

SINDON IN THE OLD FRENCH CHRONICLE OF  
ROBERT DE CLARI

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Robert de Clari (born circa 1170, died after 1216) was a Picard *chevalier* of modest means. Clari (today: Cléry-les-Pernois, *arrondissement* of Doullens, department of La Somme) was a fief belonging to Pierre of Amiens, one of the leaders of the Fourth Crusade. Robert, together with his brother Aleaume, a clerk, followed their liege lord on that crusade. Robert participated in military actions on the Adriatic coast, in Greece and in the capture and the occupation of Constantinople. Sometime after the death of Pierre of Amiens, in 1205, Robert returned to his native Picardy. We know that he gave a reliquary cross to the famous abbey of Corbie. These gifts were a part of Robert's share in the booty that the "Latins" took in Constantinople.<sup>1</sup>

Robert left a lively account of the Fourth Crusade. The writing (or more probably, dictating) of this chronicle was doubtless encouraged by the religious of Corbie. His work, called in the text *Li Estoires de chiaus qui conquisent Constantinoble* (History of Those Who Conquered Constantinople) is preserved in a single manuscript (copied *circa* 1300): Copenhagen, Royal Library, MS 487. The critical edition of this text was prepared by Philippe Lauer (*La Conquête de Constantinople*, Classiques français du moyen âge, 40, Paris, 1924, reprinted 1956). Lauer's edition was translated into Modern French by Pierre Charlot<sup>2</sup> and into English by Edgar H. McNeal<sup>3</sup> and by Edward N. Stone.<sup>4</sup> For readers of Italian, there is a recent and excellent, fully annotated, translation by Anna Maria Nada Patrone.<sup>5</sup>

Robert's chronicle recounts the preparations for the Fourth Crusade (1198-1201), the departure from Venice (1202), the voyage and the conquest of Constantinople (1203), and the establishment of the "Latin" Empire in Greece (1203-1205). The years 1198-1205 constitute the main body of his chronicle (chapters, or sections I-CXII). The next eleven years (1205-1216) are summed up in very short chapters (CXIII-CXIX). Important for our purposes, chapters LXXXII-XCIII, inserted into the narration of historical events taking place in April 1204, describe Robert's vivid impressions of the wonders of Constantinople. At the very end of this descriptive section, i.e., at the end of Chapter XCII, Robert offers the passage which contains the statement about the sindon.

Before analyzing this passage, let me underscore certain features of Robert's chronicle, for they may be pertinent to this analysis.

1. Robert de Clari is one of the first, if not the first, known writer in Old French *original* prose, i.e. not translated from Latin, or originating from the "prosification" of narrative Old French poetry. As such his writing appears awkward, repetitious and "naive", at least to the modern reader. 2. Unlike the other French chronicler of the Fourth Crusade, Geffroi de Villehardouin,<sup>6</sup> who was one of the leaders of this enterprise, Robert expresses the point of view of a lowly participant in a great historical event, the political and religious scope of which he could hardly grasp. 3. But it is my contention (and the central thesis of my linguistic and stylistic study of his chronicle<sup>7</sup>) that Robert is not simply a humble knight who writes about his personal experiences, but a humble and simple knight who has undeniable literary and historiographical pretensions. He is an excellent and a "natural" story teller. 4. He is thus no more "childish" or "naive" in his account of political events and, above all, in his "tourist" descriptions of the wonders of Constantinople than for example, an average, small town, ordinarily informed American soldier in the Second World War writing home about the things he has seen in Rome. 5. Robert doubtless, like most of his contemporaries, was fascinated by architectural, artistic and other wonders of Constantinople, but especially by the relics.<sup>8</sup> 6. He frequently insists on his own veracity as an eye witness. He devotes the last short chapter (CXX) to making his point. Here is this chapter in my own (literal) translation:

Now you have heard how Constantinople was conquered and how the Count of Flanders, Baldwin, was emperor of it, and after him, my lord Henri, his brother, because he who was there and who saw it and heard the testimony of it, ROBERT DE CLARI, knight, caused the truth to be written, how it [=Constantinople] was conquered; and although he may not have recounted in as fair a fashion as many a good author (*boine diteeur*) would have recounted, yet he always told the strict truth (*droite verité*), and he left untold many true things, because he cannot remember them all.

