

Miscellany

Letter to the Editor: “The Shroud of Turin: A Response to Ian Wilson”

ANDREA NICOLOTTI*

Dear Editor,

Volume 108, issue 2 of the *Catholic Historical Review* published a lengthy review of my book *The Shroud of Turin* (Baylor University Press, 2019), written by “independent scholar” Ian Wilson. He characterizes my work with a series of extremely negative judgments, using such terms as “superficial,” “misleading,” “troubling,” “ignorant,” “selective,” “blinkerred,” “weak,” “uncertain,” “inattentive,” and so forth.

Although his review is titled “Is the Shroud of Turin a Fake?,” in reality it does not provide any answer to that question. Wilson is a prolific sindonologist: I believe his animosity toward me stems from the fact that, in my studies, I have repeatedly critiqued his theories on the Shroud. In the very brief space afforded me in this letter, I will point out only the most glaring flaws in his review, errors which in my estimation render it wholly unreliable.

1) Wilson is astonished that, despite my “high standing and convenient location” as full professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Turin, I have never “examined the cloth itself at close quarters.” Of course, it is well known that such examination is impossible. People are no longer allowed to touch the Shroud, as Wilson was able to do fifty years ago. And “having already seen and touched the Shroud, he has no doubt of its power; eleven years ago when he began his research he was an agnostic; today he is a practising Roman Catholic.”¹ Not personally in the habit of seeking such sensational experiences, I instead content myself with the

*Dr. Andrea Nicolotti is Ordinary Professor of the History of Christianity and of the Church in the Università degli Studi di Torino. His email address is andrea.nicolotti@unito.it.

1. As stated on the dust jacket of his first book on this topic: Ian Wilson, *The Turin Shroud* (London, 1978).

knowledge that handling the Shroud without scientific instrumentation would be useless in any case. And the same is true of “high-resolution digital photographs available since 2008”: such images cannot be printed in books, as Wilson would like, because the Diocese of Turin does not grant the use rights for them.

As for the alleged “medical and anatomical convincingness” of the anthropomorphic imprint and wounds on the Shroud, several *non-sindonologist* forensic pathologists have declared it impossible to conduct a physical examination of a body that is not present, based only on a monochromatic image generated not by natural contact but by a process akin to an orthogonal projection on a flat surface² (as I explain in my book, pp. 282–87). Moreover, those seeking to conduct such an examination have produced a series of statements that are mutually contradictory and thus negate each other.

Finally, although Wilson criticizes me for “downplaying” the “famous ‘negative’ properties” of the image of Christ on the cloth, it is now widely accepted that there is nothing remarkable about them (pp. 278–82).

2) Ian Wilson asserts that my treatment of the fabric’s technical characteristics is “sometimes misleading” and “troubling.” In actuality, he only demonstrates his own lack of knowledge on the subject. I wrote:

The manufacture of a fabric like that of the Shroud required the use of a horizontal treadle loom with four shafts. Knowledge of treadle looms came, perhaps from China, in the eleventh century AD or a little before, and the loom with four shafts was probably introduced by the Flemish in the thirteenth century. This explains why up to the present time no fabric similar in technique to the Shroud has ever been found in all of antiquity. Moreover, the oldest comparable example currently identified dates to the second half of the fourteenth century. It must be added that the yarn

2. For example, as early as 1978 the FBI was asked to comment on the cause of death of the man whose image appears on the Shroud; they refused to do so, because—as director Clarence M. Kelley replied—examining photographs of the cloth would have been “not productive.” Robert Wilcox, *Shroud* (London, 1978), 135–36. In 1980, the same request was made of the famous New York-based pathologist Michael M. Baden; he concluded that “the Shroud probably never contained a corpse, and that—even if it did—a qualified pathologist could not read the kind of conclusions being held out as ‘expert medical opinion’ on what it purportedly shows. . . . If I had to go into a court room, I could not say there was rigor, whether the man was alive or dead, or that this picture was a true reflection of injuries on the body. I do know dead bodies: human beings don’t produce this kind of pattern”: Reginald W. Rhein, “The Shroud of Turin: Medical Examiners Disagree,” *Medical World News* 21, no. 26 (1980), 40–50.

twist of the Shroud (Z-twist) is the exact opposite of that used in ancient and medieval Palestine (S-twist): therefore, the Shroud could not have been of Palestinian origin.

