

# The influence of the Edessa icon on the legend of the Holy Grail

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«**I** [Joseph] climbed Holy Golgotha, where the Lord's Cross stood, and I collected in... the large shroud the precious blood that flowed from His side.»<sup>11, 13</sup> These lines from an 8th-century MS from Russian Georgia are a key element of my thesis. In nearly all of the Grail romances, which began almost suddenly in 1191, a chief attribute of the Holy Grail is that in it Joseph of Arimathea collected Jesus's blood on Golgotha.

## Introduction

My paper argues that the object that inspired the Christianization of the legend of the Grail, and in a manner of speaking, the object that was the Holy Grail may well be the Edessa icon known as the Mandylyon. My paper reinforces Ian Wilson's evidence<sup>30</sup> that the Turin Shroud was actually the Mandylyon. What we can say about the Mandylyon we can say about the Shroud. Both Grail and Mandylyon accounts say they contained Jesus' body and His blood collected on Golgotha. Both were associated with Joseph of Arimathea. In their rituals, both presented the vision of infant Jesus changing to crucified Jesus. Finally, I have run across information that surprised me as much as I think it will surprise you.

## The icon

Entering literature in the 4th century, the Mandylyon was thought for centuries to be simply a rendering of Jesus' face made with choice paints during His ministry by Abgar's painter. In the 6th century the Acts of Thaddaeus said the face was not made by human hands. Abgar's painter could not capture the brightness of Jesus' face. Instead Jesus wiped his face on a *tetradiplon* and left his miraculous image on this *sinдон*. *Sinдон* is the New Testament word for burial shroud. *Tetradiplon* means this cloth was seen folded in eight layers.<sup>6, 12, 23, 30</sup>

In Constantinople, artists made copies of the Mandylyon. Also, two eyewitness accounts describe the image as a moist and bloodstained secretion made without paints. The *Narratio* of Constantine Porphyrogenitos,

tells the Abgar story and adds a «preferable version»: In the Garden of Gethsemane, «sweat dripped from him like drops of blood. Then he took this piece of cloth which we see now... and wiped off the drops of sweat on it.» This gratuitous variation is inexplicable, unless traces of blood were seen on the face. The *Narration* continues: «Abgar alone could see the unbearable brightness shining from the portrait Thaddaeus had placed on his forehead. Forgetting the long paralysis of his legs he got up from his bed and ran to meet Thaddaeus.»<sup>6, 30</sup> The healing of the King's legs and the unbearable brightness of the icon may be the origin of the Grail's identical role in the romances.

The second eyewitness account, first noted by Gino Zaninotto in 1986, is the sermon of Gregory, also 944, noted that the icon had a wound in the side. He tells us:

This image «was imprinted only by the perspiration of the agony running down the face of the [Lord]...and ... by the drops from his own side.»<sup>7</sup>

These two narratives divulged that the icon from Edessa was not - had never been - a relic of Jesus's ministry, but a shroud-icon of his Passion, that very object which Joseph of Arimathea acquired for Jesus in the NT, stained and imaged, so as to represent the Real Presence. The strangeness of the image or the difficulty of really seeing it, mentioned by all these texts, supports the idea that these writers were looking at the Shroud of Turin.

Why were the bloodstains and full body not immediately noticed? Why this confusion about the Mandylyon? In texts we find numerous other descriptors for it: *mandylion*, *mantile*, *manutergium*, *ektypoma*, *soudarion*, *sancta toella*, *imago*, *lintheum*, *himation*, *peplos*, and even the plurals *panni*, *fasciae*, *spargana*, *othonai*, *entaphioi sindones*, and the list is not exhaustive.<sup>21</sup>

The ostensions and rituals of the icon were rare and deliberately maintained a mystique of secrecy vis-à-vis the congregation. Thus there were few individuals who had personally experienced it. A Byzantine text of 960 says:

