

Shroud of Turin

The Shroud of Turin is a relic largely considered the most famous and holy of all relics. The shroud is rectangular in shape and measures around four point four metres long by one point one metre wide. The cloth was created from flax fibrils. It exhibits the full-length front and back view of a man who seems savagely beaten and crucified.

‘The wounds correspond exactly with the biblical accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, right down to the scourge marks, nail wounds, head wounds and a single stab wound in his side.’¹

Centuries prior to when the emergence of science presented the matter in a completely new outlook; discourse over the genuineness of the shroud included prominent bishops and caused a small ecclesiastical fight for control. Since the shroud was initially exhibited in France in 1357, it has been the focus of widespread reverence; on the other hand, it was the focus of disdain from various clerics and nonconformists. Photography was a crucial element in creating easily available images and enlarging sections of the shroud for the use of comprehensive analysis by scientists and historians of art.²

In all four versions of the gospel, there is a mention of a significant cloth. The gospels of Matthew and Luke recount Jesus’ body being wrapped by Joesph of Arimathea and the disciples discovering the cloth following the resurrection.³ According to Matthew, the Bible states, ‘Joesph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock.’⁴

The Shroud of Turin is located in the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist. Ian Wilson, the author of *The Turin Shroud*, describes it as situated:

‘In the circular marble Royal Chapel. To reach this chapel, the visitor has to ascend a steep flight of steps. He finds himself in a baroque chamber lined with white marble tombs and capped with a soaring cupola. In the centre is an ornate black marble altar, set on a stepped platform and ringed by golden cherubs. This altar is surmounted by a

¹ Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, *The Second Messiah* (London: Century Books Limited, 1997) p.139-140.

² William, Meacham, ‘The Authentication of the Turin Shroud: An Issue in Archaeology Epistemology’ *Current Anthropology*, 24.3 (1983)

³ Heather Tomlinson, *Premier Christianity* (2023) <<https://www.premierchristianity.com/news-analysis/explained-what-is-the-shroud-of-turin-and-is-it-evidence-of-jesus-resurrection/14958.article>> [accessed 2nd April 2023]

⁴ Bible Gateway, *Matthew 27:59-60* (2011) <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2027%3A59-60&version=NIV>> [accessed 8th April 2023]

second altar, and it is within this, behind iron grilles, in a locked cavity known as the “sepulchre” that the shroud is kept.

It lies rolled around a velvet staff and wrapped in red silk within a four-foot-long wooden casket ornamented in silver with the emblems of the Passion. The casket is kept within an iron chest wrapped in asbestos and sealed by no fewer than three locks, for each of which a separate key is required, in turn the iron chest is within a wooden box with a painted cover. This cover is all that is visible behind the two iron grilles in the upper “sepulchre” section of the altar in which the shroud is stored’.⁵

The image on the shroud displays the stigmata from the crucifixion recounted in the Bible involving a substantial blood splatter from the spear laceration on his side. Stitching separates the major part of the shroud from a six-inch side strip of the same material, extending to nearly the whole shroud length. ‘A backing cloth of basket weave covering the entire back area of the Shroud is exposed at both ends of this side strip where pieces of the side strip have either been removed or never existed.’⁶

The most prominent attribute of the shroud is the sixteen patches that were used to cover up the damage done to the shroud after a fire in 1534. The patches were sewn symmetrically in pairs to the front of the shroud. The fire was located in a chapel in Chambery, France, where it was being kept in a chest made of silver. Hot liquid silver burned through parts of the shroud symmetrically due to how it was folded in the chest. Fortunately, the depiction of the body was untouched. The shroud was soaked using water before the fire could damage Christ’s depiction. This disaster uncovered new fascinating scientific details. Silver liquefies at 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. Since the shroud was folded in the centre of the chest, there must have been a substantial temperature disparity at several places in the image, varying from extremely high to cooler room temperatures. Nevertheless, there was mostly no altering in the image’s appearance from one area to another. ‘Since many art pigments volatilise at temperatures well below the melting point of silver, those that could have been used, if it is a painting, are rather limited’.⁷

While medical examinations of the body image provide compelling evidence for authenticity, explorations into the Linen cloth’s history revealed its case to be exceedingly feeble. There were rival shrouds in many places, including

⁵ Ian Wilson, *The Turin Shroud* (Norfolk: Lowe & Brydone Printers Limited, 1978), p.1.

⁶ Harry Grove, *Relic, Icon or Hoax? Carbon Dating the Turin Shroud* (Bristol: Institute of Physics Publishing, 1996), p.1.

⁷ Harry Grove, *Relic, Icon or Hoax?* p.3.

Champagne, Besançon and Cadouin. The Shroud of Turin first emerged in Lirey, France, in 1353, under strange circumstances, along with no authentication records. The shroud quickly began attracting substantial crowds to a humble wooden church created by the owner of the shroud and maintained by six clergymen but in financial problems. Henri de Poitiers, the resident bishop, denounced the showcasing of the shroud.⁸

By far, the most prominent research on the shroud's history was conducted by two Catholic historians, French scholar Ulysse Chevalier and English Jesuit scholar Herbert Thurston, at the start of the 20th century. Their outlooks are considered similar, if not identical. Esteemed Catholics were steadfast in their belief that the shroud was a forgery from the fourteenth century. From the point of view of Thurston and Chevalier's hard substantiated evidence, it was effectively impossible to view the shroud as authentic.⁹

