

THE SERMON OF GREGORY REFERENDARIUS

By Mark Guscini

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Background

On 15th August 944, the Image of Edessa, the *ἀχειροποιήτος* image (not made by human hands), came to the imperial capital Constantinople from Edessa (today's Sanli-Urfa in Turkey). The feast day of the event is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on the following day, 16th August, and is generally overshadowed by the Dormition of the Virgin, celebrated on the 15th.

A sermon pronounced by Gregory Referendarius, Archdeacon of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople on the occasion of the Image's arrival in the city survives in one known manuscript in the Vatican Archives, recently rediscovered by Italian classics scholar Gino Zaninotto. The codex dates from the eleventh century. I have worked with microfilm copies of the manuscript to produce this translation, kindly supplied by Professor Daniel Scavone. An excellent edition of the Greek text with a translation into French was published by André-Marie Dubarle in 1997, in the *Revue des Études Byzantines*, No. 55, pp. 5-51. I have adopted many of Dubarle's textual emendations, preferred the original manuscript reading over other suggestions of his, and corrected the few errors in his transcription of the text from the manuscript.

Gregory's Greek is exceedingly complex at times, in spite of his avowal to tell the story in simple unpolished language – a commonplace intention in medieval texts that was rarely kept to when promised. If the original Greek is in places ambiguous or difficult to understand, then any translation should maintain the same level of complexity, hence there are some passages which are far from easy to understand. A good example of the somewhat contrived expressions used by Gregory could be the sentence "Those who are of the altar touch the face of the earth with their feet", which simply means "The priests walk". A faithful rendering of the original demands equally verbose English.

The Image of Edessa and the Shroud of Turin

It was Ian Wilson who first brought to the world at large the theory by which the Image of Edessa could in fact have been none other than the Turin Shroud. The reasons behind the theory are explained in Wilson's books on the Shroud, and need no further comment here. The main objection to the theory, still made by many today, is that the Image of Edessa is generally recorded as a facial image of Christ formed in life, either when he met the messenger sent by King Abgar and wiped his face on a cloth, miraculously leaving an imprint on it, or when he wiped his face with a cloth in the garden of Gethsemane, while sweating blood. This second theory of the legend of the image, found in the Official History attributed to Constantine Porphyrogenitus, written on or shortly after the arrival of the Image in the imperial capital in August 944, is proof that blood had been seen on the Image as the author was trying to find an explanation for this.

What seems to have happened is that each time something new was discovered about the Image of Edessa, it was incorporated into the legend **with no attempt to iron out any resulting contradictions**. Yes, the image on the cloth was always said to be a facial image formed in life, but in some texts alongside this statement we also read that the image was of the full body of Christ. Gregory himself, in the sermon translated below, attributes the image to the sweat from the agony in Gethsemane, while at the same time declaring that the image has been embellished by blood from the side wound (quite obviously after the crucifixion and the death of Jesus).

Of course this kind of internal contradiction makes our twenty-first century minds jolt and think of explanations, such as interpolations, texts added on or even invented. And yet our minds do not work like those of devout Orthodox believers. My own work on Mount Athos, researching unpublished texts about the Image of Edessa, has led me to the same conclusion. It was discovered that the Image was in fact a full body, hence some Synaxarion¹ texts speak of Abgar requesting a full bodily likeness of Christ in all detail, but this was made when Christ pressed a cloth to his face only. According to some hymns contained in the Menaion², when Abgar contemplated the cloth, he saw bloodstains on it, and yet the hymns make no attempt to explain this by

¹ The Synaxarion is a book celebrating and explaining the different saints and events of each day of the year.

referring to Gethsemane. New information is included without eliminating or correcting what was previously thought to be true. There are examples of a similar process in the biblical book of Genesis, in which two different sources (known as J and E) are mixed together and the resulting contradictions (e.g. the number of animals allowed into Noah's ark) are just left in, or the three different accounts of Paul's conversion included by the author of The Acts of the Apostles, left exactly as they are with their little internal contradictions.

