

## THE SEAMLESS TUNIC

DOROTHY CRISPINO

Among the pretty legends that flowered around the childhood of Christ and around his Blessed Virgin Mother, there is one, at least, which stems from a true relic: the *Seamless Tunic*. The only disciple who stood by the Cross and saw it all, St. John, in his Gospel (19:23) relates that when the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them; four soldiers, four pieces of clothing. There was also his tunic. Now this tunic was without seam, one single piece of cloth woven from top to bottom. "Let's don't tear it," they said, "but let's cast lots to see who gets it." This was foretold in Psalm 22, the same evoked by Jesus before he gave up his spirit, crying *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me ... They divide my garments among them; they cast lots for my tunic*.

In medieval times, people were wont to meditate on all these things; and popular piety reasoned that this excellent garment must have been woven by the Lord's Mother in anticipation of the Passion. Legend takes the four-year-old Mary from a humble Galilean home and sets her in the temple of Jerusalem amongst the daughters of royalty, there to learn the feminine arts of weaving and embroidery. Of course, the little girl from Nazareth outshone them all. In reality, all girls had to learn to spin and weave at home and there is no difficulty in attributing to Mary a certain skill at the loom. Indeed, it seems quite reasonable and natural to assume that the tunic Christ wore on his way to Calvary was made for him by his Mother.

An ancillary legend gives foreknowledge of the Passion to the Child Jesus. In a small painting of *ca.* 1410, we see Mary knitting the seamless robe for her toddler Son, while he, lying at her feet, has put aside his top and his hoop to read from his book. Sensing a presence behind him, he looks up from the Scripture and, with a mild curiosity, sees there angels carrying the instruments of his destiny. He does not fear them; he only wonders at their timing.

It is a domestic scene of naive charm, depicting with delicate tenderness the future drama in which that little dress in Mary's hands will play a part; for St. Bonaventure (1221-1274), likening it to the clothing of the Hebrews as they crossed the Sinai desert (Deut. 8:4, Neh. 9:21), declared that the seamless robe grew with the Child. And so, in a medieval *Pilgrim's Manual and Mass of the Seamless Tunic*, we read:<sup>1</sup>

Vestis haec est manuale/Matris opus virginale,  
 Actum sine suturâ./Corpus tegit filiale/Donec debitum mortale  
 Ferret pro creaturâ.  
 O mirandum vestimentum/Cujus aetas dat augmentum  
 Ab ejus infantiâ./Simul sumit incrementum  
 Nullum vestis nocumentum/Gerens, labis nescia.

(This is the garment handmade by the Virgin Mother, made without a seam. It covered the body of her son up to the day he shed his blood to save mankind. Oh marvelous garment! that in an ineffable manner grew along with the Savior from his infancy! He wore it and it never tore, and time could not impair it.)



Painting from the Buxtehude altar, Hamburg, ca. 1410

During his sojourn in Jerusalem, Arculph (*ca.* 670) venerated a *linteamen* that, it was said, had been woven by the Virgin. Preserved in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, this cloth was embroidered with the Symbol of the Apostles and an image of the Lord; part of the cloth was red, part grass-green.<sup>2</sup>

In Cadouin, France, there is another "shroud" woven, legend holds, by Mary; but on this cloth is an inscription in Arabic script naming a caliph of the XI<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

In Jerusalem, after the Resurrection, the followers of Jesus continued to convene in a private "church house", and there assembled the *Arma Christi*: the crown of thorns, the nails, the lamp of the Last Supper, the stones that killed St. Stephen....

The Master's clothing was carefully preserved along with the other souvenirs. By Roman law, executioners were entitled to the garments of the condemned. Not that they wanted such miserable trappings for themselves; but since the family and friends had the right to redeem the personal effects of the executed, the soldiers could sell them back to the bereaved. The soldier who had won the seamless tunic could have asked a tidy sum, nor would the disciples have haggled.

When that indomitable woman, Helen (†329), mother of Constantine the Great, descended upon Palestine, her purpose was to appropriate all the sacred treasures of Christendom into the safety of the New Rome on the Bosphorus, transporting there the swaddling bands of the infant Jesus, his cradle, the Holy Cross, the rolling stone of the Tomb, yes, even the stumbling block.... Jesus' sandals were laid away in the Golden Horn, along with his mantle and his two tunics.

