

The first historical reference to the image on the Shroud – the Old Spanish Liturgy

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“Peter ran to the tomb with John and saw the recent imprint of he who was dead and risen on the cloths”.¹ This is what we read in the Offertory in the Old Spanish Liturgy (also known as the Toledo or Mozarabic Liturgy), for the first Saturday after Easter Sunday.

The context of the text is quite clear. It is a variation on the text in the fourth gospel, in which Peter and the “other disciple” (the liturgy thus identifies this disciple with John, as do most commentators) run to the tomb (in Luke’s gospel, Peter goes alone) and see the burial cloths but not the body of Jesus. The liturgical text adds more details. The two disciples run to the tomb after being told that it was empty (or at least that there was no body) and see something related to Jesus in the cloths. Up to this point there is no doubt. But what exactly was it that the disciples saw? The word in Latin is *vestigia*. This word has various meanings, the main one being “footprints”, but this would not fit in here as we are expressly told that the *vestigia* were on the cloth.

We have to apply a more generic sense of the word, such as “imprint” or “mark”. What Peter and John saw was something related to Christ’s death and resurrection. One possible interpretation is that the disciples saw bloodstains (death) and a body image on the cloth (life). It is difficult to imagine what else they could have seen on the burial cloths that made them think of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The historical truth of the text (i.e. whether or not this actually happened) should not distract us from its meaning. It is not important here to argue about whether Peter and John really did see blood and an image on the cloth (although the debate is fascinating), but whether the author (or authors) of this liturgy believed there was something on Christ’s funeral cloths that was in some way related to his death and resurrection. Who was this author and why would he think this?

Much has been written about the origins of the old Spanish Liturgy. Some say that it came into the Peninsula with the Visigothic invasion in 409, but against this is the almost complete absence of Arian influence.² It is also quite sure that Saint Leander (the elder brother of both Isidore of Seville and Fulgentius of Écija) revised the liturgy, which proves its existence before the Visigoths converted to Catholicism. The sees of

¹ Ad monumentum Petrus cum Iohanne cucurrit recientaque in linteaminibus defuncti et resurgentis vestigia cernit.

² The Visigoths were Arians until 589, when King Recaredo publicly professed his Catholicism – he had adopted it personally two years previously. According to Arianism, Jesus was divine but had not existed eternally.

Toledo, Seville and Tarragona all contributed to the rite. Tradition attributes the text to various people: Justus of Urgell, Saint Leander of Seville, Saint Isidore of Seville and Peter of Lleida. In spite of the lack of definite proof, it would be very strange of these people had not at least checked the text, as they were the main ecclesiastical figures of the time.

The liturgy survived the Moslem invasion in the eighth century. In fact, there are many manuscripts of the rite copied in the tenth and eleventh centuries in León, San Millán de la Cogolla, San Juan de la Peña, Santo Domingo de Calzada and Santo Domingo de Silos. The rite was abolished in the kingdoms of Castilla and León by the Council of Burgos, called under King Alfonso VI in 1080.

Catholics who lived in Moslem territory had to pay a special tax to use Christian liturgy. Those who accepted were known as “mozárabes”, hence the name Mozarabic that is sometimes given to this liturgy. When King Alfonso VI conquered the city of Toledo in 1085, he granted the Mozarabs the right to keep on using their beloved liturgy in the six parishes in the city. There are two currents in the liturgy, generally known as Tradition A and Tradition B. A belongs to the north, while B is more identified with the south of the country.

In 1495, Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros was appointed Archbishop of Toledo. He was aware of the great value of the old liturgy, which was about to disappear as most churches adopted the Roman rite. Five years later he published the *Missale mixtum secundum regulam beati Isidori, dictum mozarabes* and in 1502 the *Breviarium secundum regulam beati Isidori*. According to Jordi Pinell³, the attribution of Tradition B to Isidore and Leander would mean that at least the Missal and the Breviary had their origins in Seville.

The Catholic Encyclopaedia states that “Though until this date (sc. 589) the kings and the Teutonic ruling class were Arians, the native Spanish population was largely Catholic, and the rite - which was possibly revised and added to by St. Leander of Seville and the first Council of Toledo in 589, described and perhaps arranged by his brother and successor, St. Isidore (d. 636), and regulated by the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633 - was no doubt that previously in use among the Spanish Catholics”.

The question in the head of anyone with an interest in the Shroud is no doubt: Why all of a sudden should someone write in the old Spanish rite that there were ‘marks’ on the linen cloths seen by Peter and John in the tomb? There is a possible answer to this question, although we should proceed with the greatest caution as this answer is just a theory and not a proven fact.

³ *Liturgia hispánica*, Biblioteca Litúrgica, Centre de Pastoral Litúrgica, Barcelona, 1998.

The name of St. Leander of Seville has always been linked to the Old Spanish Rite. Leander was born in 545 and died towards the end of the same century or at the beginning of the sixth. We know he spent a few years in Constantinople, more precisely from 579 to 582, with another shorter visit in 595. It was in the capital of Byzantium that that he became friends with the future Pope Gregory the Great and it was precisely Leander who informed Gregory, when he was Pope, of the conversion of Recaredo.⁴

According to the theory that identifies the Shroud of Turin with the Image of Edessa, the Image was rediscovered in Edessa in the early sixth century, possibly after the terrible floods that destroyed a large part of the city walls in 525. Regardless of exactly how the city was saved during the attack by the Persian Chosroes I, we know that the Image was in the city in 545. It was taken to Constantinople four hundred years later and is not heard of again under this name after the sack of the city during the Fourth Crusade in 1204.⁵

Both Leander and Gregory were high ranking ecclesiastical dignitaries, one the official ambassador of the King of Spain, the other soon to become Pope. It is unthinkable that they would not have heard of the discovery of the Image of Christ in Edessa, which was said to have miraculous properties. Maybe they even saw it. There is no record of such a journey, but it would not have been necessary to learn about the Image.

At the same time, if it is true that Leander saw or was informed about the Image, later including the details in his country's national liturgy, not only do we have the first historical reference to an image on Jesus' funeral shroud (and this is undeniable), but also the conclusion that Leander knew the Image of Edessa was this same burial cloth. Possible support for this idea comes from the letter written by Braulio of Zaragoza, which around AD 650 mentions the discovery of Christ's funeral shroud while talking about blood relics. If this is so, the two Spanish bishops would be the first to identify the Image of Edessa with the cloth that wrapped Jesus' body in the tomb.

As I said at the start of this article, linking Leander's texts in the old Spanish rite with the Image of Edessa is just a theory – logical and attractive, but still a theory, not proven history. What cannot be denied, however, under any circumstances, is that according to the Old Spanish Liturgy somebody, for some reason, believed that almost two thousand years ago, Peter and John went running to the tomb and saw something on the linen cloth that was clearly related to the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth: the first historical reference to the image on the Shroud.

⁴ Cf. *Gregory the Great and his world*, pp. 164-168; R.A. Markus, Cambridge University Press 1997.

⁵ Para una exposición detallada de la mutua identificación de las dos telas, véase Ian Wilson, *The Turin Shroud*, 1978, y *The Blood and the Shroud*, 1998.