

The Retable* of Boulbon

By Jacques Bara (translated by Hugh Duncan)

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The painting shown below was probably ordered by the Canon Jean de Montagnac for the church of Saint-Agricol in Avignon sometime between 1450 - 75.

Transferred in the sixteenth century to the church Saint-Marcellin de Boulbon (in the commune of Tarascon), it has been on display in the Louvre Museum since 1904. The artist is unknown: maybe it's a certain Chugoinot - little stork- cf. the stork painted at the bottom left of the tableau [1], but several experts evoke some strong analogies with the tableau of the 'Couronnement de la Vierge' [Crowning of the Virgin Mary] by Enguerrand Quarton (Representation of the Holy Trinity, from the mass of Saint Gregory, painter of Provençal houses).



**A decorative structure raised above and behind an altar often forming a frame for a picture, bas-relief, or the like and sometimes a shelf for ornaments.*

Christ is represented in the painting showing certain similarities with the crucified Man of the Turin Shroud: long hair, forked beard, hands crossed, blood flows on the forehead, the side and the hands, and thumbs retracted. It is not very likely that the artist was inspired by the Turin Shroud like the author of the Pray Codex, at least nothing leaves us to suppose that that is the case [4]. The figure of Christ constitutes a “*snapshot*” in a moment and a place, but that one can locate in the cycle of the Passion, somewhere between taking him down from the cross and placing him in the tomb, as highlighted by Father Francois Boespflug [2].

Another interpretation is proposed here. This painting can also suggest the Resurrection of Christ and invites us to contemplate the comparison given below with the Turin Shroud, Christ ‘*resurrecting*’ in the light of the Scripture.

*“And God said: let there be light and there was light....”
God divided light from darkness /
Evening came and morning came: the first day (Gen1:3-3)”.*

These two images could situate themselves towards the dawn of the 8th day, the first day of the Messianic Age and the end of 7th day for the crucified man of the Shroud. On the right of the painting of the retable, the darkness is represented by a black background, a place of evil, a hell that was the crucifixion, with its instruments of torture: whip, nails, lance... and this hand, which comes out from nowhere that belongs to no one, adding an atmosphere of anxiety. It is from the left of the painting that the light comes, through the doorway which lets you see some Provencal houses, and by the window thanks to the wind from The Holy Spirit which comes from the Father and the Son and which gives this white glow to all the body of Christ: *lumen Christi*, it is, as St Paul mentioned it,

“The Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 8:11)”.

The face of Christ on the retable, like the one of the crucified man of the Shroud is drowned in pain. However, if the latter has his eyes closed, the face of Christ on the retable has them open, turned towards humanity in prayer, represented by the canon on his knees, probably the donator himself. Christ half opens his mouth, contrary to the crucified man of the Shroud, for which his mouth is held closed by the chinstrap (*soudarion*). Art specialists think that this type of representation is inspired by the vision of Christ during the mass of St Gregory [3]. The representation of this vision, on this tableau is not unrelated to the image of the crucified man of the Turin Shroud. One has, in the two images, two instances in time, before and after the Resurrection, illustrating the words of the psalmist:

“Like the dew gives birth to the dawn, I have begotten you (Ps 109)”.



[1]-cf. “*Compte rendu des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*” [Reports of the sessions of the Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres] – Ferdinand de Mely – 1906.)

[2] cf “*La Trinité dans l’art d’Occident* [The Holy Trinity in Western Art] (from 1400 to 1460)” Francois Boespflug – Strasbourg University Press – 2000.

[3] While Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) celebrated mass in the church Saint Croix de Jerusalem in Rome [Holy Cross of Jerusalem in Rome], one of the assistants doubted the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. When Gregory started to pray, the assistant had a vision of Christ on the altar surrounded by the instruments of the Passion.

[4] Editor’s note courtesy of Ian Wilson. There was, in fact, a little known series of showings of the Shroud in Geneva in 1453. The Shroud could well have been an influence.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: the quote from Psalm 109 (110) has several variations in both French and English (New Jerusalem, King George etc). They generally say: from the womb of the dawn, you receive the dew of your youth. For the French version quoted by Jacques Bara, it seems closest to the translation that I have given in the text above.

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