A fascinating project would be a study of all the articles of clothing mentioned in the Old Testament and the New: but here we must be content with only — and very briefly — the tunic as it was worn in Jesus' time, without so much as a glance at the bloodied coat, the *tunica talari et polymite* (Gen. 37:23) that the brothers of Joseph presented to their inconsolable father.

When Jesus sent his Twelve Disciples on their first mission, he admonished them, "...and do not wear two tunics..." (Mk 6:9, Mt. 10:10). For two tunics were commonly worn: a garment worn next to the skin, sometimes had sleeves, sometimes just armholes; it came to the knees and was often woven in one piece, without seams. Over this, a *me-il*, a wide tunic reaching to the ankles, was sometimes worn. There was also a mantle, nearly square, of 2 or 3 yards, which was wrapped around the body or thrown over a shoulder. It also served as a bed. A girdle and sandals would complete the attire.

The soldiers, St. John writes, took Jesus' clothes and made four parts, each soldier a part, and then there was the tunic without seam, *χιτων αραφος*. In 1201, Nicolas Mesarites lists "The outer garment, that nappy, as many call it ... bathed in sweat, which hung to those beautiful apostolic feet ... That garment of purple with which those criminals dressed the Lord of glory, mocking him...." This last, no doubt, is the *tunica Domini purpurea qua indutus fuit*, the purple tunic that Robert de Clari records and that King Saint Louis sent to the Cathedral of Toledo in 1248.

But the two tunics of Christ are not on Mesarites' list because the Empress Helen sent the *me-il* to the city of Trier; it was consecrated

by Pope Silvester I (250-330). She kept the inner garment in Constantinople; Gregory of Tours saw it there in the VI<sup>th</sup> century and Frelegaire in the VII<sup>th</sup>. Two centuries after the chronicler of the Merovingians, the love-child of Pippin and Bertha Bigfoot of Laon received, as a gift, the inner garment, now in Argenteuil.

### *Charlemagne*

To bring the light of Christianity to the fearsome forests of western paganism, Charlemagne knew the power of relics, and for every Frankish church he sought relics from the Holy Land. Papal documents testify that for each article offered him, Charlemagne demanded guarantees of authenticity. From the Patriarch of Jerusalem, he accepted the keys of the Holy Sepulchre and the banner of Calvary; Aaron, king of the Persians, granted him possession of the Sepulchre itself. Many relics were sent to him by the Caliph of Baghdad, Haroun-al-Raschid, with whom he was on excellent terms. Gifts from the bottomless treasury of Byzantium were not lacking. Furthermore, Charlemagne sent monks to the Orient, commissioned to search out and bring back bodies of the saints, souvenirs of the Virgin, etc., all with proper documents attesting to their genuineness.

Charlemagne himself never journeyed to the Orient, though an unknown poet of (probably) the XII<sup>th</sup> century composed, for a long summer night's entertainment in the castle, a serio-comic, paroditic epic in which his hero, Charlemagne, with twelve of his paladins for company, set out for Constantinople, stopping first at Jerusalem. There the patriarch showered his pious visitors with holy relics, among them "a piece of the *sudarium* that Jesus had on his head when he was placed and laid down in the sepulchre":

*del sudarie Jhesu que il out en sun chef  
cum il fu al sepulcre et posez et colchez.*<sup>4</sup>

Arriving in Constantinople, the Franks boasted mightily of their cavalier prowess and used these holy relics to perform fantastic miracles, leaving the Byzantine emperor and his court dumbfounded. Then Charlemagne and his merry companions, with utmost courtesy declining the gifts offered them, returned to France in triumph.

More serious accounts maintain that the Seamless Tunic was a gift to Charlemagne from the Empress Irene, in view of their proposed marriage. Chronologically, this explanation seems inaccurate:

1. In 781, Irene, wary of the Frankish warrior's encroachments in Italy, entered negotiations with Charles to wed his daughter, Rotruda, to her son, Constantine VI, then reigning. But on account of the Greeks' return to iconolatry, Charles, refusing to send his daughter to an idolatrous court, broke off the arrangements.
2. In 797, Irene overthrows her son and takes the throne.
3. In the summer of 800, Charles' wife dies.