8. There is thus no reason why his testimony should not be taken seriously.

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Having almost finished the description of the marvelous things that he saw in Constantinople, Robert inserts the following passage:

... des autres merveille qui i sont vous lairons nous ester a dire; car nus hons terriens, qui tant eust mes en le chité, ne le vous porroit nombrer ne aconter, que qui vous en conteroit le chentisme part de le riqueche, ne de le biautéi, ne de le nobleche qui estoit es abeïes et es moustiers et es palais et en le vile, sanleroit il que the fust menchoingne,

ne ne cresriés vous mie. Et entre ches autres en eut un autre des moustiers que on apeloit medame Sainte Marie de Blakerne, *ou li sydoines, la ou Nostres Sires fu envolepés, i estoit, qui cascuns des venres se drechoit tous drois, si que on i poot bien veir le figure Nostre Seigneur, ne ne seut on onques, ne Griu, ne Franchois, que chis sydoines devint quant le vile fu prise.* XCII, 11. 36-50 (emphasis mine, MS: *Fugure for figure.*)

Here is the (literal) translation of this passage:

... about the other marvels that are there [in Constantinople], we shall leave off telling you; for no man on earth, however long he might live in the city, could number them or recount them to you, if any one should recount to you the hundredth part of the richness and the beauty and the splendor [lit. nobility] which was in the abbeys and the churches and in the palaces and in the city, it would seem that it were a lie and you would not believe. And among those other there was another church [lit. another of the churches] which was called My Lady Saint Mary of Blachernae , where there was the SYDOINES in which, [lit. where] Our Lord had been wrapped, which every Friday, raised itself upright, so that one could see the form of our Lord on it [lit. there], and no one, either Greek or French, ever knew what became of this SYNDOINES when the city was taken.

As it stands, this passage<sup>9</sup> is clear and should not have caused any misunderstanding, at least with regard to the meaning of *sydoines*. *Sydoines* is a masculine singular noun. Its nominative (subject) case is denoted by the final -s. The base form would thus be *sydoine*. *Sydoine*, or *sidoine*, is a normal rendering of the Latin *syndonis-sindonem* from the Greek *sindon*, the denasalization in the first syllable having been caused probably by dissimilation. The *i* in *-oine* is also a quite normal Northern French development: thus the adjective 'good' is, in Robert's text, invariably *boin(e)*. The term is introduced by a definite article *li* which certainly suggests that Robert was referring to something known to his audience,<sup>10</sup> for otherwise he would have used the indefinite article *uns*. (The second *sydoines* is preceded by the demonstrative, masculine, subject case *chis*.)

The confusion in the interpretation of this passage - for there has been some confusion<sup>11</sup> - was caused not so much by what is in it than by the confusion outside of it, so to speak. I mean, by the old and persistent confusion between *sudarium* (with its French descendant *suaire*) and *sindon*. Lauer glossed Robert's *sydoines* as *suaire*. Charlot (see n. 2) translated "où se trouvait le suaire où Notre-Seigneur." But then he leads us into a real error by saying: "Lequel était dressé<sup>12</sup> tous les vendredis, de sorte qu'on y pourrait bien voir la figure de Notre-

Seigneur." The word *la figure* cannot possibly mean, in Charlot's context, anything else except 'face.' The first of the English translators, McNeal (see n. 3) did not translate the word *sydoines*, but, like Charlot mistranslated Robert's term *figure*: "where there was kept the *sydoine* in which Our Lord had been wrapped, which stood up straight every Friday, so that the *features* of Our Lord could plainly be seen there." Neither Charlot nor McNeal understood the meaning of the Old French *figure*, but McNeal went even further and blamed Robert for his own mistake. He added the following note (see his p. 112):