Arguing that the Image of Edessa cannot be identified with the Shroud of Turin just because there are plenty of texts that describe the Image as a facial image formed in life is rather like arguing that the planet Pluto does not exist, and bringing out a pre-1930 encyclopedia to prove the point. The only difference is that post-1930 books rectified the point in question, whereas the many Abgar texts just included the new information alongside the old (as if an encyclopedia were to say there were eight planets and then list nine). No matter how unsatisfactory this might be to our way of thinking, this is how the texts present the story.

The Gregory Sermon is precisely one of these texts. The author quite obviously knew that the Image of Edessa had both bloodstains and a side wound. He does abandon the idea of Jesus pressing a cloth to his face in reply to Abgar's letter and messenger, because he knows there is blood on the cloth – the slightly later Official History of the Image of Edessa offers both possibilities, again aware that there is blood on the cloth. He therefore concludes that the image must have been impressed onto the cloth when Jesus' sweat ran down his face like drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane.

However, this would not explain the blood from the side wound. Gregory therefore assumes that "afterwards" (giving a temporal sense to the Greek ἀφ' οὗ) the Image was embellished with blood from the side wound. At no point does he even consider the possibility that the Image of Edessa was in fact the burial shroud of Jesus Christ, once again, something that from our own point of view, seems quite obvious. He must, however, have assumed that the cloth used in Gethsemane was again present at some moment shortly after the crucifixion. Gregory's lack of inquisitive spirit about the origin of the image and the side wound is most frustrating, yet no matter what he did or did not think about the origin of the blood from the side, one thing is clear –

² The Menaion is similar to the Synaxarion but more liturgical in character. It is now in fact incorporated into the Synaxarion.

according to this sermon, the Image of Edessa had a bloodstain from the wound inflicted on Christ's side, and therefore contained a full body image. No amount of contrived pseudo-translations or explanations can get away from this simple fact.

This is therefore a text of great relevance and importance for the history of the Image of Edessa and its possible identification with the Shroud of Turin. Apart from the sixth or seventh century reference to an imaged and bloodstained burial shroud in the Old Spanish liturgy (also called the Mozarabic Liturgy), there are numerous texts that describe the Image of Edessa as much more than a simple facial depiction of Christ. This text, translated below for the first time into English, describes blood from Christ's side, a very strong piece of evidence for identifying the Image with the Shroud. It is a great satisfaction to me personally that the translation is appearing for the first time on Barrie Schwartz's web site.

The original text is continuous in the manuscript – the division into sections and paragraph numbers is mine, done for ease of reference. I would like to thank Ian Wilson, Kim Dreisbach and Dan Scavone for their suggestions and comments, both on this particular text and always. It would seem fitting to end this introduction with the words of Gregory himself, perfectly applicable to the status of the Shroud and the controversy that surrounds it, hoping that one day **"there will be no more lengthy debate about whether the image is yours or not"**.

THE TEXT OF THE SERMON

Introduction

1 A sermon by Gregory the Archdeacon and Referendarius of the great church at Constantinople, about how incredible things are not subject to the laws of praise, and about how three patriarchs have declared that there is an image of Christ which was

brought from Edessa 919 years afterwards by the zeal of a pious emperor, in the year 645³. Lord bless us.

2 The assembly of people is unbelievable, because the reason why everybody has come together is almost beyond understanding. For how can something be incredible if it can be understood? The corresponding dignity is to believe the object exists and to praise it beyond reason. Like one who tries to put, as it were, a golden cord on it, profound thoughts of eloquence perhaps, by which what cannot be made is said to have been made, and the loose bound, we could compare this to trying to boldly measure the infinite. I would say that to believe you can measure this is to seek and search for the intelligence of reason or the quest for understanding. It is therefore enough to worship what it is and not for somebody to think it can be subjected to reason as if it were not so. And what is even more important, it should be shown by my efforts as something that is more than tradition, something that historians can define as a revered object.