4. On Christmas Day, *anno domini* 800, Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne, acclaiming him emperor of the Roman Empire; for it could be argued that legally the imperial throne was vacant because it was very doubtful that a woman could hold imperial power. The papacy had secretly determined to crown Charles, then to bring about his marriage with Irene, thereby to return the seat of the empire to the West.

5. Only in 802 was the marriage project presented to Irene; she herself was deposed during the negotiations.

But records show that the Tunic was in Charlemagne's possession before such a marriage was even conceivable.

The King's sister, Giselle, was a nun in the Priory of The Humility of Blessed Marie of Argenteuil, a monastery founded in 665 and depending from the Abbey of St. Denis. The town of Argenteuil, about 15 km northwest of Paris, developed around this monastery. When Charles' daughter Teoderada took the veil and joined her aunt, Charles' gift was the precious Tunic which he himself, in solemn procession along roads thronged with cheering, weeping villagers, brought to the monastery. According to a document of 847,<sup>5</sup> the holy relic was received by the Priory on the 13th of August in the year of Our Lord 780.

Other accounts give the date as 12 August 800, or "about 800". If indeed the Tunic was sent to Charlemagne as a gift in anticipation of a marriage alliance, it would seem more consistent with events if that marriage concerned Rotruda and Constantine VI.

The Tunic of Christ, woven without seam by the Blessed Virgin and stained with the Precious Blood, was an irresistible attraction for pilgrims and penitents, particularly during those cycles when the whole earth seethed with moving masses of humanity seeking salvation. Five tiny leaden medals cut in the shape of the Tunic, survivors from an age of unclouded faith, stir us to a pensive mood. Retrieved from the secrets of the Seine, they are part of the Arthur Forgeais collection owned by the Cluny Museum of Paris.

So near to Paris, Argenteuil was in a perilous location. During the Norman invasions, to put the relic in safety it was sealed up in a wall.... In 1156, after formal recognition by the Archbishop of Rouen, it was exhibited to the crowds. Louis VII, King of France, and princes of Church and court were in attendance. At this time, the documents of the origin of the Tunic were also recovered.<sup>6</sup>

Through the centuries, kings and saints and humble folk came to Argenteuil to venerate the Holy Robe. In the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, by royal edict, the town was fortified against Protestant violence.

But the Revolution brought danger more heated than Huguenot hatred and more furious than Norman rampage. The curé of Argenteuil, Monsieur Ozet, in a deposition of 18 November 1793, stated, to our profound astonishment, that to save the priceless

PILGRIM SOUVENIRS OF THE TUNIC OF ARGENTEUIL  
 Courtesy of Service photographique de la Réunion des musées nationaux.