«Once a year, the archbishop entered alone the room of the icon...The old chest was encased with shutters... [which] were opened up by means of iron rods... [Only] then could the congregation gaze upon it... But nobody was allowed to draw near to it... Thus holy dread increa-

sed their faith, and made them shiver with yet more awe in their worship.»<sup>5,6</sup>

The most striking description of one of the Mandylion's rituals is the so-called *Oldest Latin Abgar Text*, 10th century according to Gino Zaninotto. It states that the cloth was still in Edessa. The image of Jesus' entire body and was never shown to the faithful close-up, but was kept in a gold chest (scrinium) and on Easter it used to change its appearance: it showed itself in infancy at the first hour of the day (6 a.m.), childhood at the third hour, adolescence at the sixth hour, and the fullness of age at the ninth hour, when the Son of God came to His Passion and cross.<sup>5,6,32</sup>

Whatever the meaning or method of effecting these changes, a gradual and mysterious revelation seems to be the intent.

A 13th Century MS of an earlier Armenian version of the Abgar legend may explain this method of ostension. This tradition tells the Abgar story using Eusebius's chapter numbers but, unlike Eusebius (ca. 330), it includes the icon. Again Abgar's artist could not paint Jesus, «for at first He appeared to be thirty years of age, as He really was, but afterwards, He appeared older, and finally He seemed a twelve-year-old boy. The messengers were amazed at this unusual vision of a miracle.»<sup>6</sup>

Two other eyewitness texts from the Constantinople period are important. In 1201 Nicholas Mesarites described the *sinдон* in his care. «In this place the naked Lord rises again and ...the burial sindons can prove it.» Crusader Robert of Clari reported in 1203 «the *sydoines* of Jesus stood up straight every Friday so that the figure of Our Lord could be plainly seen there.» Both Mesarites and Clari used language that suggests a folded cloth raised so as to reveal its secret fullness as an imaged shroud of the crucified Jesus. This suggests the Edessa scrinium ritual.<sup>26</sup>

## Joseph of Arimathea

If the Mandylion is the Shroud, then the Mandylion is Joseph's *sinдон* of Good Friday - the only object associated with him in antiquity. Joseph's New Testament role is very small. He is more important in the twelfth century Grail legends. We may fairly wonder why *Joseph*, the owner of the Shroud, and no other of many possible disciples was chosen as the guardian of the Holy Grail. His importance began in apocryphal Passion texts from the Byzantine East.

In the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate* (before the 6th Century), Joseph was imprisoned by Jews on Holy Saturday and released by Jesus on Sunday. To prove who he was, Jesus showed Joseph the burial shroud that Joseph had purchased, still in the tomb. Joseph and the shroud are again prominent in the *Gospel of Gamaliel*, in the *Vindicta Salvatoris*, and other apocrypha.<sup>23</sup>

## The holy Grail

No modern scholar knows what the Holy Grail really was. The reason is that the authors of the Medieval Grail romances themselves did not know what the Grail was. Helinand of Froidmont gave an etymology which seems validated by my argument. The *Graal* comes from Latin *gradale*, «gradual, in stages»<sup>14</sup>.

I do not have time now to comment on the Welsh romances used by Grail-authors.

The 12th- and 13th- Century Grail authors were wonderfully creative poets. My thesis is that they built upon a persistent legend coming to Europe via pilgrims, prelates, merchants, and knights, about a precious object of the Byzantine East that «contained» the body and blood of Jesus. Almost suddenly between 1097 (Capture of Edessa in the First Crusade) and 1200 (the Fourth Crusade) a number of Byzantine texts become known and used in the West. Many of the Grail's most important features can be traced back to the Mandylion's history and ritual.

Let us see how insignificant Joseph and his Edessa Shroud became the material for the legend of the Holy Grail. About 1191, Chrétien de Troyes first gave the Grail a Christian connection. His Grail was a dish holding a Communion Host which alone nourished the old King for many years. The Host is the Body of Christ. The Mandylion actually «contained» the image of the body of Christ. Chrétien's source had somehow indicated this. To Chrétien and others it made sense that the «container», should be a dish or a cup.

