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Although I have considered the enigmatic shroud academically for many years since reading Ian Wilson's first book on the subject, it had never crossed my mind to go to Turin to see it: until the December 2009 newsletter landed with details of how to do so as part of a BSTS group visit. I have been a member for some time and used to enjoy our meetings at the Society of Authors in Kensington - the few I made it to after moving to Pembrokeshire in the mid 1980's.

My wife Elizabeth thought a few days in Italy a good idea, so we put our names down and waited for the volcanic ash to subside in time for the trip, which it did. I tried to order my thoughts about the shroud before we went, the better to explain it to anybody who took an interest in why we would take a four day trip to Italy to stand before a medieval forgery for three minutes.

The forgery point first; a lot of clever people, not to mention several less so, have tried and failed to duplicate the photographic and three dimensional properties that the shroud is famous for. Current versions of science can't do it, for which reason it is of the very few holy relics to retain the interest of both the faithful and a wider public. The positive image reminds me of the ghost of a leaf left on the paper that contained it in a flower press. The negative image has photographic qualities that art can't duplicate.

I am intrigued by the front and back images being quite separate. If I lay a body on a sheet and draw the cloth over the body's head in the style of the shroud, the cloth outlines the top of the head as well as the front and rear, yet the shroud image does not, although there is little space between the two images.

When the carbon dating suggested a medieval date, it seemed to me unlikely, but that was the verdict of the experts who conducted the tests. Expert evidence, at least in British courts, is a matter of opinion; a fingerprint or DNA match, the rifling marks on a fired bullet or the sanity of the defendant. These are all matters of opinion put forwards by experts and can be challenged by other experts in an adversarial judicial system. Carbon dating is no different, except that if the three laboratories use the same version of science and use the same method of interpretation, they will reach similar conclusions.

It is common ground that linen routinely carbon dates to a period that the archaeology or other parameters disagree with. It's as though the method of interpretation of carbon dating needs some additional calculations before being interpreted to a date. Until the experts can debug their techniques, the rest of us can consider the shroud as a piece of evidence of the trauma caused by crucifixion. And as evidence, it seems to be common ground that it is a reliable silent witness to the trauma that a crucifixion victim would suffer.

So my approach to the shroud was that it seems to tell a reliable story, but is suspect as to when that story dates from. It's like the account of the invasion of Briton by Julius Caesar. Are his words reliable? What do you make of the fact that the oldest copy of his account is written on ninth century paper?

The trip itself was well organised and really worthwhile. We got every experience that Reggie Norton's itinerary promised and then some, such as the shroud chapel of San Lorenzo church and the church of the brotherhood of the shroud just around the corner. Mark Guscini got us into the Shroud Museum for an unbooked tour, held two seminars in the hotel and got Aldo Guerreschi along to the first one to show us his work on the three dimensional image. Our local tour guide showed us the cheapest souvenir of Turin - an Italian two cent coin, which has the spire of La Mole Antoneliana on it. Alternative souvenirs of the exposition were available everywhere, advertised as 'shroud gadgets'.

I'd formed views about the shroud before learning of the cloth kept in Oviedo, Spain, that is said to have covered Jesus' face after death. Whilst it bears no image, the stains upon it match those on the shroud and it has a clear history and a provenance dating it to at least six hundred years before the shroud made its first appearance in Lirey. Since the Turin trip worked so well, good company, informative and thought provoking, it is to be hoped that a similar trip to Spain might come about next year. You can put Elizabeth and me down for it.