Chapter 5

The Mandylion in Constantinople

The Name “Mandylion”

So far I have intentionally refrained from employing, in reference to the Edessean image, the name by which it has entered history and by which it is mentioned in the vast majority of modern publications: this is because, unlike some erroneous claims for its antiquity, the name “Mandylion” appears relatively late. It does not appear, in fact, in any of the documents prior to or contemporary with its translation into Constantinople in 944.¹

In Byzantine Greek, μαντίλιον, μανδύλιον or μανδήλιον (along with many other alternative spellings)² means precisely “towel,” “napkin” or “handkerchief,” and over time it has come to indicate a small to medium-sized piece of cloth for various uses.³ The origin of the term is the Latin term mantele (mantile) or mantelum (mantelium) which indicated the “manuterge,” which in turn derives etymologically from man-terg-s-lis (manus tergeo).⁴ The word is also known in Jewish Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic, in the forms מַנְטִילִין [manṭīlīn] or

¹ B. Frale, The Templars and the Shroud of Christ, cit., p. 112, is incorrect in stating, “In the ancient town of Edessa, present-day Urfa in Turkey, there was worshipped an image of Jesus on a cloth that was said not to have been made by human hands (acheiropita); the portrait, always called mandylion (in Greek, ‘hand towel’ or ‘handkerchief’) was the holiest of objects to the local Christian community.” It is not true that the tradition has “always” called it Mandylion, and it would be wise to remember that before the sixth century there is not a single source that refers to the image as “acheiropoieton.”

² Μαντίλιον, μαντήλιον, μαντίλιον, μαντέλιον, μαντιλί, μαντάλι, μαντήλι, μαντιλίν, μαντίλιν.


Despite the geographical origins of the legend, it is unlikely that the first use of this term to indicate the Edessean icon could be attributed to Syriac language authors because the first recorded uses of the term are Greek.

The use of this word confirms – as if additional confirmation was needed – the shape of the object in question: this was a handkerchief, a small towel that Jesus would have used to wipe his face. The *Souda lexikon* of the tenth century bears testimony that μανδήλιον was a term interchangeable with χειρόμακτρον (“cloth for wiping the hands”), and toward the end of the eleventh century, George Kedrenos – taking up a passage of John the Lydian dating from mid-sixth century – states that μανδύλιον and ἐκμαγεῖον are both Greek words that describe the handkerchief held in the hands of the Roman *mapparius*; also our sources about the acheiropoieton image play upon the double meaning of the word ἐκμαγεῖον – which means “imprint” (the image) but also “napkin” and “towel” (the support). The function – not only practical, but also liturgical – of the Mandylion was well known to the Greeks: it was used as a ceremonial object during the ordination of subdeacons. The Byzantine ritual, in fact, states that the ordainee places a towel on his left shoulder and holds a ewer and a basin in his hand, all of which serve to wash and dry the hands of the bishop. This towel, in the liturgical books, is called μαντήλιον.

All proof notwithstanding, sindonologists have endeavored to argue against this unambiguous definition. For example, an attempt has been made to claim that the word Mandylion does not indicate a handkerchief, but a large piece of

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9 Georgius Cedrenus, *Compendium historiarum* (ed. I. Bekker, *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae ope*, vol. 1, Bonn 1838, p. 297, ll. 15–18); Ioannes Lydus, *Liber de mensibus*, I,12 (ed. R. Wuensch, Leipzig, Teubner, 1898, p.6, ll. 2–7). In Roman antiquity, the *mapparius* was the officer who, by throwing a handkerchief, gave the signal to begin the public games.