I spent months surveying all the scientific literature on the matter, consulted various experts on the history of textiles, and checked one by one all the examples of ancient cloth that are wrongly said to be similar to that of the Shroud. (p. 71)

Evidently Wilson did not think to consult my over-fifty-page-long study cited in the footnote;³ he still believes the only significant characteristic is “the cloth’s distinctive three-to-one herringbone twill weave.” In doing so, however, he ignores the other variables: the material, the size, the yarn twist and its diameter, the thread count, the type of loom used, and the number and shape of its shafts. Wilson merely reiterates the same superficial comparisons rehased for nearly a century in sindonology books,⁴ such as twill examples in silk or wool from the Roman period or dating as far back as 1000 BC. Yet since at least 1988, when a renowned ancient textiles expert published the first technical report on the Shroud, it has been common knowledge that all these comparisons are erroneous and that sindonologists have “often settled for comparing superficial aspects.”⁵

Moreover, Wilson would have us believe that I am unfamiliar with the statements by Mechthild Flury-Lemberg: if he had read my essay, however, he would know that her claims—namely, that the Shroud accords more with the looms of the textile workshops of Roman Egypt than with their medieval equivalents, and that a seam of the Shroud has “characteristics that are matched only in a first-century fabric found at Masada”—are both false. The exact opposite is true for looms, in fact, and the type of seam in the Shroud—called a “counter-hem”—is found in textiles from all eras, from the Iron Age to twentieth-century sewing manuals for children.⁶

3. Andrea Nicolotti, “La Sindone di Torino in quanto tessuto: Analisi storica, tecnica, comparativa,” in: *Non solum circulatorum ludo similia*, ed. Valerio Polidori (Rome, 2018), 148–204.

4. Beginning with Paul Vignon, *Le Saint Suaire de Turin* (Paris, 1939), 77–83.

5. Gabriel Vial, “Le Linceul de Turin. Étude technique,” *Bulletin du Centre International d’Études des Textiles Anciens* 67 (1989), 20, citing precisely these false examples that Wilson still repeats today.

6. By way of example, see the seams described in Helga Mautendorfer, “Genähtes aus dem prähistorischen Hallstatt,” in: *Hallstatt Textiles*, ed. Peter Bichler et al. (Oxford, 2005), 44 (Iron Age); Chrystal R. Brandenburgh, “Early Medieval Textile Remains from Settlements in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Archaeology in the Low Countries* 2, no. 1 (2010), 73 (Middle Ages); and Margaret Swanson and Ann Macbeth, *Educational Needlecraft* (London, 1911), 38–40 (a century ago).

3) Ian Wilson insists on positing that the Shroud is the so-called Mandylion—that is, the legendary “hand-kerchief” or “towel”—of Edessa. This is a theory he himself invented in the 1970s and which has succeeded in convincing no one, except perhaps sindonologists. As I have written a book on this question, there is no use repeating myself here.⁷

4) The same applies to the other theory he invented, namely that, after the Fourth Crusade, the Shroud passed into the possession of the Templars, and thus the “mysterious” idol the Templars were accused in the trial of having adored was in fact the Shroud. This fable—scrupulously dealt with by this same Review⁸—has proven even less convincing than the previous one; on this issue, as well, I have already written a book.⁹ I point out only that a key factor in Wilson’s hypothesis was his suggestion that Geoffrey de Charnay (or Charney), the Preceptor of the Templars who was burned to death in 1314, belonged to the same family as Geoffroy de Charny, the knight associated with the Shroud’s first appearances approximately forty years later. Wilson continues to insist that Charny “might have acquired the Shroud via a family connection to his Templar namesake” despite the fact that there are at least a dozen place-names consistent with Charnay-Charny and at least four noble families bearing that name. Wilson states that I am “clearly ignorant of Jochen Schenk’s fine study *Templar Families*,” but nowhere in that book is there the slightest evidence of what Wilson claims. It is telling that another sindonologist who has engaged extensively with that very book by Schenk concludes that “there is no reason for the Templar hypothesis . . . it lacks any foundation.”¹⁰ Wilson’s arguments are embarrassing in their weakness: “Charny displays Cistercian values such as by expressing particularly strong devotion to the Virgin Mary . . . and extols the importance of holding one’s ground on the battlefield, the very point of military discipline for which the Templar order was most admired.” According to Wilson, these generic qualities would be sufficient to affirm that Charny was related to a Templar. The reality is that, after forty-five years, Wilson still has not been able to find

7. Andrea Nicolotti, *From the Mandylion of Edessa to the Shroud of Turin* (Leiden, 2014).

8. Malcolm Barber, “The Templars and the Turin Shroud,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 68, no. 2 (1982), 206–25.