3 And so, what exactly is it? By the simple touching to the face of Christ, an image of his form was made, so that people would not think in a dangerous or perilous way that it never actually existed and has been invented. And so even if nobody wishes to help me in this, I will step forward to state that it is not necessary to postpone good things. I will now therefore bring forward the witnesses, not in a magnificent style with polished words, lest the cross of Christ be rendered vain, but rather with simple letters and words, so that even if my own words show I am not an elegant writer, my knowledge will show I am not ignorant.

4 And so, now that you have suitably prepared the condition in which the soul presents⁴ itself to hear such things, I will continue so that you can listen. There is not just one father of this history, but as many as make up the indivisible number, to such a figure it seemed fitting to reach⁵. As Christ said, wherever three people are gathered together in my name, their witness is sure. Their contentious and precise wording is

³ i.e. AD 944.

⁴ The manuscript has no verb for the noun ψυχή although following Dubarle's suggestion (reading ὑπαντῶ for the manuscript's ὑπαντα) the text makes more sense. Another possibility is that the manuscript reading should be preserved (Now that you have suitable prepared everything by which the soul ...) and a different, now lost verb be provided. It could even have been the verb suggested by Dubarle, lost in copying due to its similarity to ὑπαντα.

⁵ i.e. There are three authors to be used as witnesses.

witness to their zeal for the truth. Their famous cities even now proclaim their names and their lives worthy of the high priesthood, cities worthy of having such men as patriarchs. Antioch proclaims Christophorus, Alexandria proclaims Job and Jerusalem proclaims Basil. They have written lengthy works against heretics, in which they have written about this too. As he says, "Discussing this with the Emperor inspired us to read the state manuscripts deposited at Edessa, beyond the Euphrates".

The Abgar Story

5 Let us take the story from the beginning. When Christ was still physically with us, the ruler of Edessa was called Agbar⁶. In spite of his worshipping foreign gods through the ignorance of a preacher, his theological letter to the one he had never seen and was driven to believe in bears witness to his goodness. He wrote to Christ requesting to be cured of the disease he was suffering from, and received a reply steeped in hope. It would not be out of place to recall the letters.

6 Agbar's letter to Christ in Jerusalem, sent via Ananias his messenger. Agbar, at the same time⁷ ruler, to Jesus, who has appeared as a gracious saviour in the region of Jerusalem – greeting. I have heard about you and about the cures you perform without medicine or herbs. What I have heard is that you make the blind see again and the lame walk, you cleanse lepers, expel unclean spirits and demons, cure those suffering from chronic and painful diseases, and raise the dead. On hearing all this about you, I concluded that one of two things must be true – either you are God and came down from heaven to do these things, or you are⁸ God's son doing them. I am therefore writing to ask you to come to me and cure the illness from which I suffer. I have heard that the Jews are treating you badly and wish to cause you harm - my city is very small, but very noble, enough for both of us⁹.

7 Jesus' answer to Agbar the ruler, via Ananias the messenger - "Blessed are you who have believed in me without having seen me! For it is written of me that those who have seen me will not⁹ believe in me, and those who have not seen will believe and live. As to your

⁶ While recounting the letters, the sermon spells the name as "Agbar", later reverting to the more usual form "Abgar".

⁷ Greek *ὕμα*, most probably a corruption of *Uchama*, referring to the king's skin disease.

⁸ Dubarle omits the second verb *ε* although it is in the manuscript.

⁹ The manuscript omits the negative *μη*, necessary to the sense and correctly restored by Dubarle.

writing that I should come to you, I must complete all that I was sent to do here, and thus be taken up to the one who sent me. When I have been taken up I will send you one of my disciples to cure your sickness and bring life to you and those with you”.

8 So much for the letters. Since there is no mention of an image in either letter and the voice of tradition has not been able to convince wise men or help them understand, we went to Edessa, our souls burning with zeal, hoping to find in the manuscripts there what Abgar had done. And we found a great number of manuscripts written in the Syriac language, from which we copied what was asked of us and translated it into Greek. This is what it says,

9 King Abgar said to Thaddaios, "You have taught me correctly about how Christ came down to earth, about his amazing miracles and his suffering, about his burial and resurrection, and about how he was miraculously taken up to the Father in his body, and I confess that he is the true God. But tell me how the image on the linen¹⁰ that cured me was made, since I can see it was not produced with ordinary paint, and explain its special strength, since when I saw it unfolded on your face I was cured of my illness and got up from my bed, and I felt the strength that I had in my body when I was in my prime.

