

# The Cappadocian frescoes in relation to the Turin Shroud

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**B**efore the discovery of the Mandylion in A.D.525 the image of Christ depended entirely on the imagination of the artist concerned, and this due to the fact that nowhere in the New Testament is there a definitive description of his features. Some third and fourth century writers such as Basil and Cyprian were prone to the view that they were unattractive whilst others were not so convinced and thought otherwise. The Romans of the fourth century were prone to depict Him in an Hellenistic tradition, a trend that can be seen in the catacombs in Rome, in the street of the tombs under St Peter's in reliefs on sarcophagae in the Vatican Museum (Fig. 1) and in the Good Shepherd mosaic in the tomb of Galla Placida in Ravenna.



*Fig. 1 : Relief on Sarcophagus, Vatican Museum*

The few exceptions include a profile depiction of Christ in the Orpheus Cubiculum in Rome that could arguably date to the first century ; if so the artist must have realised that Jesus was of Jewish stock and possibly had as inspiration the contemporary Orthodox Jews of Rome.

For some four hundred years after its discovery the Mandylion was kept in the Hagia Sophia built by Justinian in Edessa and from that time on the features of Jesus were based on its image, to then become the accepted norm in Byzantine Iconography. It is here where the Cappadocian frescoes must be taken into account when endeavouring to assess the authenticity of the Turin Shroud.

The remoteness and solitude of the Cappadocian valleys attracted many early Christians to carve their rupes-tral churches into the volcanic Tura of a weird landscape that was brought about by climatic conditions over a millennia of years. (Fig 2) By the time the Great St Basil succeeded Eusebius as Bishop of Caesarea in A.D.364 the valleys were renowned for their religious fervour.



*Fig. 2 : Cappadocian Landscape The Peristrema Gorge.*

Throughout the region today there are the remains of over 350 recorded churches, chapels, and monasteries but in them little decoration that can be attributed to pre Iconoclasm, that is before A.D.723. However, some still have the red linear motifs of the Iconoclastic period whilst others the remnants of varicoloured and beautiful complex designs that date before A.D.825. the year of the Restitution of Images.

The earliest post Iconoclastic schemes of decoration have scenes from the Nativity to the Crucifixion frescoed in sequence like a strip cartoon, such as those that cover the barrel vault of Old Tokali church in Goreme. The latter and first depictions of Christ in Majesty are to be found in the Virgin Church in the Goreme cliffs, now closed being in danger of falling some hundreds of feet into the Kiliclar Valley, (fig. 3) in the Pidgeon Church in



*Fig. 3 : Christ In Majesty, the Virgin Church, Goreme.*  
the Gulu Dere valley (Fig 4) and in the Yilanli Church in



*Fig. 4 : Christ In Majesty, Pidgeon Church, Goreme*

the Peristrema Gorge. (Fig. 5) Here all the images have a



*Fig. 5 : Christ In Majesty, Yilanli Church, Peristrema Gorge*

rounded contour of the beard and the quiff of fallen hair that is generally depicted by three downward strokes over the brow. The neck line is present in the Virgin and Pidgeon Church images but not in the Yilanli Church image: all three have a possible Armenian influence and all show the Eastern Blessing, the third finger touching the thumb.

The Pidgeon Church frescoe has a marked similarity with the mosaic above the Royal Door of the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul where Christ is shown receiving homage from the Emperor Leo VI. 886912. (Fig. 6) In both ins-



*Fig. 6 : Detail of Christ with Leo VI in the Sancta Sophia, Istanbul*

tances Christ is seated in a lyre shaped chair of identical design, and both images show the rounded beard and the quiff of hair. The mosaic must date to the period when Leo VI was Emperor and points to the fact that these three Cappadocian frescoes are of a somewhat similar date and painted when the Mandylyon was still in Edessa.

The Ikon in St Catherine's Monastery depicting Thaddeus giving the Mandylyon to Abgar has the image of Jesus with the fallen lock of hair, the neck line, and the rounded beard, but here the features of Abgar are thought to be those of the Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetus, A.D.919-953, who was instrumental in having the Mandylyon brought to Constantinople in 944. This could be indicative of the fact that it too was painted before the Mandylyon left Edessa or shortly after its arrival in Constantinople.

