

A CASKET, A BRIDGE, A LIGHTHOUSE

by CHRISTOPHER MORGAN

Last year I had the extreme good fortune of travelling to Rome with my father, Rex Morgan, as a member of his team investigating the earliest frescoes of the ancient Roman Catacombs. We were able to demonstrate that one of those frescoes, a profile portrait of Christ on the ceiling of a cubiculum in Domitilla, is, although now damaged, the earliest surviving realistic likeness of Christ and probably the first ever undertaken by a professional artist. Its significance to Shroud studies, through its depiction of what seems to be the same man who appears on the Shroud of Turin, and also its date, which we were able to demonstrate (contrary to most other catacomb researchers) as being from the first century, is of undeniable importance in the context of contemporary Shroud research.

While we were there my father and I took a side trip to Turin and we stood before the silver casket of the Shroud. It was an extraordinary feeling. There in front of me, tantalisingly close and yet locked away beyond me was the subject of this phenomenal period of research, debate, scientific and academic analysis, of passionate argument and deep contemplation, an artefact, the only one in history, which has been subjected to all manner of tests, hypotheses, and every conceivable modern technological innovation to demonstrate the cause and nature of its image, and yet unlike any other artefact known it remains an enigma.

It occurred to me that the study of the Shroud is itself not unlike standing before that silver casket. All of the interdisciplinary research and its outcomes in recent years seems to have led Shroud scholars closer to understanding the cause and nature of the image and yet the comprehensive answers to these questions remain beyond our reach and will not be answered unless we are able at some future time to devise methods which might allow us to either make another image with the same characteristics as the Shroud in a context relevant to the period between the first and, at the latest, the fourteenth centuries, or to find a piece of evidence which comprehensively proves its existence before its so called invention in the thirteenth century (thereby demonstrating once and for all that the C14 tests of 1988 were inappropriate and incorrect). Until either of these can be done the Shroud will remain an enigma. The answers may be tantalisingly close but they are still hidden from us, like the Shroud was itself on that day when I went to Turin.

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When my father gave me a copy of the first *Shroud News* in September 1980 I had no perception of its potential significance as a vehicle to further the cause of Shroud research. In fact I thought that *Shroud News* was too ambitious a project for my father to sustain for more than a couple of issues given the enormous number of projects which take up his time and energy. I also thought that he would run out of material to report on after about six issues. I was completely wrong! From the appearance of his studio it is obvious he already has enough material for the next hundred without anything else happening.

After these hundred issues I can now appreciate the strength of his vision in pressing on with *Shroud News*. Its editor has created a focus which has helped everyone in Shroud research maintain contact with the central issues and questions posed by this extraordinary artefact. *Shroud News* has become a bridge linking Shroud researchers across the world and also a lighthouse illuminating aspects of this research for all who are interested in following its progress. *Shroud News* got me hooked. I've already made my plans to be in Turin for the exposition of 1998 to see it for myself.