The shroud's history can be reliably traced back to when the shroud was first in the ownership of the Savoy family in 1453. It was in the possession of Duke Louis of Savoy and his wife, Anne de Lusignan; the pair were deeply devout and were continually in the presence of clergymen. Documents owned by Chevalier reveal that in 1453 the Duke and his wife obtained the shroud following rather unclear negotiations with a French widow, Margaret de Charny. The same documents reveals how the de Charny family owned the shroud since the mid-1350s. One of the mysteries is how the shroud comes into the hands of this family. Margaret de Charny inherited the shroud from her father, Geoffrey II de Charny, who inherited it from his father, Geoffrey I de Charny, who had passed away in 1356. A small amount was known regarding the shroud during the time of Geoffrey I de Charny. However, a memorandum from 1389 appears to supply the relevant information. The writer Pierre d'Arcis, Bishop of Troyes, declared the shroud a forgery and that Henri de Poitiers, a former Bishop of Troyes, had discovered the artist who had created the shroud.¹⁰

Where the Shroud of Turin was before the mid-1350s is a mystery. In the records of numerous important relics prior to the 14th century, there is no reference to the shroud displaying an imprint of Jesus Christ's face and body. This lack of mention along with the dubious circumstances of the shroud's emergence and the admission of the creator seemed adequate to resolve the issue. However, this has to be viewed as an open verdict.

⁸ William Meacham, 'The Authentication of the Turin Shroud (1983)

⁹ Wilson, *The Turin Shroud*, p.67.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.68.

In 1203, a French soldier involved in the Crusades stopped in Constantinople and indicated that a Church displayed a shroud that Christ had been buried in every Friday and that 'his figure could be plainly seen.'¹¹ It is probable that this shroud and the Shroud of Turin are the same, especially when considering the pollen evidence and that these were the only noted 'Shrouds of Christ' with a face and body imprint. It is almost irrefutable that the shroud was one of many treasures looted during the Crusade. Wilson suggests that the shroud, hidden and covertly revered by the Knights Templars from 1204 to 1314, was passed into the hands of Geoffrey de Charny, a knight who has the same name as the previous Templar master of Normandy.¹²

The mystery of the shroud's background preceding the Crusades will likely never be uncovered; however, it can be determined where the shroud was located over the centuries. Pollen samples extracted from the shroud uncovered that it had spent time in Palestine and Turkey, and the scientific evidence appears to place it in the time of Christ's crucifixion. These findings indicate that the relic belongs to the early church period. Whether authentic or not, the shroud has avoided public view for an exceedingly long time in which a relic claiming to be the burial cloth in which Christ was wrapped in and displaying his image would have brought vast attention and pilgrimage.¹³

In 1898 the Committee for Sacred Art coordinated exhibitions that included the Turin Shroud. The committee realised this was a good reason to photograph the shroud. Despite backlash Secondo Pia, an amateur photographer, was chosen for this task on May the 28th, 1898. Pia was astonished to find that the developed plates exhibited the image of the body and face much more transparent and true to life than the naked eye could see when looking at the cloth. Pia described the event as:

'Shut up in my darkroom all intent on my work, I experienced a very strong emotion when, during the development, I saw for the first time the Holy Face appear on the plate, with such clarity that I was dumbfounded by it. It was a great glory and I was seized by trepidation at what I had seen.'¹⁴

The most significant test that could be done on the shroud was refused by the people involved as it would cause damage to a piece of the shroud. The practice, radiocarbon dating, had been denied as the sample that needed to

¹¹ Robert de Clary, *The Conquest Of Constantinople* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1936), p.112.

¹² Wilson, *The Turin Shroud*, p. 66-73

¹³ William, Meacham, 'The Authentication of the Turin Shroud (1983)

¹⁴ Christopher Knight and Robert Lomas, *The Second Messiah* p.141.

be taken was too sizeable. However, developments in sample sizes meant the potential destruction to the shroud diminished to the point it deemed allowable. An article entry in *Nature* in 1986 announced that the famous relic would, at long last, be scientifically dated:

‘The Roman Catholic Church is about to see one of its most famous relics submitted to the obvious test: pieces of the Shroud of Turin are to be taken to seven laboratories around the world for radiocarbon dating. Given the sensitivity of current techniques, less than 5 milligrams of cloth can yield a date with an accuracy of ± 60 years or so.’¹⁵

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences was in charge of the testing and chose five centres to participate in dating the shroud. These five centres are:

‘the universities of Oxford, of Arizona in Tucson and of Rochester, New York; ETH Zurich; and the Centre pour Faibles Radioactivités at Gif-sur-Yvette, France.’¹⁶

The Turin Shroud is undeniably one of the most bewildering and informative archaeological finds ever. While it is unknown how the image formed on the cloth, it is a crucial record of Christ’s crucifixion and was fittingly titled “the fifth gospel”.¹⁷ Considering that the academic consensus only half a century ago considered the shroud a medieval forgery, the current evidence gives a solid archaeological judgement for legitimacy.

By the early 20th century, differing opinions regarding the shroud were plainly evident. Scientists felt the examination of the image provided conclusive evidence that it was an imprint of a body carrying injuries precisely the same as the wounds inflicted on Christ. In contrast, historians felt that the lack of mention through history and the abrupt emergence of the shroud under mysterious circumstances was an equally cogent negative indication. The direct testing conducted for the last 20 years goes a long way in illustrating that the shroud is an authentic linen used to wrap a dead body from ancient times rather than the product of a medieval forgery.¹⁸

¹⁵ Philip Campbell, ‘Shroud to be dated’, *Nature*, no.323 (1986) p.482.

¹⁶ Philip Campbell, ‘Shroud to be dated’, p.482.

¹⁷ Joseph Marino, ‘The shroud of Turin: the Fifth Gospel? Or the First Gospel? Or Neither?’ *Academia* (2021)

¹⁸ William, Meacham, ‘The Authentication of the Turin Shroud (1983)

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