CHAPTER SIX

WHAT WAS THE IMAGE OF EDESSA?

If the story of Abgar sending a messenger to Christ in Jerusalem, and the latter’s wiping his face on a cloth, is no more than legend, then in a certain sense the Image of Edessa never existed. And yet the situation is more complex, as there most certainly was an Image of Edessa taken from this city to the capital of the empire in the tenth century, where it remained until the beginning of the thirteenth century. A legendary origin does not mean that the object never existed, and whatever the origins of this image were, an object known as the Image of Edessa did exist. The aim of this chapter is to look at the words used to define this object, and to analyse the different descriptions of the cloth to see whether it is possible to form an idea of what the Image of Edessa was and what it looked like.

The document known as the Liturgical Tract states that the Image was deliberately kept at a distance from the common people, in order to increase their sense of mystery about it and their sense of religious awe. Von Dobschütz dates this text to shortly after the Image’s arrival in Constantinople, stating that it was based on an earlier Syriac original, which means that the rites described therein would refer to what was known from and how the Image was seen and used in the city of Edessa. Whether this is so or not, there seems not to have been any direct public access to the cloth, contributing to the scarce and scant descriptions of its appearance. The task undertaken in this chapter is far from easy.

The Image of Edessa is constantly referred to in the texts as an εἰκών, a word which I have not translated by the obvious “icon”, preferring “image”. The reason for this is that the word icon suggests to many a painted image, and despite the fact that by reading the texts it becomes clear that the Image of Edessa is not described as a painted image (except in the Doctrine of Addai), I thought it better to avoid any possible misunderstanding.

The Septuagint uses this word in the creation account—κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν—where it must mean similarity, neither a painted image nor the exact essence of something or somebody else. New Tes-
tament usage of the word has two different connotations—a representation of the emperor on a coin (Mark 12:16), but also “the very essence of a thing made visible in its image”,¹ as in 2 Cor 4:4, ... τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ. The use of the word εἰκὼν in reference to the Image of Edessa is to be taken in this second sense.

Averil Cameron concludes that the Image of Edessa “never actually looked like a cloth at all”.² This is a somewhat daring conclusion, which seems to contradict just all about all known sources, in which the fact that the Image was imprinted (by whatever means) onto a linen cloth is clearly stated. I see no reason to doubt that the Image was on a linen cloth, whatever else it was or was not.³

There are many different words and descriptions used in relation to the Image of Edessa, and to my mind one of the most significant is precisely the one that all modern historians seem to shy away from. I refer of course to the Greek word τετραδιπλον, used only for the Image of Edessa in the whole known corpus of Greek literature. This in itself is highly significant—if a word is brought into being for the sole purpose of describing a specific object, and never used for any other known object, then it must surely reflect a unique property of the object in question, something that differentiates it from other similar objects (in this particular case, from other likenesses of Christ). Scholars who have written about the Image in the twentieth century have by and large ignored this word and its significance;⁴ possibly because its implications seem to contradict what they take for granted about the Image.

At first sight, the word seems easy to understand—it is made up of two elements, the words for “four” and “fold over in two”. However, does this mean folded over in two four times (resulting in sixteen layers),

² Averil Cameron, Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium (Aldershot 1996), 88.
³ Cameron’s apparent desire is to establish that the Image of Edessa is not the Shroud of Turin, leading her to deny any similarities (the Shroud of Turin is made of linen) even when all the sources are against her. Rather than look at what the Image was, she spends most of her time arguing what it was not.
⁴ Cf. inter alia Steven Runciman, ‘Some Remarks on the History of the Image of Edessa’, Cambridge Historical Journal 3 (1931), 238–252; Averil Cameron, Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium (Aldershot 1996), Chapter XI. An excellent article on the meaning of the word is the unpublished ‘On the meaning of tetradiplon’ by Professor Daniel Scavone of the University of Southern Indiana, to whom I am grateful for letting me see his text.