

The First International Shroud Congress in Spain

For once, the idea behind this congress was not so much to present new findings (thereby avoiding the risk of papers that nobody apart the author understands) as to present what we know for the first time in Spain. The public response was excellent and the auditorium was packed all three days. On a practical level, the organisation was flawless, the timing was as punctual as a congress can be, and the food was really excellent

And so to the papers. The list of speakers was truly impressive – Ian Wilson, Barrie Schwartz, John Jackson, Bruno Barberis, Emanuela Marinelli and Robert Villareal, plus the very best of Spanish research from Jorge Manuel Rodríguez, Felipe Montero and Alonso Sánchez Herмосilla to name but a few. Not something we could afford to miss

After the opening formalities, Barrie Schwartz got the proceedings underway with a look back at 1978 and the STURP research on the Shroud. He showed plenty of interesting photographs that I at least had never seen before. He was followed by John Jackson, who explained the limitations of the work done in 1978 and expressed a desire to repeat the event with today's technology (a desire shared by all present).

One of the new faces on the congress roster was Paolo di Lazzaro from Italy, whose paper was one my personal highlights. He showed how our brain works to fill in spaces and make us “see” things that we would like to see, but which quite simply are not there. In reference to the Shroud this could be applied to the supposed inscriptions, the supposed coins, the supposed flowers and the supposed many other things that people “see” from time to time.

After a wonderful paella, the afternoon session was devoted to history. Ian Wilson spoke about the different types of Mandylion and the Shroud's possible relationship with Serbia. I followed with references to early documents showing how the Shroud was indeed conserved from the very earliest times after its use.

The second day, Sunday, was (inevitably) devoted to Carbon 14, and also the Sudarium of Oviedo. I was not present at most of the talks on this day, as I was constantly being whisked away for interviews with television and radio stations. The gala dinner was held at night, and as all the other meals it turned out to be a thorough success. All the presenters received a lapel badge, the insignia of the Spanish Shroud Centre (Centro Español de Sindonología).

Some of the best presentations came on the Monday. Andrés Brito entertained us all with an account of how the Shroud is reported in the Spanish press and how it varies according to the newspaper and reporter in question. Somebody should do a similar kind of study for the international press.

Marzia Boi then spoke about the pollen present on the Shroud. She analysed Max Frei's work in this field, and concluded that his work is still valid despite certain minor errors. She then said that there is no Gundelia Tourneforti on the Shroud (this was a mistaken identification), and that the pollen present on the cloth shows that oils and unguents were used in the burial of the man on the Shroud.

Juan Manuel Miñarro then treated us to a detailed explanation of how he sculpted a copy of the man on the Shroud using the measurements and bloodstains on both the Shroud of Turin and the Sudarium of Oviedo. The end result is as impressive as the detail that went into its making.

Finally, Bruno Barberis spoke about the future of Shroud studies. It is not often that the Turin Centre speaks so openly about this, and it was a delight to hear Bruno explain how they too wish further direct studies to take place. But as he also pointed out; i) the Shroud belongs to the Pope, ii) Bruno is not the Pope and iii) he has no hope of becoming the Pope.

The afternoon question session was open to all and to my mind showed the absolute need for questions to be written down and asked by somebody on the table. This could sound like censorship, and I would answer that it does, and indeed is. But it would have avoided people mumbling into the microphone and nobody understanding what they were saying, others asking questions in deliberately bad taste that could have been offensive to some presenters and yet others who insist on telling their own life story and not actually asking anything.

A last minute addition to the programme was BSTS member and well-known filmmaker David Rolfe, whose web site Shroud Enigma hosts articles and photographs for the BSTS. He asked for a consensus among presenters about the characteristics of the Shroud image that (in this case) Richard Dawkins would have to answer before being able to dismiss the Shroud as a medieval forgery. The consensus was reached and so the challenge is on

Congratulations to the CES in general and to Jorge Manuel Rodríguez in particular, and all the volunteers who made this excellent congress possible.