

The Second International Conference on the Sudarium of Oviedo

Oviedo, Spain, 13-15 April 2007

The first International Congress on the Sudarium was held thirteen years ago, and given that direct hands-on investigation and other research has been continuous since that time, there was plenty of new material to digest and hear. The congress was very well attended – c. 240 delegates – with a health BSTS representation (Joanna Emery from Canada, film producer David Rolfe and Alan Foster from the UK, Michael Hessemann – who knows just about everything there is to know about just about every relic, whether true or false - from Germany), STURP team leader John Jackson and his wife Rebecca, Bruno Barberis and Nello Balossino from the Centro Internazionale di Sindonologia in Turin, and Scientific Adviser to the Papal Custodian of the Shroud, Piero Savarino. Most of the delegates were, of course, Spanish. Simultaneous translation was provided, which appeared to work well most of the time. A modern example of the medieval confusion between the words sindon and sudarium was evident when the translator referred to the Shroud of Turin as the Sudarium, confusing people until the mistake was cleared up.

Two or three articles on what the Sudarium of Oviedo is and how it could have been used have been published in previous BSTS newsletters, so if anyone has any doubts about the cloth it could be a good idea to refer back to these articles.

The Congress was officially opened by Carlos Osoro, Archbishop of Oviedo, whose interest was evident as he was present at all the different presentations. Chairman of the Centro Español de Sindonología Jorge Manuel Rodríguez gave an overview of what has happened in the field of Sudarium studies since the first congress took place thirteen years ago, and then the presentations were underway.

First to take the microphone was Alfonso Muñoz-Cobo, who explained how back in the mid 1960's Monsignor Giulio Ricci first realised that the cloth kept in Oviedo could very well have been the Sudarium mentioned in the fourth gospel. Without any of the complex used today in such research, Ricci saw the possible link of the cloth with the Shroud of Turin. Bruno Barberis, Director of the Centro Internazionale di Sindonologia in Turin, and Scientific Adviser to the Papal Custodian of the Shroud, Piero Savarino, spoke about the new system for the conservation of the Shroud, now kept in an airtight box, in the dark and in an inert gas atmosphere. Mention was made of the restoration work carried in 2002 – “with the owner's consent, the Holland cloth was substituted by a new support cloth and the patches, which had been sewn on in 1534 to cover the holes resulting from the fire in Chambéry in 1532, were removed; the considerable quantity of carbonised material present under the patches was catalogued and conserved for future studies”.

The fact that the Sudarium of Oviedo is not kept in anything like such scientific conditions is no secret. María del Socorro Mantilla de los Ríos y Rojas spoke about how the Sudarium should be conserved, making the following recommendations: a) place the cloth in an airtight container, b) take the red velvet covering cloth off, c) the cloth should not be exposed to natural or fluorescent light – illumination should be with fibre optics cold light, d) the average temperature in the container should be 20° C and the average humidity 55%, and e) it would be better to conserve the Sudarium in an inert gas such as argon or nitrogen).

Next behind the microphone was Felipe Montero, who spoke about the chemical analyses carried out on the Sudarium. Among his conclusions are that the cloth “could have been woven in the west, not necessarily in Palestine. It was pinned to the hair of a corpse and the blood that stains the cloth was in turn covered with aloes and storax”.

María José Iriarte spoke about palinology and the Sudarium; by way of an introduction she mentioned Max Frei’s work with pollen from the Sudarium, which fits in perfectly with the known historical route the cloth took. Her own conclusions were quite different, stating that she has not been able to identify pollen that could pin the cloth down to any given geographical location.

