

Martin Biddle, *The Tomb of Christ*, Stroud (Glos), Sutton Publishing, 1999, 172 pp, with numerous colour and black & white illustrations throughout. Paperback edition UK £12.99, USA \$21.95.

Review by Ian Wilson

Anyone seriously interested in the Turin Shroud needs to give some consideration to where it and the body it theoretically wrapped were first laid - i.e. the tomb 'hewn out of rock' owned by Joseph of Arimathea that is referred to in Matthew 27: 60; Mark 15: 46; Luke 23: 53; and John 19: 41. For this Martin Biddle's definitive book *The Tomb of Christ*, which has been the subject of an excellent recent Channel 4 documentary, provides an absolutely indispensable aid.

Martin Biddle, who is Professor of Mediaeval Archaeology at Hertford College, Oxford, spent ten years, in partnership with his wife Birthe, conducting an exhaustive architectural and photogrammetric survey of the Edicule, or shrine, of the Holy Sepulchre as housed in Jerusalem's historic Church of the Holy Sepulchre. During the Victorian era none other than General Charles Gordon, of Khartoum fame, doubted the authenticity of this traditional Holy Sepulchre site because it self-evidently lies within Jerusalem's walls, whereas the gospel tradition and Roman law required that any place of burial should be outside. But back in the 1950s archaeologist Dame Kathleen Kenyon showed that during the Roman era Jerusalem underwent a series of changes to its walls, and that during the decade of Jesus' death the Holy Sepulchre site was definitely outside the walls. The intra-mural location is therefore no bar to the site's authenticity.

Biddle has not only gone along with Kathleen Kenyon's findings, he similarly finds plenty to support the Holy Sepulchre site being the true location where Jesus' shroud-wrapped body was laid after the crucifixion. For even though the marble slab venerated by present-day pilgrims is merely a later ornamental cover rather than the original stone on which the Shroud would have rested, there can be no doubt that the site itself has been revered as that of Jesus' tomb for nearly seventeen centuries - i.e. since at least as far back as the time of Rome's Constantine the Great.

And what vicissitudes of fortune it has suffered during those centuries. These include its overly drastically conversion into a Christian shrine by Constantine's architects in 325, its near total destruction by the fanatical Caliph Hakim in 1009, further serious Moslem damage in 1244, a fire which brought the Church's roof down on it in 1808, and major earthquake damage in 1927. Biddle has produced excellent architectural drawings of the Sepulchre's different housings over the centuries, showing that each phase of rebuilding has retained certain elements of what had existed before, one inside the other rather in the manner of a Russian doll.

Biddle's ten year survey of the Holy Sepulchre Edicule was prompted by the 1927 earthquake damage this sustained, the mostly 19th century shrine still being propped up with unsightly metal shoring. As he explains, long-term the structure needs to be methodically taken apart stone by stone, then reconstructed, much in the manner so successfully used for the Abu Simbel temple. Though the self-avowedly 'rigorously detached' Biddle never ever mentions the Turin Shroud anywhere in his study, for Shroud-watchers the exciting aspect is that his plan, if implemented, should temporarily expose whatever is left of the original rock of Jesus' original rock-cut tomb. This would focus new attention on one often overlooked sector of Shroud studies - the now quarter-of-a-century-old findings by Turin microanalyst Giovanni Riggi of substantial quantities of limestone dust amongst samples taken from the Shroud's underside, i.e. from that part which would have been in direct contact with the rock of Jesus' tomb. In particular, pollen grains sampled from the Shroud's underside all featured a limestone coating notably absent from those samples taken from the side in direct contact with the body. Potentially, therefore, the reaching of the original limestone shelf of Jesus' tomb should enable samples from it to be matched with those taken from the Shroud. This is made possible by limestone rock samples taken from different locations each having their own distinctive crystalline 'signature' when they are analysed under the microscope.

Since responsibility for the Holy Sepulchre Edicule is shared between a number of different and often sparring Christian denominations, much patience is needed awaiting a collective decision from them to proceed with dismantling the structure. And inevitably the giving of any go-ahead is hardly helped by the present high state of political tension between Palestinians and Israelis. But if only greater peace and order can be restored, the future certainly holds the promise of some interesting developments. And in the meantime - even despite the omission of any mention of our Shroud - Biddle's book comes very highly recommended.