An Overview of Iconography

The Holy Face of Lucca

There is another tradition in the West that refers to a cloth bearing the entire image of Jesus, but it has nothing to do with the image of Edessa, nor is it related to the Shroud, although many sindonologists have repeatedly connected it with the Turinese relic: it is a legend about a large wooden crucifix that has, on its reverse, a compartment intended to contain relics. The crucifix is in St. Martin's Cathedral in Lucca and is known as the “Volto Santo” (‘Holy Face’).

There is indeed a story, known as the Legend of Leboinus (or Leobinus), that originates in traditions regarding the icon of Beirut, specifically a sermon by Pseudo-Athanasius that appeared by the end of the eighth century in the hands of the iconodules at the time of the Second Council of Nicaea. The legend tells of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem by a bishop from northern Italy named Gualfredus: while in the Holy Land, an angel revealed to him in a dream the existence of a miraculous sculpture hidden in the basement of a Christian named Seleucius. The sculpture was the work of the Pharisee Nicodemus, the man who, according to the Gospel of John (3,1; 19,39), became a disciple of Jesus, and took part in Christ’s burial.

After the resurrection and the ascension of the Lord, Nicodemus was inflamed with such a passion due to the presence of Christ that he always carried Christ with himself, he always had him on his lips. Having the

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quantity and the quality of the form of Christ’s body been thoroughly learnt and his features outlined in his mind, he sculpted the Most Holy Face, by virtue not of his art, but of the divine one.  

The work of Nicodemus is therefore a supernatural sculpture, made by divine inspiration. The bishop Gualfredus, the legend continues, bought the image from Seleucius and transported it to Italy on a ship guided by an invisible hand. After various adventures, the Holy Face was handed over to the bishop of Lucca in 742 (or 782, according to some).  

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