

THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE SINDON
WHEN IT INFOLDED THE BODY OF CHRIST

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For the thirty-six years that Mons. Pietro Savio held a position in the Vatican Archives, he made extensive and intensive research into ancient and medieval sources which appertained to the Shroud, bringing to light an enormous corpus of texts of incalculable value to sindonology. His book, *Ricerche Storiche sulla Santa Sindone* (1957), presents these texts, along with Savio's commentary, in the original languages: Greek, Coptic, Latin, etc.

The following is translated and republished by kind permission of the Centro Internazionale di Sindonologia. It is Section IV of an article entitled "The Imprints of Jesus on the Holy Shroud," which appeared in *Sindon* #9, May 1965.

The ancient documents cited here are quite independent of subsequent exegesis on John 20:6-7 by Lavergne and Feuillet and their discussions of the word *othonia*; but they lead Mons. Savio to the conclusion that the body of Jesus was not bound by bands, but that instead the Shroud was spread out, beneath and over the body. Savio's concluding sentence in Section III reads: "It is therefore a vain pretense to insist that John 19:40 should be interpreted as 'ties' or 'bands.' The documents closest to Apostolic times clearly exclude that meaning, but show instead that *othonion* was a cloth of considerable dimensions."

Today, this signification has at last been established; the issue is no longer in debate. Nevertheless, the texts given by Savio retain high interest as complementary evidence.

ED.

The ancient writers of the Oriental Church insist on the use which, in those parts of the world, one made of the sindon in composing the dead for burial. It was the ordinary linen bedsheet which came to be the burial sheet, the "sepulchral sindon, sindòn entáphios." If this sheet was not of the ordinary variety, that is to say, if it was not a common sindon, it was then designated with the appropriate adjective, usually "precious".

The sindon was arranged about the corpse in the same manner used by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus when they composed the body of Jesus for burial and laid it to rest in the tomb; that is to say, the body was infolded in the sindon with aromatics.¹

Sometimes, though very rarely, fluid ointments were spread on the sindon instead of the dry powdered mixture of aromatics. In the flourishing Egyptian Church, this method of burial was the rule.

In the Acts of the martyrdom of apa Anûb di Naësi, "Julius, a man of Chbehs, waited until midnight. He then went to where the body of the saint was lying. He took it; he wrapped it in a sindon; he put upon it an aromatic with oil and wine."²

The Acts of the martyrdom of apa Ari remark that "Julius buried his body in a new sindon."³

In the Acts of the martyrdom of apa Didymus, one reads that "Julius came, a man of Chbehs; he brought a costly sindon and an abundance of precious perfumes and put them upon his body."⁴

In the Acts of the martyrdom of apa Epima, "the servants of Julius brought some sindons, which their master had given them, with costly aromatics. They covered the body of the saint, laying [the sindon] over [the body]."

And when the body of the martyr arrived to Pancoleus, where he was born, all the people, having learned of his arrival, "all came out to meet him with censors of incense, with candles, with crosses, with olive branches, with palm branches, with sindons, and they buried him honorably."⁵

In the Acts of the martyrdom of abba Isaac Tifrense, one reads that "the leading citizen came; he carried a cloth of byssus; he put it upon [the martyr's] head. He brought also sindons; and buried the body of the blessed Father Isaac."⁶

In the panegyric to St. George Diospolitano, pronounced by Theodotus, bishop of Ancira, the orator says that "the servants of St. George bought very precious sindons with very costly aromatics, and they buried the body of their lord with honor."⁷

In the "miracles" of St. George it is related that "the next day [Pasyncratos and two other servants of St. George] got up, went down to the city, bought aromatics and sindons; they took them and put them upon St. George's body."⁸

In the life of St. Pacomius, it is narrated that if a cenobite of the monastery founded by Mary, sister of the saint, "died, the corpse was carried to the oratory [of the monastery], having first been covered with a sindon by their mother."⁹

In the panegyric of St. Peter, archbishop of Alexandria, pronounced by Alexander, archbishop of that city, the orator says: "After these things, they brought precious sindons and silken veils and aromatics, and buried his holy body and laid it in this cemetery."¹⁰

In the Acts of the martyrdom of St. Theodore, the pious lady Eusebia "asked for the body of St. Theodore. They gave it to her. And she gave a burial with great honors, with precious sindons; she applied [to him] much fragrance with a precious ointment."¹¹

Among the Christians of Egypt of the first centuries (II, III), it was therefore normal to wrap the corpses in a sindon, in the same manner used by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus when they composed the body of the Lord for burial.

