CHAPTER TWO

THE ORIGINS OF THE IMAGE

No definite or convincing theory as to the Image’s origins has been postulated to date. Previous books and articles that have attempted to provide an answer regarding the Image’s origins have come up with different sources, dates and reasons; none of which have offered more convincing arguments than any other. All that can really be done is to look at the sources and analyse what authors both ancient and modern have to say about it.¹

The Narratio de imagine Edessena dates the origins of the Image of Edessa to the time of Christ himself, shortly before his passion, as do the vast majority of sources. It should be pointed out that the Narratio de imagine Edessena itself gives two possible versions for the origins of the Image, one the regular Abgar story (i.e. the king sends a messenger to paint a picture but Jesus miraculously imprints his facial features onto a cloth and sends it back to Abgar) while the other one differs significantly. The second version stages the imprint story in the garden of Gethsemane, when Christ was sweating blood²—he was handed a cloth to wipe his face on and the image of his face was miraculously transferred onto the cloth.

There was without doubt a king reigning over Edessa when Christ was alive, and he was called Abgar. He was most probably in power from AD 13 to 50. He is mentioned by Tacitus in a rather unfavourable light,³

Igitur excitis quorum de sententia petitus rex, positisque castris apud Zeugma, unde maxime pervius amnis, postquam inlustres Parthi rexque Arabum Acbarus advenerat, monet Meherdaten barbarorum impetus

² The textual evidence for the sweating of blood in the original gospel attributed to Luke is meagre, although the verse and the tradition are obviously old.
³ Annales XII: 12.
The earliest textual mention of the Image is in the Doctrine of Addai, around AD 400 (Eusebius makes no mention of the Image, although he is aware of the supposed correspondence between Jesus and Abgar). According to the Doctrine of Addai, Abgar sent Maryahb, Smeshgram and Hanan the faithful archivist (Ananias in the Greek versions) to Eleutheropolis with some letters. When the governor answered the letters, the three envoys went to Jerusalem and saw what Jesus was doing, and how the authorities were plotting to do away with him. Given that Hanan was an archivist, he recorded everything they saw and heard. When they returned to Edessa, they told Abgar all about Jesus (Hanan read his account to the king), thus fomenting a desire in Abgar to go and see Jesus for himself. The reason given in the Doctrine of Addai for not doing so is that the king could not pass through a district ruled by Romans that was not his.

Abgar’s letter to Christ is more or less the standard version that was used later, requesting healing for a certain illness he had and inviting Jesus to come to Edessa. No mention is made of requesting a portrait in case Jesus cannot or will not go. Christ’s answer to Abgar was an oral...

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