Just weeks before the congress took place, new samples from the Sudarium were subject to carbon dating. Five samples were dated from five different cloths – three of them came up with the expected date, while the cloth from an Egyptian mummy returned a date of any time in the 19th or 20th centuries. The laboratory immediately concluded that the cloth (and the mummy) were fakes. The sample from the Sudarium was dated to around 700 AD. Scientist César Barta spoke about the carbon dating process, emphasising the fact that if carbon dating is always absolutely accurate, then we could just as well finish the congress there and then. However, there were several points to bear in mind – in specialist carbon dating magazines, about half the samples dated come up with the expected date, around 30% with an “acceptable” date, and the other 20% is not what one would expect from archaeology. The laboratory used (via the National Museum in Madrid) said they were surprised by the result and asked if the cloth was contaminated with any oil based product, as oil is not cleaned by the laboratory processes used before carbon dating and if oil is present on a sample, the date produced by carbon dating is in fact the date of contamination. Finally, the history of the Sudarium is very well established and there are definite references to its presence in Jerusalem in AD 570 and at the beginning of the fifth century.

DNA studies on the linen of the Sudarium are also underway, under the supervision of Manuel Rey (who works at Newbiotechnic in Seville) and Enrique Monte (Department of Microbiology and Genetics at the >University of Salamanca). These studies are just beginning and the presentation was more about what they hope to obtain than actual results. Their aim is to be able to pinpoint the geographical area where the linen came from.

The talk about DNA studies on blood samples from the Sudarium generated a lot of excitement. Antonio Alonso from the National Institute of Forensic Science and Toxicology has analysed blood samples and tried to establish if a DNA chain can be established. Attempts to identify nuclear DNA (i.e. DNA contained within the nucleus) were unsuccessful, but he was able to identify a human mitochondrial DNA – in other words, human DNA from the blood on the cloth. However, Alonso recommended great caution and would not show the actual DNA results for two reasons – it could very well belong to anybody who has handled the cloth over the centuries, and he wished to avoid sensationalist headlines of the “DNA of Christ” kind. Studies will continue.

So much for the first day’s presentations. In the evening there was a guided visit to the Cathedral and a generous welcome reception provided by the City Council of Oviedo.

The second day opened with Guillermo Heras, head of the Investigation Team responsible for the research carried out on the cloth. While he showed how the cloth was used with a volunteer “corpse”, the relevant gospel verses about the Sudarium (John 20: 1-7) were read in the original Greek, English and Spanish. This was followed by Jaime Izquierdo explaining how digital images and computer techniques are used in Sudarium studies.

Mark Guscini then explained the known history of the Sudarium, research carried out with all the surviving manuscripts. As has already been mentioned, there are definite references to the Sudarium's presence in Jerusalem in the 5th and 6th centuries, two hundred years before the carbon 14 date. He was followed by Enrique López, a priest from the cathedral in Oviedo, who surprised all present by trying to discredit all the work done so far, suggesting that the absence of the Sudarium from some of the lists of relics in the cathedral means it was not actually there. Unfortunately, López' way of discrediting other speakers (just saying they were wrong but not providing any reasons why this might be so), and his own attitude of hitting the table and saying that nobody was going to believe him anyway destroyed any credibility he might have had.

Juan Uría spoke about how pilgrims on their way to Santiago would often make the detour to Oviedo to visit the cathedral and touch the box the relics were kept in. The material was fascinating, but in the 21st century it is no longer acceptable to simply read from a written paper without even glancing at the people sitting in the auditorium. Presentations (especially at a congress where people are listening for seven or eight hours) need to be dynamic and visual.

Father Fidel González then made an announcement – four hundred years ago the mass of the Sudarium had been banned from the liturgy, but now had been reinstated, and the special mass of the Sudarium can be held whenever the Archbishop sees fit.

The afternoon session was devoted to comparative studies of the Sudarium of Oviedo and the Shroud of Turin. César Barta spoke once more about the coincidences between the blood stains on the two cloths – the same blood group, the same blood types (life blood and post-mortem blood) in the same areas and the dramatic overlay of stains on the nape of the neck, all of which suggest that the two cloths were used on the same corpse.