Robert seems to have confused the *sudarium* (sweat cloth or napkin, the True Image of St. Veronica) with the *sindon* (the grave cloth in which the body of Jesus was wrapped for the entombment). Both relics were in the church of the Blessed Virgin in the Great Palace and not in the church in the palace of Blachernae, as Robert says. The confusion between *sudarium* and *sindon* is found also in the charter of Baldwin II of 1247...: *partem sudarii quo involutum fuit corpus eius in sepulchro.*<sup>13</sup>

Robert's on *i pooit bien veir le figure Nostre Seigneur* must mean "one could see clearly on it the form, or the outline, of the body of Our Lord." The French word *figure* acquired the meaning 'face' only in the era of the *précieux*. Before *circa* 1650, *figure* meant what it signified in Latin, i.e. 'figure,' 'outline,' 'form,' etc. This fact is common knowledge to all students of Old French language: see, for example, Walther von Wartburg, *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol III, p. 521.

Even if he was wrong about Robert's understanding of the *sindon*, McNeal helped us by drawing attention to the fact that the Latin *sudarium*, confused sometimes with *sindon*, caused a far greater difficulty in French, where *suaire* is the only word used for the Holy Shroud. (The technical term for shroud, *linceul*, is used in the normal, secular meaning.) Thus Lauer was right when he glossed *sydoines* as *suaire*, Charlot was right when he translated it as *suaire*, for the confusion between the Greek *sindon* and the Latin *sudarium*, as between their French descendants *sido(i)ne* and *suaire*,<sup>14</sup> was, as any sindonologist knows, a real one. Arthur S. Barnes, having studied the confusion in connection with our text, makes the following observation:

Putting together these scanty notices we may conclude, I think, that in Constantinople the Shroud itself was spoken of, as it is today, indifferently as the *Sindon* and the *Sudarium*; that it was identified not only with the 'Sindon of Joseph of Arimathaea' but also with the 'Sudarium that was over his head' of St. John's gospel ...<sup>15</sup>

Speaking simply as a student of Old French, I wish to defend Robert de Clari. He did not confuse anything, nor did he contribute to any confusion. He says simply and clearly that there was the sindon which stood upright every Friday and on which could be seen clearly the outline of the body, or the form of the body of Our Lord.

But Robert concludes his testimony about the sindon by saying: "and no one, either Greek or French, ever knew what became of this sindon when the city was taken." I believe that this *quant le vile fu prise* requires a comment. McNeal interpreted the *quant*, rightly, as *after* (and so does Nada Patrone). Stone, more literal, follows Charlot in translating it as *when*. Does this mean that Robert de Clari never saw the sindon? Not necessarily. To begin with, "after the city was taken" could mean "sometime after the conquest of the city." This would imply that Robert saw the sindon after the assault on Constantinople, before this relic disappeared. I think that there is a more probable explanation. The French took Constantinople twice. The first time (July 1203) they assisted the young Alexius IV Angelus in gaining the throne he claimed. The "Latins" resided both outside the walls of the city and inside for several months in 1203. The second siege and assault on the city began in March 1204, after the French were turned away by an "anti-Latin" *coup d'etat* carried out by Murzuphlus Ducas who, having assassinated Alexius IV, proclaimed himself Alexius V. As we have seen, Robert places his description of all the marvels of Constantinople after the second taking of the city in April of 1204. It is highly probable that Robert saw the sindon sometime in 1203, during the reign of Alexius IV. The phrase "when the city was taken" undoubtedly refers to the second assault. Otherwise the phrase would suggest that Robert was arguing against his own status as a reliable witness. The whole tenor of his chronicle mitigates against such an interpretation. Robert always insists on his being an honest witness, who tells only the truth. His only limitation, according to him, is that he could not remember all that he has seen and heard.

## NOTES

1. For Robert's gifts to the abbey see, for example, the Introduction to McNeal's translation (below, n. 3), especially pp. 5-6. The Benedictine abbey of Corbie, near Amiens, was renowned throughout the Middle Ages for its scriptorium library, and school.
2. *La Conquête de Constantinople*, Poemes et Récits de la vieille France, 16, Paris, 1939.
3. *The Conquest of Constantinople Translated from Old French*, Columbia University Records of Civilization, 23, New York, 1936.
4. "History of Them that Took Constantinople," *Three Old French Chronicles of the Crusades*, Washington University Publications in Social Sciences, 10, Seattle, Wash., 1939, pp. 16-264.
5. *La Conquista di Constantinopoli (1198-1216). Studio critico, traduzione e note*. Collana storica di fonti e studi, 13 Genova, 1972.