9. Andrea Nicolotti, *I Templari e la Sindone. Storia di un falso* (Rome, 2011); “L’interrogatorio dei Templari imprigionati a Carcassonne,” *Studi medievali* 52, no. 2 (2011), 697–729; and “L’idolo/statua dei Templari: dall’accusa di idolatria al mito del Bafometto,” in: *Statue*, ed. Luigi Canetti (Florence, 2017), 277–333.

10. Karlheinz Dietz, “Die Templer und das Turiner Grabtuch,” in: *The Templars and Their Sources*, ed. Karl Borchardt et al. (New York, 2017), 359.

even the slightest evidence of a connection between the two Geoffroys. And in any case, such a connection would prove nothing.

5) Wilson deems my chapter devoted to pre-fourteenth-century shrouds to be “doubly futile.” It is certainly futile for him, interested as he is in only the Turin one because he believes the others to be fake. For those with a historiographical interest in reconstructing the progressive appearance of multiple shroud relics from the sixth century onward, however, it is arguably quite useful.

6) Wilson writes that I should have made “Charny the prime focus for some concentrated new research,” instead of basing my arguments “mostly on century-old findings.” This insinuation is unfounded. I collected a great deal of material on this family from my archival studies; however, since my aim was a history of the Shroud and not a biography of the Charny family—as Wilson seems to be conducting—I quoted only what was relevant for that purpose. His criticism that I have “clearly never read” Charny’s writings on chivalry does not even deserve a serious response. I have read them, but unlike Wilson I do not lightheartedly employ them as if they were a historically accurate autobiography.

7) Based on his supposedly superior knowledge of the Charny family, Wilson believes he has found several errors or gaps in my work. At times he is simply overconfident, as when he believes he can demonstrate the precise dating of two pilgrim badges on the basis of inconclusive arguments. Or as when he states that Charny participated in the Smyrna crusade (1344–46) traveling with the first expedition rather than the second, contrary to what many scholars have found in the past. This is a possibility, as I already noted in my book (pp. 73–74), but not a certainty: the arguments Wilson develops, all of which I was already familiar with, are interesting but would require substantiation.¹¹ In any case, this would not change anything in terms of the history of the Shroud because it is never mentioned in any document before 1389.

8) At other times, Wilson treats his opinions or beliefs as facts. For example, he makes it sound as if I claimed that Charny commissioned a forger to make the Shroud; consequently, he states that I missed “a potential candidate for the presumed forger,” namely the illuminator Jean Le Noir, and that Jean harbored a “friendly affection” for Charny because Jean

11. These are arguments he already made in his last book, one with its own share of problems. Ian Wilson, *The Book of Geoffroi de Charny* (Woodbridge, 2021).

decorated a manuscript containing works by Charny.¹² In response, a) I did not claim that Charny hired a forger, as this is only one of many possibilities; b) there is no evidence that Jean Le Noir knew Charny; c) it is only Wilson's opinion that Jean Le Noir illuminated that manuscript, an opinion based on his superficial artistic analysis. The world's foremost expert on Jean Le Noir does not agree, however;¹³ d) I am not sure how many people wishing to have a corpse portrayed on a 4.5-meter-long cloth would turn to a miniaturist. This example serves to illustrate how Wilson is wont to invent, and then build further inventions on these same inventions, thereby constructing castles in the air.¹⁴

9) Wilson states that I lack knowledge of the medieval documents on the Shroud, because otherwise I would not have written "that the showings [of the Shroud] must have taken place within Charny's lifetime." Perhaps Wilson has trouble understanding what he reads, but what I wrote is that "The uncertainties . . . make it impossible to know definitively whether, according to Pierre d'Arcis, the exhibitions of the Shroud began when Geoffroy I de Charny was still alive" (p. 101).

10) Wilson claims that, "though unconsidered by Nicolotti, it may therefore have been" after Charny's death "that one of the redundancy-threatened canons came up with the idea of using it for money-making showings." Perhaps "it may have been" . . . but I personally am not a fan of invention.

11) According to Wilson, I "uncritically" take at face value "that it was king Charles in person who, in August 1389, ordered a *bailli* to travel to Lirey to seize the Shroud"; instead, according to Wilson, the king "was far too busy preparing for the coronation of his queen Isabel of Bavaria to be bothered with Parlement matters"; and therefore "bishop Pierre d'Arcis, as a member of the king's Parlement, appears to have taken advantage of such

12. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, MS 9270.

