



- ONE -
Edessa, 536 A.D.



The Artist

I tilted my head and let the sun's golden rays warm my face. The cloudless sky was welcome news for Edessa. After last year's terrible flood, every inhabitant of my blessed town gave thanks for the calm, dry days.

The smell of ochre and eggs wafted through the air and I heard the clay pots shift on the stones. I knew Aggai, my mentor, had returned and soon my lessons would begin.

I wondered why he had missed yesterday's evening meal but was hesitant to ask. As a monk and instructor he was strict, yes, but he was also gifted with the talent, discipline and wisdom of someone twice his age. Who would not yearn to be like him? I was grateful to be the apprentice of such an important artist. My parents had both died in last year's flood and so, at the age of thirteen, I became an orphan. If it were not for Aggai I would be toiling away as a labourer, rebuilding the damaged houses and smelly streets of Edessa.

Aggai had taken pity on me. He said my thin hands were those of an artist. "Perhaps to paint," he commented, "or create poetry." The words he spoke next surprised me. "I can teach you to write as well. Come, be my apprentice."

Of course, I did not hesitate. He saw in me more than anyone. In less than a year, I had learned the written word and developed an eye for beauty although my painting skills still needed much work.

I turned to my instructor and blinked. A large flat wood, the kind we painted consignments on, lay in his open hands.

"You brought a finished work today?" I asked.

Aggai's eyes fixed on the painting. "Yes," he answered plainly.

I leaned over to study the art. It showed a man's face, illuminated in sepia while subtle greys and mossy greens covered the wood. He wore a sombre, piercing expression framed with dark wavy hair, a beard and a gilded halo around the head.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"His Face."

"Our Lord's?"

Aggai nodded. My forehead wrinkled in confusion. "How do you know Our Lord looked like that?"

"The Master knows," he stated.

Before I could say a word, Aggai interrupted. "Remember when I spoke of the Master who taught me how to paint?"

"Yes," I mumbled, vaguely aware that Aggai's Master was a famous artist, recently commissioned by the Emperor Justinian to create paintings for the magnificent cathedral under construction.

"The Master summoned me," said Aggai.

So that was where he had gone, I thought.

Aggai sighed. "The Master is ill with the fever. He may even soon pass through death's door. But with his remaining strength, he gave me this painting and said that this is how the Christ Image must appear."



'Christ Pantocrator',
St. Catherine's Monastery,
Sinai

(image courtesy of Dan Scavone)

I glanced at the striking portrait. "I do not recall any mention of Our Lord's appearance..."

"There is the Image," he answered. "The acheiropoietos—a miracle—not the work of human hands, that long, long ago cured a great King of his illness."

Not the work of human hands? I wondered if my instructor had perhaps drunk too much wine this morning. "Have you seen it?" I asked.

"No," he continued. "It was only recently found in the flood-ruined West Gate. Before he took ill, the Master was blessed to view the Image, the Image of Edessa. He quickly painted this and instructed that I use the knowledge in my own work." Aggai propped the piece against the table and knelt down.

"See here," he said pointing to the lower half of the painting, "the Lord has a beard." He swept his fingers upward. "This is where the crown of thorns pierced His Holy Head."

Aggai solemnly explained the features of the true cloth: two wisps of hair on the forehead, a mark between the eyes, a crease over the neck and an open area under the nostrils.

He handed me a thin brush. "Today we work on the icons and later, the mosaics. We shall harness the light's splendour for God's glory."

My mind clouded. As a member of the clergy, named after the one who lived during the reign of King Abgar V, the word 'God' was never far from Aggai's lips. Still, I had never heard him so enthused. Why was he so convinced this was the Image? I trusted him but my hand trembled uncontrollably. "Perhaps, if I saw this Image..."

"You cannot," Aggai retorted. "It is too holy for common eyes to see, except perhaps on one holy day a year."

I walked over to my flat piece of wood and tried to paint. The strokes ran false. How could I paint something I have never seen?

After a while, I couldn't bear it any longer. "If I am ever to be an artist, I must see it to believe!" I cried and threw the brush down.

Aggai closed his eyes momentarily, as if in silent prayer. "Courage," he said softly. "Our Lord's face was divinely imprinted on the cloth. We each possess talents, gifts from Him to honour Him. Through our work, miracles will happen."

His words rang true. A sacred image such as this one would protect us from evil. Churches and monasteries held other icons that many flocked to for their miraculous powers. But was I the vessel through which another might be painted?

I sunk into the dusty ground and wept silently. To my surprise, my wise instructor did not force me to create the Image with the paints. Instead, he gently placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Wipe your tears,” whispered Aggai. “Perhaps you are more poet than artist,” he said with a smile. “I shall create this next painting, a miniature perhaps? And you, in turn, must do what God instructs you to do.”