The most important grail author was Robert de Boron, ca. 1200. This writer was totally original. He both created the Holy Grail and introduced Joseph of Arimathea into the literature as its first guardian. Robert de Boron's impact was immense; whatever the grail had been previously, he made it the cup of the Last Supper.

Robert used the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate*. In Robert, Pilate not only gave Jesus's body to Joseph, but also gave him the cup. When Joseph went to take Jesus down from the cross, he collected the dripping blood in this cup. *Robert is the first to assign this Shroud feature to the Grail*. As in the *Acts of Pilate*, Jesus visited him in his cell. In this version Jesus returned Joseph the precious cup, but did not release him. After forty years, during which the Grail alone sustained him, Joseph was freed by Vespasian, himself just cured of leprosy by means of Veronica's cloth. The cup has taken the place of the *sinдон* of the *Acts of Pilate*, but *en revanche* the mention of the Veronica has given us an important clue. Robert developed this section from the apocryphal *Vindicta Salvatoris* and the *Cura Sanitatis Tiberii*.<sup>22</sup>

Since Chrétien left his work unfinished, several writers produced continuations. The First Continuation, about 1200, tells a most interesting story about a head of Jesus carved by Nicodemus. But, he says, God Himself set His hand to shaping it, for *it could not be made by human hands*. This standard descriptor of the Mandylion

is evidence that the author was familiar with the Mandylyon literature.<sup>17</sup>

The Grail romance called the *Perlesvaus*, 1191-1225, recalls the *scrinium* ritual. In the Grail Gauvain seemed to see its great secret: a chalice, changing to a child, and then to the Crucified Jesus. Also, the Grail again was the vessel used by Joseph to collect Jesus's blood.

Earlier in the same romance, Arthur had a vision: At mass, Arthur... saw a lady ... offer her child to the celebrant ... [then] It seemed that the celebrant was holding in his arms a man, bleeding from his side, hands and feet, and crowned with thorns ... Then the man's body changed [again] into the shape of the child.»<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the *Queste del Saint Graal* (ca. 1225), at the Eucharist «the Host takes the semblance of a child whose face blazed as bright as fire, and he entered into the bread... [Then] from the Grail Christ issues "unclothed" and bleeding.» He administers the sacrament and tells Galahad that the Grail is the dish from which he had eaten the Paschal Lamb at the Last Supper. We see that the gradual change from child to crucified Jesus is shared by Mandylyon and Grail.<sup>18</sup>

In the meantime, the display of the shroud icon in Constantinople produced new rituals and new art. The Threnos, Epitaphios, and *Man of Pity* all represent a new realism in Byzantine art. Also in the 12th century, the *Melismos* ritual first appeared. The Eucharistic bread is presented visually on the altar as a naked Christ-child-the-Sacrificial Lamb-cut or broken to become the crucified victim.<sup>2, 15</sup> These art motifs and rituals relate directly backward to rituals of the Mandylyon and forward to the vision of Arthur in the *Perlesvaus*. So from Byzantium and the shroud icon come the great secret of the Grail: it contains the body of Christ shown by the gradual change from child to crucified, all accompanied by brilliant light. It is the mystery of the Transubstantiation.

## Joseph in Britain

I have now a series of documents that will tie my argument neatly together. They will show that Joseph of Arimathea was never in Britain and that the origin of the Holy Grail was in Edessa.

The first is that 8th-century Russian MS, mentioned already. It says Joseph and St. Philip built a church at Lydda near Jerusalem. The Book of Acts names two Philips, who preached only in Palestine, Phrygia, and Turkish Galatia-all in the East. Somehow this story came to be known in the West.<sup>11, 13</sup>

Next is the *Liber Pontificalis*, a chronicle of the popes. Under Pope Eleutherus (170-185), a 6th century copyist inserted: «This pope received a letter from British king Lucius for missionaries to teach him the Christian faith.» Of course, in 170 there were no kings of Britannia, which was still a Roman province.<sup>8</sup>

Third, Venerable Bede (8th c.) also names «British King Lucius» and Pope Eleutherus. Gildas, Bede's chief

authority, is silent on this. Thus Bede's source here must be the scribal insert. Bede in turn was a source for every other early British historian.