13. "The artist of Madrid, surely a contemporary of Jean Le Noir, is of a very inferior level and does not have the exquisite finish of style of the recognized works of Le Noir": François Avril, personal communication, 7 October 2023.

14. Another example: according to Wilson, in light of the presumed "anatomical convincingness" of the injuries visible on the Shroud, I "might also have taken an interest in the pioneering Lombard physician Guido da Vigevano, a prominent member of the French royal court." According to Wilson's whataboutist logic, therefore, I should have gone looking for an illuminator and a physician. Guido died around 1349, perhaps a bit too early; and why did Wilson not think of Évrard de Conty, from the Faculty of Medicine of Paris? Or Guillaume de Harcigny, who has a cadaver monument that looks so much like the man in the Shroud? Or any one of the other hundred physicians working in Paris in the fourteenth century? And why Paris and not Troyes? And so on and so forth.

royal court distractions to push through the royal orders for the Shroud's seizure." Well, what a fantastic plot! I consider it more "critical" to adhere to what is written in the documents, however: the order to seize the Shroud is a letter sent by "Charles, by the Grace of God, King of France, to the *bailli* of Troyes" in which the king himself recounts what the bishop reported to Parlement on August 4. It concludes: "I command you to place that cloth actually and indeed into my possession"; the document bears the royal seal and is dated that same day "in Paris, in my Parlement." The following August 15, the *bailli* went to collect the Shroud "by virtue of certain royal letters addressed to us."¹⁵ Wilson does not believe this, however: he is convinced that "almost certainly" the seizure letter "had been prepared for him by persons unknown and slipped into a pile described [as] unimportant which the king had signed without reading it."¹⁶ Hence Wilson—who has the supernatural ability to view King Charles's desk and list of engagements in a crystal ball—would have us believe that persons in Paris were writing letters on behalf of the king without him being aware of their contents, making him stipulate that he had made decisions in Parlement, and all this because he was too busy preparing for his wife's coronation, which . . . was to take place on August 23, a full 19 days later.

12) "Equally uncritically," writes Wilson, I fail "to ascertain why Geoffroi II might have been away from Lirey at this particular time": he was "amongst the top performers at the jousting tournaments that were being staged as part of the coronation's entertainments," and therefore "Charles VI and Geoffroi II were happily socializing together." However, the jousting tournaments began on the afternoon of August 25, more than twenty days after the Parlement meeting and ten days after the *bailli* had gone to seize the Shroud. This point is thus irrelevant. Perhaps Wilson also has a copy of Geoffroy's agenda where it is written that he was "happily socializing" with the sovereign ten days beforehand? And if so, what difference would it make?

13) Wilson claims that I represent Marguerite de Charny "as unprincipled and mercenary" (words I did not use) when in fact she was nothing but a "childless, widowed noblewoman with a sense of heavy responsibility." I would note merely that she disobeyed court rulings on four separate occasions; the canons of Lirey called her a "perfidious woman"¹⁷; she held traveling ostensions of the Shroud—in violation of the Constitution 62 of

15. Ulysse Chevalier, *Étude critique sur l'origine du St. Suaire* (Paris, 1900), docs. A and B.

16. Ian Wilson, *The Shroud* (London, 2010), 232–33.

17. Chevalier, *Étude critique*, doc. GG.

Lateran IV—and not out of mere devotion, but “for manifold gain”¹⁸; and she illegally sold the relic to the duke of Savoy under the table, and died excommunicated for having done so.

Space limitations prevent me from continuing as I would like, although I would have a great deal more to say. In summary, Wilson spent almost his entire “review” critiquing—with arguments of this kind—only a small part of my book: a chronological span of about fifty years in the fourteenth century, to which I devoted approximately fifty pages out of a five-hundred-page-long book covering twenty centuries. He cares little or nothing for the fact that I have reconstructed the history of the Turin shroud, and other shrouds as well, in careful depth; that I have reread all the documents and discovered new ones through archival research; that I have corrected the assertions of previous scholars; or that I have published previously unpublished sources in Latin or Old French¹⁹: Wilson only advances criticisms, and unwarranted ones at that.²⁰

18. According to the monk Cornelius Menghers: *Chronicon*, ed. Edmond Martène, *Veterum scriptorum et monumentorum amplissima collectio*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1729), 461.