Nello Balossino's talk was entitled "Turin Shroud and Oviedo Sudarium; analysis and comparison by computer science methods". He was followed by John Jackson and Keith Propp, who read their presentation "Preliminary Comparisons of Scientific data collected from both the Shroud of Turin and the Sudarium of Oviedo". A summary was given of the work done by STURP in Turin in 1978, and then some of the results compared to Jackson's own direct research on the Sudarium. Not everything came out as expected:

"In the ultraviolet fluorescence photographs taken of the Sudarium, it is evident that what has been designated as blood regions do not appear to fluoresce. This similar behaviour can also be noted in the ultraviolet fluorescence photographs of the Shroud. There is, however, a possible lack of correspondence between the UV fluorescence of the Sudarium and Shroud photographs, which needs further clarification. In a Shroud photograph, there appears to be a light halo surrounding the upper part of the side wound. This has been interpreted as being due to serum exudation from the blood into the surrounding cloth during the contact time of the blood with the Shroud. Thus far, no similar fluorescent structures associated with possible serum exudations have been seen in the new Sudarium imagery. To resolve this difference, which may be important (particularly if the Sudarium blood coming from the nose is due to the same damage that caused the side wound seen on the Shroud), it will be necessary to conduct specific examinations of the Shroud of Turin to determine the precise chemical nature of the fluorescent halos that are seen on the Shroud. If, indeed, these are due to serum, then it will be necessary to determine why such residues are apparently not seen in the Sudarium imagery and this might require further, specialised studies of the Sudarium".

Jackson's closing comments are applicable to all the afternoon's presentations: "In conclusion, it is to be understood that the results of this paper should be considered

preliminary. Further studies based on this data will be conducted. Those studies will be directed towards comparing blood features on the Shroud and the Sudarium. It is clear, however, based on the preliminary survey of the available data discussed in this paper, that further research on both the Shroud and the Sudarium will be required in order to make rigorous conclusions concerning the possible correspondences between the two relics”.

The proceedings for the day were rounded off by Mark Guscini, with a second paper entitled “A Comparative Analysis of the History of the Sudarium of Oviedo and the Shroud of Turin”. The presentation was divided up into the histories of the two cloths (assuming that the identification Shroud/Image of Edessa is correct) – reaching the conclusion that if past and future research shows that both the Shroud and the Sudarium were indeed used on the same corpse, this could only have been in Jerusalem some time before the fifth century (the only place both cloths coincided in time and space).

The question session held at the end of the day revolved around Enrique López and his systematic attempt to discredit work presented during the day. One question was divided up into three parts – why did López only have half an hour to present his theories, why did Mark Guscini ignore the deed of the opening of the Ark in Oviedo in 1075 and why couldn't Codex Valenciennes proceed from Oviedo as suggested? Guscini's answer was a) López had half an hour, exactly the same as everyone else – a good speaker should know how to summarise everything in the time allotted, which is never enough but there has to be a limit in a congress, b) because Guscini's work is focused on the Sudarium up to the eighth century and its arrival in Oviedo and c) because the style of writing shows very clearly that the manuscript in question is from France, something that López seems to be unaware of.

On the second evening a special mass was held in the cathedral, which was full to overflowing for the occasion. For the first time in 400 hundred years the special Sudarium mass was celebrated, and the Archbishop blessed those present with the cloth in his hands, in its frame. After spiritual needs had been catered to, the City Council of Oviedo took care of more earthly matters and put on a really excellent gala dinner for all presenters and delegates.

Sunday morning was much more of a theological session, related to the questions of the empty tomb and what resurrection means. One of the most fascinating presentations I have heard for a long time was “Theological Implications of Modern Physics” by Manuel Carreira S.J., who holds a PhD in Physics. Carreira showed that physics and theology should not be in conflict, but rather complement each other – even in such complex and debated matters like evolution, the end of the material universe and the nature of the spirit. He received a long ovation.

The congress was closed by Guillermo Heras, Jorge Manuel Rodríguez and the Archbishop of Oviedo, Carlos Osoro. All in all the event was a great success – the organisation was as close to perfect as you can get when dealing with so many people and the new information presented should serve as an example to other congresses that just repeat the same thing over and over again.