William of Malmesbury, writing his history of Glastonbury Abbey ca. 1125, used Bede and my fourth text, Freculphus, 9th c. Bishop of Lisieux. The words of Freculphus: *Phillipus... Gallis praedicavit Christum*, were ambiguous enough to suggest that Philip preached in France rather than among the Gauls in Galatia. William's original book had said (from Bede) only that missionaries had been sent to Britain by the pope at the request of British King Lucius in 166. He said: if St. Philip had preached in Gaul - as Freculphus had declared - it was probably he who sent disciples into Britain.<sup>24</sup>

William's book was updated by Glastonbury monks in 1247-with additions. Now we read «St. Philip was in Gaul, as Freculphus tells us. He sent twelve disciples to preach in Britain, and ut ferunt [as is said], he placed at their head his favorite disciple, Joseph of Arimathea.»<sup>24</sup>

It is this spurious text of 1247 that first placed Joseph in Glastonbury, and it derives from Freculphus and the sixth century insertion via Bede - and from the Russian MS, where Joseph was placed with Philip in Lydda. But Joseph of Arimathea was never in Britain.

## Who is king Lucius of Britain?

Adolf Harnack first noticed in 1904 that the British King Lucius in the *Liber Pontificalis* was really King Lucius Septimius Megas Abgarus VIII (177-212), first Christian king of Edessa and the only King Lucius who espoused Christianity in the late 2nd. c. Harnack also revealed that Edessa was also known by its citadel, in Syriac, the BIRTHA, in Latin Britium.<sup>10</sup> The 6th century Syriac *Chronicle of Edessa* notes that «in the year 205 Abgar VIII built the BIRTHA.»<sup>9</sup> Clement of Alexandria, early third century, wrote that St. Jude Thaddeus was buried in *Britio Edessenorum*, the citadel of Abgar.<sup>10</sup>

Palut, Edessa's first bishop, was consecrated in 200, Lucius Abgar's time. The *Chronicle of Edessa* describes the flooding of «the sanctuary of the Christian church» - under the year 201. Lucius Abgar VIII had ties with Rome. He took his Roman name from Emperor Septimius Severus. Towards 202 he visited Rome amid a lavish reception. Eusebius notes that the bishops of Osrhoëne (of which Edessa was the capital) communicated with Eleutherus.<sup>1, 9, 25, 27, 28</sup> So new convert Lucius Abgar may indeed have sent Eleutherus a letter. The «British king Lucius» of the *Liber Pontificalis* fits England not at all, and Edessa entirely.

## Conclusion

Let us consider the Grail's secret. As cup of the Last Supper in which Joseph collected Jesus' blood, it is already so awesome as not to require the embellishment of

some further - anticlimactic - secret. So why a secret in the first place? It only makes sense if the Grail, as the Mandylion, truly did contain the mystery of its true identity.

Finally, recall that 8th c. Russian MS which began this paper. It antedates by centuries every Grail narrative. In the apocryphal tradition about Joseph of Arimathea, before Joseph's Holy Grail as cup of Jesus's blood, there was Joseph's cloth in which he had collected the blood of Golgotha. Both the Holy Grail and the icon revealed the mystery of the infant Jesus changing to the body of crucified Jesus. Was this the secret of the Holy Grail? Was the Grail's secret the Mandylion's secret?