It would seem then that the images of Christ with a rounded contour of the beard were painted before the Mandylyon left Edessa, and here it must not be forgotten that Edessa is some 1350 kilometers from Constantinople and some 530 from Cappadocia, not an easy journey today in spite of modern transport. It is not then likely that these particular frescoes were the work of Constantinople for it would not have been an easy matter for those of the Capital to have closely studied the Mandylyon when kept in remote Edessa.

Though it is difficult to date the frescoes precisely it is very apparent that the upsurge of painting in the churches took place between the late tenth and first half of the eleventh centuries when the decorative format was not that of a strip cartoon. Those that had had their Iconoclastic designs painted directly onto the Tufa walls then had plastered over before being frescoed with scenes from the New Testament, the Iconography following guidelines laid down by the Byzantine Church. Some of this decoration was the work of local artists with varying degrees of competence, often the monks themselves, but even so they have a sincerity of feeling and a freedom that is not to be seen in the later Byzantine style.

On numerous occasions this redecoration was commissioned by wealthy donors who had themselves included in the frescoes in attitudes of supplication, and in areas where the plaster has fallen away the underliving designs of the Iconoclastic period are again visible. Michael Skepides is the name of the donor in the Kalabash church in the Sogalni valley with a recorded date of 1061, but what is interesting is the preservation of a land dispute that involves a Eustathios Skepides of a wealthy family living in Southern Italy In 1204. There could be a connection.

The expertise and quality of decoration in many of these churches is such that their wealthy donors must have employed artists from the ateliers of Constantinople, and it is here where the images of the Pantocrators appear to have been influenced by the Mandylyon now kept in the Pharos Chapel. The frescoes in the Apple Church and the Karanlik Monastery Church show a so-

phistication that must be that of a Constantinople workshop, for both churches have the same scheme and flamboyant style that could date to the first quarter of the eleventh century, that is before 1025. The fine Pantocrator in Karanlik plainly shows the markings 12, 13, 15, (Fig 7) whilst that in the nearby Apple Church, though



*Fig. 7 : the Pantocrator, Karanlik Church*

more damaged, is clearly of the same style and period. In Karanlik the fresco of The Betrayal in Gethsemane shows Christ in a full frontal pose and here again the face has the markings 12, 13, 15, (Fig. 8) and in all these



*Fig. 8 : The Betrayal, Karanlik Church*

depictions the beard has lost the rounded contour and has a distinct notch or fork of varying depth.

In the images that date from the early eleventh to the late twelfth century this treatment of the beard becomes a standard and can clearly be seen in the somewhat terrifying Pantocrator that looks down from the dome in Daphni and dates to around 1100. Others include a similar Pantocrator in Cefalu Cathedral, the Christ Eleemon in Berlin, the mosaic of Christ in the Bargello in Florence, around 1150, and those in the early twelfth century church of Theotocus Trikaros in Cyprus.

Before 1204 the quiff of hair appears to have been definitive of the image of Christ appearing as it does in that of the Christ Child in the Virgin's arms in a fresco in Direkli church in the Peristrema Gorge.

A similar fresco in the Kiliclar church, that approximately dates to the first quarter of the eleventh century, shows the Christ child with a less wooden but more naive and sophisticated maturity that makes it much more alert and endearing. (Fig 9)



*Fig. 9 : The Christ Child, Kiliclar Church*

Frescoes in two other Cappadocian Churches are of importance. Those in the courtyard Monastery near the village of Eski Gumus are the work of three hands: The Pantocrator in the dome of the apse shows not only the markings 12, 13, and 15 but also 1, the band of the Phylactery and possibly the Phylactery itself and could date to the first half of the eleventh century. (Fig 10) This is the only instance in the Cappadocian churches where this marking is so clearly depicted. Also in the decorative scheme are the emblems of the Evangelists with that of the ox of St Luke being the best preserved. These emblems are often depicted in the Romanesque churches in France but rarely to be seen in Cappadocian Iconography. Comparison between the frescoes of Eski Gumus and those of the Goreme churches shows a marked difference in style, but even so they could still be the work of the Constantinople workshops.