And Thaddaios answered, "When Ananias, who you entrusted the letters to, said in hope that apart from your health, you also wished to look upon the likeness of his face as it was seen, Jesus told him to come quickly to you with the letter, in which he promised to send you one of his disciples after his ascension, and I am that disciple. But Jesus, undergoing the passion of his own free will, believing that human nature fears death – indeed death comes upon the very nature that was made to live – taking this linen cloth he wiped the sweat that was falling down his face like drops of blood in his agony. And miraculously, just as he made everything from nothing in his divine strength, he imprinted the reflection¹¹ of his form on the linen.

10 When he came down the mountain after praying, he gave it to Thomas, one of my fellow disciples, as I was not there. He told him to give it to me, so that after the ascension I could bring it to you.

You say it has a special strength – this is by the definition of the one who made it, as has been said, and who sent it to you through me. You can therefore see that it is not that the form requested came into being on it, as this did not seem right, neither what you thought worthy to be, but what you did not hope for, so that not only in this nature but together with it

¹⁰ Greek ἐν τῇ ὀθόνη – the singular of τα ὀθόνια, used in Luke's gospel as an equivalent of sindon.

¹¹ Greek ἀπαύγασμα – the word used most often in the text for the image on the cloth.

are all things given life. Therefore not only would you be saved but also everyone who comes forward to see this miracle after you. I have put it on my face¹² and have shown in silence that this is the reflection of the face you were seeking. It has made itself more visible to you than I have. And best of all, honouring the top part of my body – for the most beautiful part is the face, not that which is below the armpits – I attribute the light shining out not to my own face but rather to the face of the one on the cloth".

Miracles

11 This is what they say, this is what we found in the manuscripts we mentioned above. Immediately afterwards are the miracles worked by the holy image, among which is the one related to Chosroes, king of the Persians. It is said that when he was expecting to capture Edessa, he gathered together a large amount of olive branches and roots in a circle around the wall and set fire to them. The bishop at the time, Eulalios¹³, placed his hands on the linen where the image not made by human hands had been formed and went round the top of the city walls so that everybody could see him. As soon as he showed the image to those who were setting fire to the wood, a strong wind blew out of it and drove the rising flames back onto those who were lighting the fire. It burned and consumed them as it spread out.

#12 This is what those who were thought worthy of being priests and patriarchs have recorded. I know that they will be received at the heavenly altar as they have given us the fullness of tradition, just like Christ gives us the fullness of the law according to Paul, where he says "I have not come to destroy the law, but rather to fulfil it"¹⁴. If we¹⁵ have undertaken a long voyage in order to fulfil tradition, this is why I have thought it unnecessary to record Theodore's¹⁶ arguments against John, who is in perfect agreement

¹² Presumably the whole Shroud over Thaddaios' body – a most practical way of showing the whole image.

¹³ The bishop's name is given as such here and in the Official History of the Image of Edessa, written shortly after this sermon. In the Greek Orthodox Synaxarion, many manuscripts of which I have studied in the archives of Mount Athos, the name is given as Eulabios. No bishop of either name is known in the history of Edessa, which underlines even further the legendary nature of the story.

¹⁴ The quotation is from the gospel of Matthew, not Paul.

¹⁵ The manuscript reading is *oi ð*. I have followed Dubarle's suggested emendation to *ei ð*.

¹⁶ Most probably Theodore of Studium, d. 826.

with these present writings. At the same time, this work is not aimed at the ear¹⁷ that is captivated by a sea of faces or the loud noise of voices, but rather at the ear that is worthy of receiving it, a work not put together with complex strings of words but rather in the simplicity of truth.