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## Epilogue

The evidence of this paper was inspired by, and now supports and enhances, Ian Wilson's remarkable insight of twenty years ago that the Edessa icon was not merely the prototypical copy made from Jesus's "death mask" as seen on the Turin Shroud, but was in fact the folded Shroud itself. Therefore the Shroud is that cloth that enters history in association with Joseph of Arimathea. Only by beginning from Edessa do all the documents make sense. Wilson's insight, now further fortified, remains fundamental in establishing the antiquity of the Shroud in the face of radiocarbon dating. ■

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Question de M. René Olivier

Mon intervention ne concerne qu'un détail au sujet du Graal. Je ne reviendrai pas sur ce que j'ai publié dans la Rilt n°3, au sujet d'une certaine convergence historique, sinon pour insister sur le grand danger d'établir une relation quelconque entre le Linceul (ou le Mandylion) et le Graal. Le mythe du Graal est né au XIIIème siècle dans la littérature provençale de l'amour courtois et il est sans rapport avec le Linceul et le Mandylion. Historiquement, un trou chronologique, un gouffre chronologique de treize siècles les sépare, que rien ne permet de combler. Dans l'article de la Rilt n°3, il est un mot que je n'ai pas voulu prononcer, en raison de son contenu explosif, c'est celui de la signification cathare de l'ensemble du mouvement culturel provençal au XIIIème siècle. Il n'est pas possible de s'engager ici dans un débat de cette envergure, en raison

de la richesse extrême de son contenu. Je me limite donc à renouveler à ce sujet mon cri d'alarme tendant à préserver le Saint Suaire qui nous est cher, et le Mandylion, de toute promiscuité avec un symbole culturel d'une autre signification, d'une toute autre nature. Mais je demeure par contre prêt à fournir sur ce sujet toutes les explications nécessaires, soit par écrit, soit par réponse à des questions directes, qu'il vous plairait de me poser. De toute manière, une quelconque parenté entre le Linceul ou le Mandylion et le Graal ne pourrait apporter aucun argument en faveur de leur authenticité, puisque le mythe littéraire en question ne date que du XIIIème siècle.

Réponse

Je suis désolé que vous ne soyez pas d'accord avec moi ; je sais que l'histoire du saint Graal a deux aspects : vous avez tout

d'abord la tradition qui est entièrement littéraire, poétique et romantique avec Lancelot, la quête du Graal et toutes ces histoires de dragons et de chevaliers ; ça c'est une chose, mais vous avez également le Graal qui a été christianisé et il n'y a aucun doute à ce sujet. Et tout ce que je vous dis, c'est que la christianisation du Graal a commencé avec l'icône d'Edesse et avec le rite de l'Enfant Jésus qui se change ou se transforme en Jésus Christ crucifié, et à Constantinople, cela nous a donné au XIIème siècle un autre rite avec une représentation beaucoup plus réaliste liée à la présence du Linceul, donc de l'icône, aux croisés qui sont arrivés et qui sont repartis d'Edesse et de Constantinople ; nous avons le phénomène de christianisation et il y a les histoires de l'icône qui ont été colportées et qui se trouvent jusqu'en Occident ; donc nous pourrions avoir de plus amples discussions sur la question.

## L'influence de l'icône d'Edesse sur la légende du Saint Graal

L'auteur s'appuie sur divers indices pour confirmer l'identification du Mandylion d'Edesse avec le Linceul d'abord conservé à Constantinople. Il remarque que les rituels d'Edesse et les ostensions de Constantinople font penser à la vision progressive du Christ enfant devenant le Christ crucifié que l'on trouve dans la légende du Saint Graal.

Il note que la légende du Graal s'est christianisée au tournant des XIIe-XIIIe siècles et que Joseph d'Arimathie y fait alors son apparition. Le rôle de Joseph, qui n'est connu dans les Evangiles que pour avoir fourni le Linceul, s'est accru dans certains textes orientaux. La légende du Graal s'est inspirée à son sujet des Actes (apocryphes) de Pilate en transformant le Linceul (sanglant) en calice contenant le sang du Christ.

Convaincu que, contrairement à la légende, Joseph d'Arimathie ne s'est jamais rendu en Bretagne (Angleterre), l'auteur montre que cette légende s'est inspirée de textes anciens où l'on confond avec un prétendu roi des Bretons le roi d'Edesse dont la citadelle s'appelait BIRTHA ou BRITUM.