*Fig. 10 : The Pantocrator, Monastery Church of Eski Gumus*

rence in style, but even so they could still be the work of the Constantinople workshops.

Sakli Church in the Goreme hills is the other of major importance but reached only by a vertical descent down the cliff side. Here the Mandylion decorates the top of an arch to form a part of a larger scheme, (Fig.11) but with



*Fig. 11 : The Mandylion, Sakli Church.*

rounded features so that the whole fits into the contour of the arch. Nevertheless the Vignon markings are clearly shown and in this case the eyes appear to be lidded. (Fig 12) The figure of St John with the Gospel occupies



*Fig. 12 : Detail of Mandylion Image*

the right support of the arch with that of the Virgin on the left. On either side of the Virgin are the frescoes of two independent buildings, one a rectangular structure that could represent a church and the other a tall tower. (Fig. 13) Depictions of independent buildings as such do



*Fig. 13 : Detail of buildings, Sakli Church*

not figure in any other Cappadocian frescoes: they only appear as background structures in scenes of the Annunciation and the Presentation in the Temple. It is speculation that these frescoes could relate to the Hagia Sophia of Justinian in Edessa and the Gate House where the Mandylion came to light in 525.

The lattice motif decorating the wall of the church also covers part of the ceiling of Sakli itself and is a feature that could link the Church with Edessa, for this lattice design was one that was used on the Royal robes of Abgar. It is also a feature of the eleventh and twelfth century depictions of the Mandylion that are respectively in the Greek library in Alexandria, in Novgorod, and in Gradac. Furthermore the images of Saints Cosmos and

Damian, the physicians born and subsequently martyred with their mother in Edessa, are shown in prominent positions facing each other on the pillars of another arch. Also and significantly the fresco of St Helena incorporates the design of a shield that can be seen in the Bayeux Tapestry, an obsolete design by A.D.1100 when the shield was truncated by having the top section removed.

The decoration in this church is such that it could well be a link with the First Crusade when passing through Constantinople on the way to Edessa in A.D. 1097. Here Baldwin of Boulogne was not slow in eliminating Thorus, the Armenian ruler, to become the first of the Counts of Edessa in 1098 : the family to remain as such till being displaced by Zengi of Aleppo in A.D. 1144. When passing through Constantinople in 1097 it is hard to believe that the leaders of the First Crusade did not avail themselves of any opportunity to see the Mandylion, and they could well have been the patrons responsible for the decoration in Sakli between that date and their expulsion from Edessa in 1144.

Between A.D. 944 and 1204 the images of Christ had the Markings 12, 13, 15 with the beard showing a distinct notch or marked fork. These criteria spread Eastwards into Georgia and Russia to become the norm in the images of Christ, even though the facial characteristics did not always conform to the Cappadocian style: examples being the Christ enthroned in the St Barbara Church in Sveti in Georgia, (Fig. 14) and the cloisonee



*Fig. 14 : Ikon of Christ, Sveti*

# The Cappadocian frescoes in relation to the Turin Shroud

enamel of The Raising of Lazarus in the State Museum in Tiflis.

However, between 1204 and 1357, some 150 years between the disappearance of the Shroud from Constantinople and being exposed to the pilgrims at Lirey, it is significant that the markings 12, 13, 15, do not figure in any of the images of Christ to be seen in the Romanesque Churches of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries located in the villages of the Loir between Vendôme and Nantes. The most striking being those in the Churches of St Gillies (Fig. 16) and Pontigne: (Fig.15)



*Fig. 15 : Christ in Malesty, Pontigne, The Loir Valley*



*Fig. 16 : Head of Christ, St Gillies, Loir Valley.*

nor do they appear in the frescoes of Christ in Cluny. (Fig. 17)



*Fig. 17 : Christ in Malesty, Cluny*

The markings do not appear in Giotto's frescoes in the Chapel of the Annunziata in Padua that date to 1305, nor do they appear in his frescoes in the Basilica in Assisi. They do not figure in the works of Doccia of Ravenna nor are they to be seen in the images of Christ that date to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the churches of Cyprus. Though the images of Christ in the Hagia Sophia and the Karive Camii, that date to the late fourteenth century onwards, have a very slight semblance of a notch it is significant that the Quiff of hair has not been shown. (Figs. 18, 19) Between 1204 and 1357, some 150 years, it would seem that the Vignon markings in these images, have faded out and been forgotten though the features of Christ have remained traditional.