About the Image and how it was received in Constantinople

13 But now it is time to sing loudly and joyfully to God. Oh Lord, together with the countless good things you have given us, you have now brought us peace, taking heed that history and tradition are sisters in thought. "Yes" and "No" no longer have a place among us, there will be no more lengthy debate about whether the image is yours or not. All of us who belong to the One have come together as one, all with the same thoughts, all proclaiming the same faith. Who is like you, God, doing everything in wisdom from times of old? A second light, immaterial and unique, came devotedly from you, an unexpected and material intertwining, natures distantly embracing heaven and earth, one living being made of two opposites: your human image, food from the clouds, a river flowing from a dry rock, and what is genuinely new under the sun, you were born a man in these last times from a virgin mother. You wiped clean¹⁸ the sweat of the nature you had taken on and what was wiped clean was transformed into an image of your unchanging form, just like Adam's form was drawn out of the ground, like the eyes of nature in the folds of the kneaded earth. The time has come to lead your people Israel out of Egypt, Pharaoh's hard heart has been smitten, the sea has been divided and its depths have been laid bare, a column of fire leads the way so that Israel may be saved in¹⁹ the repose you have promised.

14 The day has come on which your image has been brought from Edessa to the people of your pleasure, and the things with which the nature of the unfaithful should have been fed have been punished. The raging river Euphrates, closing the mouth of the people who tempt, is upset by the calm, the lookout man is surprised at the ship with no ballast – he steers, he manages the rudder – it is as if the people who have lost the Image

¹⁷ Dubarle says that the manuscript reads *οὐς* and suggests *οὐς*, which in fact is the correct manuscript reading.

¹⁸ The manuscript has the optative *σμήχθεις*, corrected as suggested by Dubarle to *σμήχθεις*.

were to say, "I know now that God wants you to have it, so take it and leave". The flames of countless hearts lead the way along which it is led in honour, until it reaches the objects with which it is to be counted together and glorified.

15 For many years your ancient ark was in the hands of the Philistines, but it was saved by your providence. Your beloved king, your servant David danced in front of it and all Israel rejoiced in its resting place. For many years your glory resided with those you considered worthy, now it has been united to those things held in honour by your chosen people – the cane, your nails, the cross and the other objects through which we receive mercy and in which we are always strengthened.

16 The Emperor marches on foot in front, more acceptable to you than if he were adorned with crowns of power. The patriarch is in front, dressed in red, stopping the fiery angel from lighting the incense in the thurible, just like Aaron. Those who are of the altar touch the face of the earth with their feet, announcing your peace. There is light from the torches of the people, more than the grains of sand on the shore, blocking out the light of the sun, many groups of escorts, all singing in harmony, contending with those related to the one Lordship thrice holy and with those groups in which choir-leaders play the cymbals together. The great king and prophet David played his lyre as he was inspired by the Spirit.

17 What else? You will now agree that our story fits in with tradition, and we are joined in the spirit to the paradox of the image. If there is any stain on the brilliant light of the image in us from above we will make it whiter than snow, brighter than a sapphire. There is no stain from sin that cannot be washed away by your grace and by the tears of repentance. The saying is not far away – I will not reject a broken and humble heart. But, oh portion of Christ's heritage, it is time for you to decide what is right. We should not work to obtain such a gift while not forgiving those who make us stumble a little, when we have been forgiven much more. For what is our rule for praying to God? Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. What a wonderful reconciliation! Forgive us great sins without number and we forgive others insignificant things. And he does forgive, not looking too closely at what we deserve

¹⁹ Dubarle's edition has *πρὸν* whereas the manuscript has *πρὸς*.

for our deeds, since he cannot break his own law, which he gives more freely²⁰ than some receive it.

18 The one who is prepared to come down quickly for our good, for those who are nothing, the mere border of his robe, is aware of the weakness of our nature, as he made us and took on our nature. As he has undergone temptation, he is able to help us in temptation. This comes from the mouth of Christ, according to whose gospel God judges the world.

