

The Sudarium of Oviedo: Signs of Jesus Christ's Death by César Barta

Reviewed by Michael Woodward

This third area to be examined in the Jenny Stanford 'Christian Relics and Phenomena' series, following the volumes on The Shroud of Turin and Byzantine Coins, will be warmly welcomed.

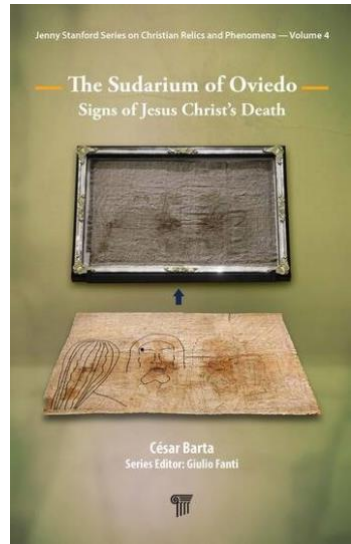
The subtitle implies a prejudgement of the status of the mysterious Sudarium of Oviedo, but those drawn to it will be at least receptive to the evidence that it indeed played a part in a death by crucifixion.

The book demonstrates how consistently the two witnesses of Shroud and Sudarium agree, and illuminate each other.

Pope John Paul II called the Shroud 'a mirror of the Gospel', and underlined that the Church seeks to approach its study without preconceived positions, inviting scientists to act with inner freedom. So the working hypothesis of the distinguished Spanish scientist, test engineer and prominent Sudariologist Cesar Barta is that the Oviedo linen is the cloth that St John reports was folded up and lying by itself. The evangelist also reports that this sudarium had been wrapped around Jesus' head.

Compared to the Shroud, the Sudarium is outwardly unbecoming to the untrained eye. It is a dirty, creased piece of linen, roughly the size of an opened pillow case (my own working model) heavily stained with blood and pulmonary oedema, as well as the olive oil smoke of centuries. There is no recognisable facial image or imprint, and the stain pattern itself is obscure; until, that is, one realises that the length of the linen has been securely attached to a man's hair, and then doubled back to increase the absorbency. This was a very practical move, as the Sudarium's purpose was clearly to meet Jewish funerary requirements to capture and bury the blood of a victim of violent death, and not let it fall on the ground.

Barta traces in great detail the possible histories of the Sudarium: like the Shroud it has an intriguing but hard to substantiate past, with oblique documented glimpses, apparently in and around Jerusalem, and long silent intervals. However, it was probably transferred to Spain after 614, and has an undisputed provenance in Oviedo since 1075, where it has been honoured in the Camara Santa of the cathedral.



Another highly significant Sudarium date is August 1965, when Shroud scholar Mgr Giulio Ricci made a visit. He perceived the symmetry of the main stains to understand its peculiar use, and managed to make a match between the beards in the two photos of Shroud and Sudarium. In 1977, Ricci was the catalyst for Max Frei to study the pollen and, in 1985, for Dr Bollone to study the blood. This brought the Sudarium into the mainstream of Shroud study, and in 1989 the Research Team of the Spanish Centre for Sindonology (EDICES) was formed to continue investigations. Crucially, Archbishop Merchan and the cathedral canons gave permission for "the complete study of the Holy Sudarium". The team included Italian and American scholars, as well as Mark Guscini.

This volume becomes a compendium of the deep and detailed research undertaken since then, and presented at the International Congresses in 1994 and 2007. The careful establishment of the position of the Sudarium in relation to the dead man on the cross: how the fluids leaked, and the likely timescale - from first fitting with needle and thread to its removal in the tomb - casts considerable light on the passage from cross to sepulchre.

Inconclusive carbon dating efforts are included, and meticulous research on fibres, showing a highly unusual density of weave, and one notably similar to the Shroud. The author's own daughters nobly assisted with some inventive and productive research into how long hair caked in sweat and blood might behave in both linens, and Barta helpfully includes some Unsolved Questions and Open Issues for further consideration.

This will be an indispensable aid to serious students of the Sudarium. In the 'For Attention' column of a possible 2nd Edition, some of the important photographs are very small and somewhat indistinct. Some plates with photographic paper might be an option? A modern solution might be a secure clickable archive on the publisher's website with high resolution images for closer inspection. I appreciate this book is a reference text, and is not going to be the kind of elegant Sudarium narrative we have enjoyed from Mark Guscini and Janice Bennett. However the flow is unnecessarily peppered with small solecisms that a final edit by a native speaker would remove.

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by César Barta

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