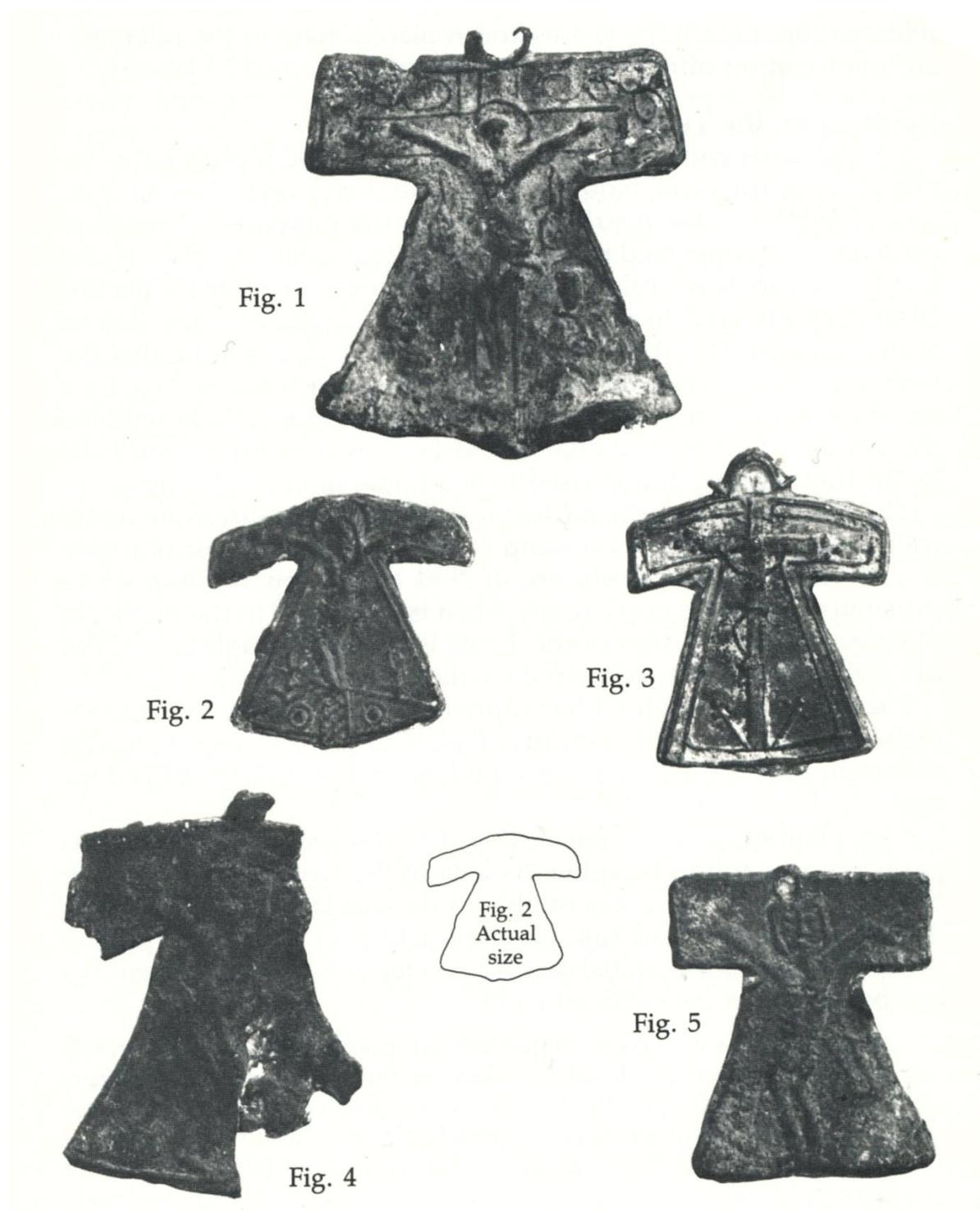


Fig. 1: Medal in the form of the Tunic, with crucifix, Virgin, St. John.  
 Fig. 3 depicts Christ on cross, a Virgin on the reverse.  
 Figs. 2, 4, 5 depict Christ on the cross, but the cross is not represented.  
 Fig. 4 has a Virgin and Child on the reverse; the reverse of Fig. 5 shows a Virgin crowned but without the Child.  
 The rings at top of Figs. 1, 3, 5 show that these souvenirs were pendants. Dimensions of Fig. 2: 17 mm x 18 mm (approx. 11/16". Fig. 1, then, would be approx. 1 3/16").

relic, he and his sacristan cut it into pieces which they buried in the rectory garden. Perhaps his mind was at rest while he languished in prison. When the Terror had passed and Monsieur le curé was released, he dug up the pieces and replaced them in the reliquary; an investigation officially recognized the Tunic on 17 May 1804.

### **Research on the Tunic**

In 1892, a team of medical researchers identified blood on the Tunic, finding traces of blood globules, hematin crystals and iron. The bloodstains are nearly invisible to the naked eye, but their presence was confirmed by infra-red photographs made by Gerard Cordonnier in May, 1934. In 1893, two experts from the Gobelins laboratory attested to the great age of the fabric and the lack of seams. In 1931, the abbot Parcot analyzed the dye, stating that the dark-violet or maroon color was fixed, as in ancient practice, by a mordant of iron. It was Parcot's opinion that the cloth resembled the Antinoë fabrics, and that it had been woven on a horizontal loom, the ordinary frame used in the home in ancient times.