19 Let us not now doubt about grace, let us rather be lit up with the wonder of grace, so that this, by being near the first goodness, may act as mediator and bring us near too, so that we can unhesitatingly be where we were before we tasted the fruit of the tree, before we contrived to cover our shame with leaves. And we will become so if we value the things of God over those of man, as sensible people do. It is without doubt one of the things of God to search the scriptures, which helps obtain riches beyond compare. Witness to this is the discovery of recent history, that which is revealed as useful for those who meditate the scriptures in divine prayer. If we care about becoming gods or sons of the Most High through purity or purification - for without these nobody will see the Lord - let us continuously speak of the divinely inspired scriptures.

20 Just as it is impossible, when the sun has set, for the pupils of the eyes to see the sunlight, it is also impossible for our eye of understanding within to see what is right without the brightness of the divine scriptures. Christ²¹ himself tells us by nature to search the scriptures, and so we are persuaded to lend the ear of understanding to him, and we remain in the endless realm of scripture with God-given zeal, so that just as the holy writer says, the abyss – this is what he calls the scripture – may be clearly called an abyss of divine things, that we may be filled with spiritual things and flow with rivers of living water from within.

²⁰ Following the emendation *ἴδιον* for the manuscript reading *ἰδιον*.

²¹ Dubarle changes the manuscript reading to *χρηστός* although I have preferred the original reading “Christ”.

The Image of Edessa is not a painting

21 He will do this straight away for us if we so desire, if we look upon the reflection and the immense beauty it is depicted with. For this is not the art of painting, which provides a door for the mind to consider the original and depicts²² images. This reflection was imprinted from a living original. Painting establishes a complete form with various beautiful colours, representing the cheeks with a blooming red, the encircling of the lips with red, it paints the beard with flowery gold, the eyebrow with shining black, the whole eye in beautiful colours, the ears and nose in a different way, overshadowing the flanks of the imprint with a compound of qualities and showing the chin with hair.

#22 This reflection, however – let everyone be inspired with the explanation – has been imprinted only by the sweat from the face of the originator of life, falling like drops of blood, and by the finger of God. For these are the beauties that have made up the true imprint²³ of Christ, since after the drops fell, it was embellished by drops from his own side. Both are highly instructive – blood and water there, here sweat and image. Oh equality of happenings, since both have their origin in the same person. The source of living water can be seen and it gives us water, showing us that the origin of the image made by sweat is in fact of the same nature as the origin of that which makes the liquid flow from the side. This is just like a spring pouring out fresh water as it were from two vessels, which water the tree of life and divide it into two streams, recording the same God and man, one marvellously producing something praiseworthy and superhuman, the other in bringing about a defined likeness of a man, declaring with clear words with which colours the image and likeness should be adorned. And for the prototype to be transferred to the likeness, he does this himself with the sweat of the human form he deigned to bear, and as befits the divinity he decreed that the intellectual image in us, the one we had breathed into us by the first life-giving visitation of the spirit as a good gift, should not be formed from another source, just as he did not form his own image from anywhere else, but rather from a human nature, as it were from the sweat of the form he had taken on, with exactly the right colours. And what is this nature? Purity, calmness, rejection of all evil and whatever else belongs to this class of

²² The manuscript has the senseless *μορμοι*, changed by Dubarle to *μορφῶν*.

²³ Greek *ἐκμαγεῖον*.

things, through which similarity to the divinity is formed. Indeed, an image not formed by such things is not like the prototype, and is called something else, not an image.

Conclusion

23 But oh pure Son of the pure Father, Word, Wisdom, image, imprint, reflection – for I call you all of these things as I am sanctified by recalling them and others of the same kind, and the one who is above all names and deeds - behold the crown which the pious zeal of the Emperor places on the reflection of your face and bestow diadems of grace on it like those of absolute sovereignty. Do not become weary of being the guardian of the church whose bridegroom you are beyond all beauty. Strengthen your special army against blasphemers, free from all necessity those who look to you with pious trust and give freely to all of your morning grace so that we can offer our gratitude to the Father, to you the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and for evermore, Amen.

