

The Lisbon Shroud Copy

By Mark Guscini

On a recent trip to Lisbon I arranged for a private viewing of the copy of the Shroud held in the city, often referred to as the Xabregas copy (Xabregas being the convent where it was originally kept). There is some information about the copy in an article by Remi van Haelst – this article is mainly concerned with the Lierre copy and only a few lines are devoted to the Lisbon copy. The article is available online at barrie Schwartz's web site: <http://www.shroud.com/vanhels2.htm>

Remi's work on the Lierre shroud is excellent, but it would seem that he only worked from photographs for the Lisbon copy, and consequently the information he provides is not as accurate as it might otherwise have been. The copy is most definitely not the same size as the original in Turin, and the paragraph omits all mention of the most significant and original feature of the copy – the frontal and dorsal images are sewn to each other and so only one can be seen at any time unless the cloth is hung up vertically and viewers can walk from one side to the other.

But back to my own visit. The shroud copy is kept in the National Tile Museum, quite a distance from the city centre. To get there you have either an uncomfortable twenty-minute walk along very narrow pavements, or you can catch a local bus where the Metro comes to an end. Despite the location, the museum is well worth visiting for the collection of tiles, and in relation to the Shroud copy the staff were most pleasant and helpful at all times.

The cloth is kept rolled up in a wooden box (see Figure 1). The first thing that strikes you as you see it is the absence of the burn marks from the 1532 fire, which means that it was copied either before this year or was copied afterwards from another copy that did date from before 1532. And just as with the Lierre copy, which also lacks the burn marks from the 1532 fire, the four sets of four L-shaped holes (also burn marks) are present on the cloth. The symmetry of the holes is almost exactly as on the original Turin Shroud, although the set on the right of the dorsal image is not the same shape. The long stroke of the "L" is almost diagonal.

Remi van Haelst was quite right when he pointed out that these holes (as pointed out above, most definitely burn marks on the original Shroud) are in fact depicted as red dots on the Lisbon copy (and on the Lierre copy too). He concludes that the artist must have thought they were blood stains (four bloodstains from four nails?), and indeed, that they might well have been bloodstains that were later damaged by fire. I would not necessarily agree with this. Van Haelst also claims that the presence of coins and other objects on the Shroud has been proven – and this is much more than doubtful.

The Lisbon Shroud copy is painted on linen and measures 197 x 94 cm, significantly smaller than the Turin original. As I said above, the frontal and dorsal images are sewn together, but even if they were separated and placed end to end the copy would still be smaller. The photograph on the front cover of the newsletter was sent to me some years ago now by Remi Van Haelst and shows the two cloths separate, most probably for an exhibition.

As a work of art, the Lisbon copy leaves much to be desired. The artist's limited abilities are best seen in the face on the cloth – the eyes are nothing more than two dots, and the moustache seems to have been confused with the mouth (or possible what is intended to be the moustache looks like the mouth, and the small line under this is meant to be the mouth). Either way, the resulting expression looks like a child's drawing. The hands are crossed and the thumbs invisible, as on the Turin cloth. The artist's lack of skill is also evident on the feet on the dorsal image, where the painting of heels seems to have surpassed his capacity.

What really grabs our attention are the three red chains on the image. The first is painted around the head, and while is evidently intended as a chain on the dorsal image, looks more like a red headband on the front. There is nothing on the Turin Shroud to suggest the presence of this (is it meant to be the crown of thorns? in which case it is more suited to an image of the Veronica), which could mean that the Lisbon copy was not painted directly in the presence of the Turin Shroud, but rather some time after the artist had seen the original, and was now working from memory.

The red chain across the back (which does not continue around the body on the frontal image) is easier to account for; the bloodstain which runs horizontally across the bottom of the back on the Turin image was mistaken for a chain.

The third chain goes round the ankles on both images. Again, there is nothing to suggest the presence of a chain here on the original cloth. If the artist remembered the bloodstain across the back as a chain, the addition of two further chains round the head and feet is most probably due simply to artistic licence.

On the dorsal image the hair is loose, and the angle of the arms does not coincide with their position on the frontal image.

The earliest written record of the copy dates from 1639, when nuns at the convent of the Madre de Deus stated that it was a gift from Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor from 1493-1519 and the son of Frederick III and Eleanor of Portugal. There is no apparent reason to doubt this; in fact, the copy must logically date from before 1532.

The copy formed part of the exhibition held in 2009 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the foundation of the convent of Madre de Deus (which is now the National Tile Museum). A truly beautiful catalogue was published, which includes some information about the copy (although it mistakenly suggests a date of the 16th or 17th century) and a colour photograph of the frontal image. The main catalogue is in Portuguese, although there is a good English translation of most of the text at the back.

The catalogue includes a fascinating description of how the copy was displayed in the early eighteenth century, which I take the liberty of quoting:

On the eve of Good Friday I went by river to see the shroud on display. It is exhibited on a small stone veranda that was adorned with purple cloths for the purpose. The convent from whose window it is shown is called Madre de Deus. As soon as the window is opened, people kneel, and the priest comes bearing the cloth rolled in his hand and accompanied by other people dressed in white, carrying in their hands lighted white wax candles, even though this ceremony takes place at about four in the afternoon. The cloth is about three feet wide by eight

feet long. It is rolled in red damask and the damask is longer than the shroud and people are on their knees the entire time. Finally, he shows the feet and says that these feet suffered the pain of being nailed to the cross for their sins and then talks of the body as the cloth is slowly unfolded. The exactness of the proportions, the difference between light and shade (because the area of the arms which are folded over the genitals is raised as it would be on a painting) clearly show that this is pencil work. When it has been fully displayed for some time the priest turns his back on the people and says that Christ himself will also turn his back on impenitent sinners. A little later he again shows his face, and some time after that he slowly begins to fold the cloth. All this time he speaks of the Passion, and people sob and sigh and beat their breast at passionate parts of the talk. The whole thing from start to finish lasts about half an hour. One side of the shroud shows the figure of a man with his face towards us, his arms crossed over his stomach, an ordinary face, reddish in colour, but not evenly vivid overall. The other side shows a man with his back turned towards us. They say that this is the true shroud of our Saviour and that these marks were made by his blood. There were a large number of people there, both on land and in boats. Three boats that carried on the mast side had the figure of a man made of old clothes filled with straw; it represented Judas, and using a rope and a pulley they dipped it several times in the water.

The author of the text repeats the claim that this is the original shroud that wrapped Christ's body, but discreetly points out that this cannot be so. First of all, earlier on he has said that the figure is clearly the work of an artist, and his use of the phrase "they say" shows that he at least does not agree with what follows.

In summary, as a work of art the Lisbon copy is sadly lacking. Its great value lies in its confirmation of the existence of the L-shaped holes before the fire of 1532.



The Lisbon Copy

