

IDOL SPECULATION

By

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A REVIEW OF

THE TEMPLARS AND THE SHROUD OF CHRIST

By Barbara Frale

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In *The Templars and the Shroud of Christ*, recently published in an English edition, Barbara Frale, a “Vatican Secret Archives Historian”, asserts that the Order of Knights Templar once possessed the Shroud of Turin. This pronouncement will, no doubt, come as quite a shock to the readers of her 2004 book, *The Templars, The Secret History Revealed*, in which, after admonishing historians to publish historical conclusions only on the basis of “reliable proof”, she suggested that this guiding principle be applied to the “conjecture” that Templars were once Shroud custodians. From these statements, one would reasonably deduce that, during the five-year period spanning the respective publications of her two Templar studies (2004-2009), Dr. Frale had discovered reliable proof of a Templar-Shroud connection sufficient to advance that concept from a status of conjecture to one of certitude.

This is not the case, however, as in *The Templars and the Shroud of Christ*, Dr. Frale discloses that, by the late 1990s, she was already aware of certain Templar trial testimony which had described “an object exactly similar to the Shroud of Turin”. By according to Dr. Frale a full portion of academic *bona fides* with respect to her aforementioned admonishment to fellow historians and her concomitant criticism of the Templar-Shroud connection as mere conjecture, it becomes necessarily true that, in 2004, Dr. Frale did not deem any Templar trial testimony with which she was then familiar to constitute reliable proof that the Templars had once possessed the Shroud. Thus, rather inexplicable is the apparent fact that, contrary to her cautionary advice to other historians, she herself employed “unreliable proof” in order to substantiate the sensational conclusion of her 2009 book that a portion of the Shroud’s undocumented history is to be found in the documented trial records of the Templar Knights.

In *The Templars and the Shroud of Christ*, an otherwise interesting and informative read, Dr. Frale deftly employs numerous historical sources to establish motive, means, and opportunity for the Templar Order’s acquisition of the Shroud. After essentially restating Ian Wilson’s 1978 Mandylyon Theory, which identified the Turin Shroud with several imaged cloths devoutly venerated in Edessa and Constantinople prior to 1204, she purports to confirm Wilson’s self-described “working hypothesis” that a rumored Templar head idol was also the famous relic. Dr. Frale summarily discounts historical facts which might tend to undermine that conclusion and, for example, she blithely dismisses numerous Templar eyewitness accounts which ascribe diabolical features to their idol as the product of an era so rife with confusion and sensationalism that it made people imagine the presence of heresy and sorcery in everything surrounding them.

As the “reliable proof” that she had previously espoused as prerequisite to the establishment of historical fact, Dr. Frale proffers but one exhibit, the existence of which, as has been previously noted, was apparently known to her for well over a decade. That document, written in Latin and kept in the Paris National Archives, recounts the 1307 interrogations of certain imprisoned Templars, and Dr. Frale contends that the testimony of one such prisoner, Arnaut Sabbatier, undoubtedly establishes, as a matter of historical fact, that some Templars had seen an idol “identical to the Shroud of Turin” which was fully unfolded and exhibited in a manner which displayed that relic’s full-body image.

The portion of Sabbatier’s testimony upon which Dr. Frale bases her conclusion is found in the following passage: “*quoddam lineum habentem ymaginem hominis, quod adoravit ter pedes osculand*”. According to Dr. Frale, Sabbatier thereby “said explicitly” that he had observed the whole figure of a man’s body on a linen cloth. It is certain, however, that Sabbatier never said explicitly that he had observed a full-body image of a man, and Dr. Frale does subsequently concede that Sabbatier had given this description only “in so many words”. It is also patent that Sabbatier never said explicitly that he had observed an image on a “linen cloth”, as the Latin word for such an object is “lin-teum”, not “lineum”, the missing letter “t” possibly denoting a scrivener’s error in recordation or transposition, and yet this critical omission goes completely unmentioned by Dr. Frale, a specialist in paleography, the study of ancient writing.

Once all of the interpretive varnish is removed from Sabbatier’s testimony, his account of having worshipped, by kissing, an undefined “lineum” image of a man with feet totally fails to provide reliable proof that the Templars were once in possession of the Shroud. Perhaps that is why, as Dr. Frale has acknowledged, this source document had been largely ignored by other historians, and why, too, Dr. Frale had failed to mention even its existence in her 2004 Templar study. In addition, Sabbatier’s testimony certainly presents no evidence whatsoever that a Templar idol shared the several critical features of identification with the Turin Shroud which were trumpeted so loudly and sensationally in the publicity which preceded the initial publication of this book in 2009 and in which the Templar idol was variably described as a “long piece” of “linen cloth” upon which was “impressed” the “full figure” of a “bearded” man.

In time, perhaps, some historian will discover and present reliable proof which confirms Wilson’s Templar hypothesis. Until that transpires, however, due heed should be paid to Umberto Eco’s Foreword to Dr. Frale’s 2004 book in which she described any alleged Templar-Shroud link as mere conjecture. Eco, a respected medievalist and famous novelist, astutely opined that ninety-nine percent of books relating to the Templars are “pure fantasy” and he unequivocally endorsed that book as “a thoughtful and welcome antidote to these literary frauds”. With regard to Dr. Frale’s 2009 book which promotes, as historical fact, the very Templar-Shroud connection which she had denigrated as conjecture just five years earlier, it should be duly noted that Umberto Eco has neither authored a Foreword nor provided an endorsement.