6. *La Conquête de Constantinople*, édité et traduite par Edmond Faral, Les Classiques français de l'histoire de France au moyen âge, 18 and 19, Paris, 2nd ed., 1961. Villehardouin does not mention the sindon.
7. *La Chronique de Robert de Clari. Etude de la langue et du style*. University of Toronto Romance Series, 6, Toronto, 1963.
8. He mentions, for example, in LXXXII: two pieces of the True Cross, the lance which pierced our Lord, two nails of the Cross, a phial containing Our Lord's blood, a part of His tunic, a part of Our Lady's robe, the head of St. John the Baptist, and "so many other rich reliques that I could not recount them to you or tell all the truth." (11.34-5).
9. Chapter XCII (and with it the description of Constantinople) closes with a brief mention of the splendid tomb of Emperor Manuel in the abbey where there was also to be found "the marble slab on which Our Lord was laid when He was taken down from the Cross, and on which there could still be seen the tears which Our Lady shed upon it." (11.55-8)
10. The word *si(n)do(i)ne* was known in Old French before the chronicle of Robert de Clari. Thus in the *Roman de Thebes* (circa 1150) we read: "Descovert ont le fil le rei / D'un *sidone* qu'il sor sei" (ed Leopold Constans, Société des Anciens Textes Français, vol. I. Paris, 1890, vv. 109-10). But *sidone* has only a secular meaning here: 'They took off the cloth with which the king's son was covered.' *Sidoine* means. 'bier cover' in the *Chanson d'Antioche* (circa 1180). The use of the term *si(n)do(i)ne* specifically for the 'Shroud of Our Lord,' does not, as far as I can ascertain, predate Robert de Clari (see Tobler-Lommatsch, Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch, vol. IX, p. 627). However, a variant of this word *sin(n)e*, (*signe*, *sisne*, etc.) was used in Old French with the acceptation of the 'Shroud of Our Lord' before Robert's chronicle. The earliest example seems to be found in *Fierbras*, an epic written at the end of the XIIth century. (The large part of this epic deals with the relics associated with the Passion.)
11. See my "En Marge du vocabulaire de Robert de Clari: *Buhatiaus, conterres, sydoines*," *Romance Philology*, 15 (1961), pp. 12-18.
12. Note that Charlot's *qui etait dressé* suggests that the sindon was put upright by someone. Such translation is abusive. Also abusive is Nada Patrone's (see above, n. 5) *veniva esposta ritta* "used to be exposed upright." Robert clearly implies in his *se drechoit tous drois* (Modern French: *se dressait tout droit*) that the sindon stood upright all by itself.
13. Notice that McNeal, while criticizing Robert de Clari for having confused the relics, himself continues the old and wide-spread confusion between the *sudarium* found in the Gospel of St. John, 20, 6-7 ("Venit ergo Simon Petrus sequens eum, et introivit in monumentum, et vidit linteamina posita, et sudarium, quod fuerat super caput eius, non cum linteaminibus positum, sed separatim involutum in unum locum.") and the apocryphal story of St. Veronica. The other English translator (above, n.4), unfortunately less known than McNeal, avoids the confusion. He translates the key words correctly: *sydoines* as 'shroud' and *figure* as 'form.' Stone does not comment on the passage. The Italian translator, Nada Patrone (see above, n. 5), who renders *sydoines* as *sindone* and *figure* as *figura*, offers a thorough and judicious commentary (see her pp. 18-19 and 227).
14. It seems that the Old French *suaire* 'Shroud of Our Lord' is attested only after the date of composition of Robert's chronicle (1216). But *suaire* as '*sudarium quod fuerat super caput eius*' and as the 'True Image' was used before that date (see Tobler-Lommatsch, Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch, vol. IX, pp. 1044-5).
15. Arthur Barnes, *The Holy Shroud of Turin*, London, 1934, p. 54.