What then is the conclusion? From the history and chronology of the Mandylion as detailed by Ian Wilson it appears that a cloth bearing an image was presented to Abgar around A.D. 30 to be concealed in the West Gate of Edessa on his death in A.D.57. Between A.D.57 and its discovery in A.D.525, a period of some 460 years, the cloth became a legend of the distant past, its possible existence being mentioned by Bishop Eusebius. Eviden-



*Fig. 18 : Head of Christ, Hagia Sophia*

ce that the features of Christ were unknown prior to A.D. 525 lie in various artists interpretations that often favour



*Fig. 19 : Head of Christ, Karive Camii.*

a GrecoRoman concept. After 525 the concept of the image dramatically changes as reflected in the early frescoes that definitively show the markings 15 and 13, but with a rounded contour of the beard.

After the transfer of the Mandylion to Constantinople the Vignon markings in the Cappadocian frescoes beco-

me more Pronounced, the Beard then having a distinct notch or fork: the markings to become widespread and reach Eastwards Into Georgia. After the sack of Constantinople in 1204 the later images of Christ gradually loose the Vignon markings, the most significant being that of the Quiff of hair. This is very apparent in the post 1204 mosaics in Istanbul and must indicate the fact that the artists who worked in Constantinople during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had by then forgotten the traditional markings, not having the Mandylion as a reference.

This leaves us with the fact that those of the ateliers of Constantinople who painted the post 944 frescoes of the Cappadocian Pantocrators were apt to record the Vignon markings in more detail in their images, and inspired so to do by the Shroud that was then kept in The Pharos Chapel. If the Turin Shroud with its markings that are reflected in the early Cappadocian frescoes is a copy of the fourteenth century, it is fair to assume that it must have been copied directly from an original, and if so what happened to the original after the copy was made, and in the circumstance why a need for a copy.

If the Shroud is a skillful forgery and not a direct copy from the original that disappeared in 1204, the question arises as to how the markings were incorporated into the image when they were not to be seen as a reference in the frescoes of a comparable date in the Romanesque churches of France and Italy, let alone the mosaics of a similar date in Istanbul. Even given the formidable expertise of mediaeval forgers of relics it is difficult to accept the theory that those responsible incorporated the Vignon markings on such a forgery when all contemporary images lacked them, and there was no recourse to the original last seen in Constantinople.

Two enigmas still remain. If the Shroud is a forgery, how was it done? If the Shroud is not a forgery but dates to the time of the Crucifixion, in what way was the image imprinted on the cloth. When assessing the mass of circumstantial evidence that has accumulated in order to determine the authenticity of the Shroud the history of the Cappadocian churches together with their important frescoes must not be overlooked. ■

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## Les fresques de Cappadoce et le Linceul de Turin

*L'auteur s'applique à rechercher l'apparition des signes de Vignon (points de ressemblance avec l'image du Linceul) dans l'iconographie du Christ en fonction des étapes de l'histoire du Linceul : 525, 944, 1204 et au-delà.*

*Il a particulièrement étudié les fresques qui, après la période iconoclaste, ont redécoré les églises troglodytes de Cappadoce, situées entre Edesse et Constantinople. Les fresques qu'il signale sont souvent l'oeuvre d'artistes byzantins et leurs dates probables vont de la fin du IXe siècle au début du XIIe.*

*Les Pantocrators les plus anciens montrent un Christ à la barbe ronde et peu de signes de Vignon. Dès le début du XIe siècle à Karanlik et à " la Pomme ", apparaissent la barbe fourchue et d'autres signes de Vignon. Parmi les autres fresques citées par l'auteur, il faut noter l'une d'elles, dans l'église Sakli, où se trouve représenté le Mandylion, entre des bâtiments dont l'un pourrait être l'église d'Edesse.*