So this manner of burying the dead could be seen as a custom already existing among those peoples at the time of Jesus' burial (a custom to be considered, therefore, in the line of tradition), or it could be seen as a custom introduced by those Christians in imitation of the burial of Jesus. In either case, this custom or tradition is clear proof that the body of Jesus, when it was composed for burial, was not

"bound" (tied with bands), but was infolded by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in a loosely-spread sindon.

This is the historical basis from the ancient Oriental liturgists. On this basis, they move with assurance in their interpretations, which could, perhaps, be overlooked by a superficial eye, or seem obscure or at least not very clear; but they are the deductions of acute minds.

Thus, texts of St. Isidore Pelusiot¹², St. Sophronius patriarch of Jerusalem, St. Germanus patriarch of Constantinople, place us in a position to be able to establish in a clear manner, that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus laid upon the body of Jesus the Sindon spread out, in that guise in which—in point of fact—it has come down to us.

John, patriarch of Constantinople, also follows the same interpretation. The "Fasting Man", in his tract *De Sacra Liturgia*, writes: "The linen which one spreads upon the Holy Altar, must represent and symbolize the sindon, in which the body of the Lord was infolded by Joseph and Nicodemus."¹³

To conclude: The Oriental ecclesiastical tradition excludes that the body of Jesus was "tied," or wrapped in strips; the manner of burial of the Christians of the primitive (III-IV c.) Egyptian Church offers a certainty that the sindon of Jesus was spread out. Therefore, the imprints left upon the Holy Shroud of the bloodied body of the Savior when he was taken down from the cross and laid to rest in the tomb, are completely natural and obvious to the understanding.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. In Ethiopia as late as the XVth c., one finds the custom of burying the dead in a sindon and sudarium with aromatics. An example of this manner of composing the corpses for burial occurs in the *Acts of Krestos Samra*. The effigy of the foundress of St. Michael monastery, on the island of Guangut near Lake Tana, is in sindon and sudarium, with an aroma of cinnamon. *Acts of Krestos Samra*, ed. ENRICO CERULLI in *Scriptores Aethiopici*, 33-34, Louvain, L. Durbecq, 1956.
2. *Scriptores Coptici*, III, I, *Acta Martyrum*, ed. J. BALESTRI and H. HYVERNAT, 240, Parisiis, 1907. The aromatics brought by Julius of Chbehs to pour over the sindon in which the body of apa Anùb was wrapped, was a fluid ointment. Cfr. *Ricerche Storiche sulla Santa Sindone*, V, 39.
3. HENRI HYVERNAT, *Les Actes des Martyrs de l'Egypt*, I, 223, Paris, 1887.
4. HYVERNAT, op. cit., I, 302.
5. *Scriptores Coptici*, III, I, *Acta Martyrum*, 154-155, ed. BALESTRI and HYVERNAT, Parisiis, 1924.
6. *Scriptoris Coptici*, II, *Acta Martyrum*, 88.
7. op. cit., H, 259.
8. op. cit., II, 313.
9. *Scriptores Coptici*, III, VII S. *Pachomii vita bohairice scripta*, ed. L.-TH. LEFORT, 27-28, Parisiis, 1925.
10. HYVERNAT, *Les Actes des Martyrs de l'Egypt* cit., I, 282.
11. *Scriptores Coptici* cit., *Acta Martyrum* cit. 180. In the Coptic texts translated here, the word 'sindon' recurs under the following forms: sondonion, soudonion, soundonion (the most frequent—seven times), sountonion.
12. P. Joussines reports the text of St. Isidore Pelusioto, referred to on pg. 21 of my *Ricerche* as an anonymous text (anòniimou). *Catena Graecorum Patrum in Evangelium secundum Marcum collectore atque interprete*, PETRO POSSINO, 357, Romae, Typis Barberinis, 1673.
13. *Spicilegium Solesmense*, ed. J. B. PITRA, IV, 441-442, Parisiis, 1858.