I rubbed my eyes and tried once again to concentrate. What did this divine cloth Aggai spoke of look like? Did it shine as bright as the stars?

I stood up and shook my head. “I must first clear my mind.”

“Walk to the site of the cathedral,” Aggai advised. “The Master says a special place will be constructed there for the Cloth.”

With the parchment tucked under my arm, I made my way through the winding paths to where hundreds of sun-bronzed men toiled. I stared at a magnificent stone arch taking shape and the skilled artisans sculpting the impressive columns.

I walked towards a nearby stonecutter, a youth not much older than myself. “I have never seen such grandeur,” I told him.

He wiped a sweaty brow. “It is no simple task to fashion the heavens.”

At that moment, the pieces suddenly fit together. I finally understood. Every part of the Cathedral symbolized God’s majesty. Who could not be stirred by a dome that reflected the Universe or windows with images that relived

His Word? I vowed that someday, I would return and see this cathedral that was worthy enough to contain the Image of Edessa.

I returned to Aggai and told him of my decision. My destiny was to glorify God through words, not paintings. I wished to become a poet.

Aggai nodded and I knew he was pleased.

“Perhaps one day, the Spirit will move you to write of the Cloth, that which is not the work of human hands.”

And years later, as an old man standing within that divine cathedral, I did.



A ‘Mandylion’, or
Face of Christ on
Cloth, in the Vatican.
(image courtesy of
The Holy See)

**Acheiropoietos — Greek meaning
“not made with hands”**



A Legend of the Edessa Cloth

Long ago, a king called Abgar ruled Edessa. Abgar suffered from a terrible illness that his physicians could not cure. Upon hearing of the miraculous cures of a healer named Jesus, Abgar sent a messenger to summon this Jesus in the hopes he would be cured. Since Jesus knew he would soon be crucified, he could not go. Instead, he placed a cloth over his face which miraculously imprinted his image. When the cloth was sent to Edessa, the mere sight of it was enough to cure Abgar and he converted his land to Christianity.

- King Abgar V, who ruled Edessa during the time of Jesus, did exist
- historical documents indicate a Christian Church was destroyed during a flood in 201 A.D.
- later documents refer to Edessa's conversion to Christianity and an image of Christ's face and body.

In 525 A.D., Edessa suffered another great flood. Shortly after, a cloth with Jesus' face, the Edessa Cloth, was found hidden above the city gates. It was later referred to as an image that was "not the work of human hands'. Around 692 AD, the Byzantine Emperor had coins made showing Christ's face, based on the Edessa Cloth and similar to the Shroud.



(image courtesy of Ian Wilson)

Edessa is known as the first Christian city. Today it is mainly Muslim and called Sanli Urfa. It is located in southeast Turkey.



The Edessa Cloth is found.
(image courtesy of Mario Moroni)

The Vignon Markings

Early Christian art pictured Jesus as a beardless youth. This changed dramatically in the sixth century when Jesus was portrayed with a beard, long hair and large eyes, similar to the face on the Shroud.

A French scholar named Paul Vignon noticed similarities between the Shroud and Byzantine portraits of Jesus. In 1939, he wrote:

"There are many representations of Christ, notably the Image of Edessa which could be derived only from the shroud...(the) face visible on the shroud served as a model for artists as early as the fifth century. The artists did not copy slavishly, but tried to interpret the face, translating the masklike features into a living portrait, which was still a recognizable copy of the original."

These similarities, called the Vignon Markings, included:

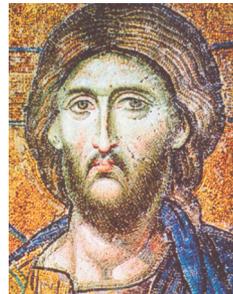
- two 'strands of hair' hanging in the middle of the forehead (which is actually a bloodstain on the Shroud)
- one raised eyebrow
- "square without a top" shape from creases between the eyebrows
- a "V" shape between eyes
- large eyes



4th century depiction
of Jesus



coin, 8th century



mosaic of Jesus,
12th century
(above images courtesy of
Ian Wilson)

- no ears, neck or shoulders on many icons
- a forked beard
- straight nose
- injury indicated by bruised forehead or swollen cheeks
- hairless gap between lip and beard
- line across the throat (fold mark)



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(Image courtesy of the Holy Shroud Guild)

The Emperor Constantine established Byzantium as his capital in 330 A.D. and renamed it Constantinople (known today as Istanbul, Turkey). The Edessa Cloth ceremoniously arrived in Constantinople on August 15, 944 A.D. For the next two centuries and more, it became part of the collection of relics of Jesus owned by Constantinople's emperors.



Istanbul today

