

The Shroud, the Knights Templar and Barbara Frale

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Every now and again in Shroud studies someone with some genuine academic credentials comes forward claiming to have found powerful new evidence supportive of the Shroud's authenticity – only for that evidence, once properly investigated, seriously to lack the substance attributed to it. A particularly sad case back in the late 1990s was that of the Russian scientist Dr Dmitri Kouznetsov, whose 'carbon-enrichment' experiments to explain the Shroud's C14 date turned out to be completely bogus. The latest example – albeit somewhat different - is Vatican Secret Archives archivist Dr Barbara Frale.

In April 2009 the London *Times*, along with other quality newspapers across the world, reported that Dr Frale had discovered in the Archives Nationales in Paris a hitherto unknown document describing an initiate to the Order of Knights Templar, Arnaut Sabbatier, being shown the Shroud at one of the Order's secret reception ceremonies held in the year 1287. The newspapers' reports were based on an article that Frale had written for the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* in which she specifically referred to the object shown to Sabbatier as being 'a long linen cloth on which was imprinted the figure of a man'. Although Dr Frale had never ever contacted me, her article mentioned me by name, speaking of her discovery as 'vindicating' my theory, first published in 1978, that the Knights Templar had owned the Shroud at some time during the so-called 'missing years' period between its disappearance from Constantinople in 1204 and its reappearance in Lirey, France during the 1350s.

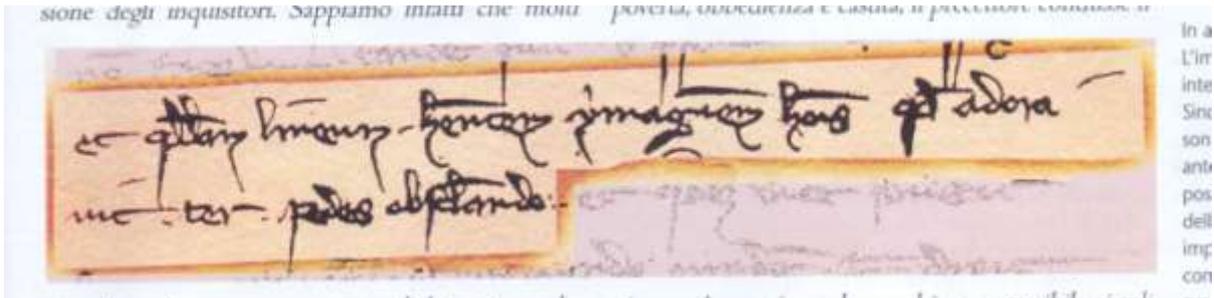
Now when Dr Frale made her announcement I was close to completing my very latest book on the Shroud. I therefore lost no time emailing her via the Vatican Archives asking if she could let me know some details of the Sabbatier document. To her credit, she responded quickly, in English, and with every show of friendliness. To my puzzlement, however, she was reluctant to supply me with any proper transcript of the document – even just for the key passage referring to the 'long linen cloth'. She said that the Archives Nationales had sent her only a 'bad reproduction' photocopy, some pages of which were 'very dark'; also that because reading mediaeval documents was her everyday work, she did not normally make transcriptions of those she worked on.

Having specifically checked-out Frale as being quite genuinely an archivist employed the Vatican's Secret Archives, my first interpretation of her reticence was that she probably intended to publish a proper, definitive study of the document prior to making its contents more generally available - something that would be perfectly understandable for any conscientious scholar. However, on my obtaining a copy (in Italian), of her *I Templari e La Sindone di Cristo*, a book for general readership specifically devoted to the issue of Templar ownership of the Shroud, to my surprise I found that in this Frale had provided even less detail about the Sabbatier document than she had in her article. Though this began to arouse a few suspicions, the fact that I was so close to completing my Shroud book (written to a very tight deadline for last year's expositions), gave me little option but to accept her claims at face value - whilst carefully noting that I had not actually yet seen the key document central to her claims.

Then shortly before Christmas 2010 the Italian scholar and specialist in Christian history Dr Andrea Nicolotti contacted me to request the use of two photos, and in the course of our correspondence he happened to mention that he had been making some exhaustive checks on Dr Frale. Dr Nicolotti's main interest in her concerned certain apparent falsifications in both her transcription and translation of the deposition of Sabbatier's fellow-Templar Guillaume Bos, whose testimony to the Inquisitors had hitherto gone unpublished, and was therefore genuinely new to scholarship. But for me particularly illuminating were Dr Nicolotti's insights concerning similar falsifications that Frale had made in her translation of the Sabbatier deposition with its alleged reference to the Shroud.

For the facts are that document containing the Sabbatier deposition was most certainly not a new discovery by Frale. Transcripts from the key parts of its Latin text had been published in 1907 in a German scholarly work, Heinrich Finke's *Papsttum und Untergang des Templeordens*, which I myself had consulted at the British Library back in the 1960s. Frale could therefore very easily have answered my original request simply by directing me to the relevant pages (vol 2, pp.323-4). More seriously, readily apparent from Finke's transcript is that while three of Sabbatier's fellow Templars all described their order's mystery 'idol' as of wood (lignum), Sabbatier reportedly spoke of 'quoddam lineum habentem ymaginem hominis,' i.e. 'a certain lineum having the image of a man'. Previous scholars, recognizing this as almost certainly a scribal error, had carefully corrected the non-grammatical adjective lineum to the noun lignum, i.e. wood, to correspond to the other Templars' depositions in the same manuscript. Frale, however, had quite unhesitatingly translated it as flax/linen. Furthermore, Frale's assertions that the lineum (whatever its nature), was 'long' and was 'imprinted', both crucial elements for identifying it with the Shroud, were simply not present in, or supported by, the original Latin text. On the very kindest assessment of Frale, even if she were able, via some suitably gymnastic linguistic argument, somehow to justify her interpretation, the document surely represents far too flimsy ground for her ever to have made such extravagant claims about it to the world's press.

Compounding my misgivings about Dr Frale, Dr Nicolotti was able to provide me with a photo of the key page of the document as obtained by him from the Archives Nationales, a page which, as may be recalled, Frale had told me was only available via a badly reproduced, 'very dark' photocopy. In actuality the photo is unmistakably clear, in full colour, and perfectly legible. As Dr. Nicolotti further informed me, a detail of that very same photo had been published, to accompany an interview with Frale, in the popular Italian magazine *Fenix* in June 2009 (see below). That was one month before Frale assured me, via email, that she possessed only illegible photocopies.



The key section of the Sabbatier manuscript, as published in the Italian magazine Fenix, June 2009, as part of an article by Adriano Forgione 'I Templari e la Sindone di Gesù'.

In summary, and quite aside from her seriously questionable behaviour towards me, Frale's so extravagant claims to the world's media as made back in 2009 simply cannot justify the conclusiveness that she so publicly attributed to them. Besides her misinforming the world in general, she misled me, and thereby seriously misdirected the line that I took in chapter 14 of my latest book. This is not to say that I have rejected my original theory of Templar ownership. Although the details have always been hazy and the hard evidence hard to come by, for me the broad theory remains the most plausible explanation for how Geoffrey de Charny of Lirey came to be in such suspiciously unprovenanced possession of the Shroud in the mid 14th century. But if supportive 'evidence' for such a theory, as ventured by Dr Frale, turns out to be so poorly founded, such misinformation cheapens and diminishes the whole subject. And whilst I have absolutely no competence to comment on Dr Frale's more recent claims to have discovered Aramaic lettering on the Shroud, it is hard for me to avoid harbouring the strongest doubts concerning these also...