19. In this book I summarize also my previous research: Andrea Nicolotti, “Una reliquia costantinopolitana dei panni sepolcrali di Gesù secondo la Cronaca del crociato Robert de Clari,” *Medioevo greco* 11 (2011), 151–96; “Un cas particulier d’apologétique appliquée: l’utilisation des apocryphes pour authentifier le Mandylion d’Édesse et le Suaire de Turin,” *Apocrypha* 26 (2015), 301–31; *Il processo negato. Un inedito parere della Santa Sede sull’autenticità della Sindone* (Rome, 2015); *Le Saint Suaire de Besançon et le chevalier Othon de la Roche* (Vylès-Filain, 2015); “Le Saint Suaire de Turin en Belgique . . . à Liège?,” *Bulletin trimestriel du Trésor de Liège*, 47 (2016), 13–18; “La Sindone, banco di prova per esegesi, storia, scienza e teologia,” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi* 33, no. 2 (2016), 459–510; “El Sudario de Oviedo: historia antigua y moderna,” *Territorio, sociedad y poder* 11 (2016), 89–111; “The Scourge of Jesus and the Roman Scourge: Historical and Archaeological Evidence,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 15 (2017), 1–59; “I Savoia e la Sindone di Cristo: aspetti politici e propagandistici,” in: *Cristo e il potere*, ed. Laura Andreani and Agostino Paravicini Bagliani (Florence, 2017), 247–81; “Marguerite de Charny, François de La Palud e Ludovico di Savoia,” *Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino*, 116, no. 1 (2018), 191–209; “Nuovi studi sulle immagini di Cristo,” *Medioevo greco* 18 (2018), 299–350; “The Acquisition of the Shroud by the House of Savoy,” in: *The Shroud at Court*, ed. Paolo Cozzo, Andrea Merlotti, and Andrea Nicolotti (Leiden, 2019), 20–56; “Le fotografie della Sindone di Secondo Pia (1898) e di Giuseppe Enrie (1931),” in: *Santi in posa*, ed. Tommaso Caliò (Rome, 2019), 239–72.

20. He found only one real error: I wrote that Geoffroy became lord of Charny when actually I should have said “of Montfort.” This is an oversight of absentmindedness: it is well-known that Geoffroy was never lord of Charny; the fact has been stated in any publication since the seventeenth century. I apologize, of course, but this oversight does not seem all that serious; I would suggest it is more serious that, for example, Wilson has continued for more than forty years to confuse Geoffroy II de Charny, who died during the Crusade of Nicopolis, with a similarly named bastard of Charny baillie of Caux, and the lord of Thury buried at Froidmont: Ian Wilson, *The Turin Shroud* (London, 1978), 177, 183; *The Book of Geoffroi de Charny* (Woodbridge, 2021), 150.

He was evidently offended because I wrote that “he [Wilson] has dedicated himself to various miraculous and esoteric topics (like life beyond death, reincarnation, stigmata, a biblical flood, and Nostradamus).” This was not an insult, however; it is the plain truth. After all, in one of his 1992 books, Wilson presents himself as follows: “he has written several books on historical and religious mysteries.”²¹ This is not the place to express what I think of these books of his, which he judges to be “serious, critical, investigative.” Suffice it to say that I have read them all (even the one in which he describes his experience with a ghost at the house of a sindonologist friend²² and the one in which he invokes Darwinian evolution and “inner mechanisms” to explain stigmata²³).

The point is, Wilson is a sindonologist, and sindonologists proceed from the inalienable assumption that the Shroud enfolded the body of Christ. Those who do not accept their untenable speculations (e.g., the Mandylion and Templars theory) and scientific denialism regarding the medieval result of the carbon-dating are regularly scorned and hit below the belt.

I hope the day will come when historians are allowed to work in peace on the history of relics and devotions, without any more factional conditioning or having to defend themselves against attacks such as those launched by the Shroudies—of which Wilson is a distinguished representative.

21. Ian Wilson, *Holy Faces, Secret Places* (London, 1992), 1.

22. This tale underpins his book *In Search of Ghosts* (London, 1995): in 1994 in a historic mansion owned by Rex Morgan, after going to bed, Wilson and his wife heard the sound of gentle breathing, appearing to emanate at standing height above floor space which was occupied by a wooden clothes-airer. Quite luckily the sound ceased altogether when Wilson offered a silent prayer.

23. Ian Wilson, *The Bleeding Mind* (London, 1988), 127–8.