The fabric is fine wool, riddled by moths. It measures one metre from one sleeve to the other and is 0.95 m long. Because of its extremely frail, webby condition, in 1894 it was sewn onto a white satin support. Once every fifty years it is displayed to the public; in the meantime, a portion of the Tunic is visible through the grill of the elaborate double reliquary in which it is preserved.

The Tunic of Argenteuil has captivated the curiosity of sindonologists since early in this century. Paul Vignon examined it, as did Giovanni Judica-Cordiglia, Antoine Legrand and Gerard Cordonnier.

Pierre Barbet, in *La Passion de Jésus-Christ selon le chirurgien*, compares the ubication of the bloodstains of the two relics. As on the Shroud, the principle areas on the Tunic start from a large stain on the right shoulder and cascade obliquely over the boney projections. In the English translation, *A Doctor at Calvary*, his remarks can be found on pages 95 and 100:

Now the beam would be oblique behind, pointing downwards and to the left.... Having rubbed the skin off the right scapular region it would do the same on the left, but lower down near the point of the left shoulder blade, grazing the spinal column ... and would go on ... as far as the ... left iliac creast ... [causing] excoriations on all the boney protrusions....

With Gérard Cordonnier's infra-red photos before him, Barbet compares what he has just stated about the wounds observed on the dorsal image of the Shroud with the description Cordonnier gives of bloodstains on the Tunic: stains on the collar bone, the acromion and right sub-scapulary region; small stains on the vertebrae, starting from the seventh cervical; a very large stain on the lower part of the point of the left shoulder blade; an important mass at the left iliac crest; a group at the left sacral region.

A question inevitably arises: Could the blood on the Tunic be of the same group as the blood on the Shroud?<sup>7</sup> Indeed, until more tests are permitted on a number of relics purporting to be from the Passion, we cannot conclude that the Shroud alone has survived the centuries. The Tunic of Argenteuil, historically and scientifically, lays claim to authenticity, and the fact that it has been preserved and protected despite its extreme fragility lends credence to the belief that this seamless robe, woven or not by the Virgin Mother, was the garment Christ wore against his bleeding body while he carried the beam of his cross to Golgotha, and there, from the Cross, saw Roman soldiers cast dice for its possession.

#### NOTES

1. *Messe de la Tunique Inconsutile de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ; Manuel du Pelerin*; in the Sequence.
2. ADAMNANI: "De Locis Sanctis", *Itineraria et Alia Geographica*: Aliud quoque lintheamen maius Arculfus in eadem Hierusolimitana civitate vidit, quod, ut fertur, sancta contexit Maria, et ob id magna reverentia in ecclesia habetum totus veneratur populus. In quo videlicet lintheo duodecim apostolorum formulae haventur intextae et ipsius Domini imago figurata. Cuius lintheaminis una pars, rubei colons et altera e regione in altero latere viridis habetur in modum viridium herbarum.
3. cf. *Spectrum* #17, Dec. 1985, p. 26.
4. *Voyage de Charlemagne à Jerusalem et à Constantinople*, vv. 170-171.
5. P. BAIMA-BOLLONE: *L'Impronta di Dio*, Mondadori, 1985, p. 113.
6. dom GERBERON: *Histoire de la robe sans couture de Notre-Seigneur Jésus Christ* (1677); cited by J. DAOUST, "La Sainte Tunique d'Argenteuil", *Esprit et Vie*, June 1982, p. 362.
7. BAIMA-BOLLONE: "Identification of the Group of the Traces of Human Blood on the Shroud", *Spectrum* #6, March 1983, reprinted from *Sindon* #31, Dec. 1982.

I wish to thank Rev. MARIE-JOSEPH DUBOIS for giving me copies of his personal notes. These were from: L.F. GUÉRIN (1845); L. DE SIVRY ET CHAMPAGNAC (1850); V. DAVIN (1865); E.O. CHEVALIER (1859). Chevalier was the great-great grandfather of Père Dubois. As mayor of Argenteuil, Chevalier based his booklet on documents in the municipal archives: papal bulls, title deeds, fiscal records, etc.

Other sources available to me include:

A. LEGRAND  
 J. BRIAND. O.F.M. (1985)  
 J. DAOUST (1982)  
 CHRISTOFARI (1957)