been represented on top of the icon and / or the bottom, as well as on the sides⁴⁵, the above-mentioned elements rather evoke fixing threads of the cloth with nails on a board, confirming what is said in the *Narratio de imagine edessena*. Let us note that on the famous Skylitzes manuscript engraving, the cloth which bears Christ's Face, the cloth is not "floating", but seems held on a rigid stay adorned with "fringes" (at least on top). And let us recall that Doctor J. Jackson evidenced⁴⁶ a transversal folding of the Shroud in eight, evoking a fixation on such a rigid stay, which also goes along with the hypothesis published by Ian Wilson⁴⁷ and Hilda Leynen⁴⁸ of an exposure which enabled people to see only Christ's Face, in a casket with a golden trellis⁴⁹ to protect it from the faithful fervour.

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("Let Us see Your Face")

⁴² See the 4 L shaped holes which can be seen on both the Shroud and the engraving.

⁴³ Codex Pray dates from 1195; engravings could have been made in 1148 for Theodora, Manuel I Commene's niece's wedding with Henry Duke of Ostrich and King of Hungary, the emperor Conrad's brother, who had become great friend of Manuel I; cf. "*History of Byzantium*" - J.J. Norwich - ed. Perrin - 1999.

⁴⁴ P Vignon marks: letter from 1205 to Pope Innocent III; Skylitzes manuscript engraving; Codex Pray.

⁴⁵ They can be seen notably (crossed) at the bottom of the tissue held by King Abgar who receives the Mandylion, on an icon at St. Catherine's monastery in Sinai, dating from the second half of the 10th century.

⁴⁶ At the 4th Scientific Symposium on the Turin Shroud, held in Paris in April 2002 by CIELT - Report published in booklet 26 MNTV.

⁴⁷ "*The Turin Shroud*" - Ian Wilson - ed. Albin Michel - 1984 - chap. 14.

⁴⁸ "*On the Mandylion*" Hilda Leynen - op. cit.

⁴⁹ "*Abgar ... fixed it to a panel and adorned it with gold which can be seen nowadays*" – in the *Narratio de imagine edessena*.

⁵⁰ 215 Rue de Vaugirard - 75015 – Paris, France.