

The Back of Jesus in Medieval Painting Compared with the Turin Shroud

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One of the least investigated topics associated with the Shroud of Turin is surely that of the *back* of Jesus as it was represented in medieval art. The matter seems so mundane as to dwindle into insignificance in comparison with all the hi-tech forensic analysis the Shroud has undergone. Yet, it is happily a topic within the personal observational reach of us laypersons who do not carry microscopes around in our pockets all day.

The topic obviously bears on the question of the authenticity of the Turin Shroud. Is the Shroud truly the burial shroud of Jesus of Nazareth, or is it merely a medieval product, whether a deliberately faked burial shroud of Jesus or only a liturgical cloth of the altar frontal type? (see Google Images for examples of the latter.)

The Shroud famously bears the life-size double image, front and back, of a crucified man, who either is, or is supposed to be, Jesus. The bloody wounds about his head were obviously left by, or are supposed to represent wounds from, a crown of thorns.

The question of Jesus' *back* in medieval painting is very closely related to that of his *double image* on the Turin Shroud cloth. In that regard, one can categorically state that there is no known case of a double image of Jesus (medieval copies of the Shroud excepted, of course), or a double body image of anyone else, in medieval art, and that such uniqueness is already strong evidence for the Shroud's authenticity (considered in conjunction with its other unique and very rare features). Mirror images of people were occasionally depicted, but always only of faces and always as reflections on actual mirrors or still pools of water, shown within the paintings themselves (see Google Images for examples).

The oft-proposed medieval contact print artistic hypothesis for the image formation, involving dye, a statue, and a cloth, has sometimes been offered to explain that additional, back image, but there is no known instance of such contact print-making during the Middle Ages, and even if there were, that would not explain the many other unique features of the Shroud. In fact, it would still not fully explain the back view or dorsal aspect of Jesus on the Turin Shroud, because, while using a statue would make a back image or impression *possible*, it would by no means make it *necessary*. A merely frontal contact print image could also have been produced, and much more easily so. Thus, the riddle of that second, back image remains, if art it is.

Purely in the case of the *back* of Jesus, considered alone, one can likewise make a strong authenticity argument from numbers, or rather, again, the severe lack of numbers. Of course, a skeptic of the Shroud's authenticity might object: "But the Shroud is not unique in that regard. There are other medieval examples showing Jesus' back. Think of the Stuttgart Psalter illustration. Next question."

Such a comment as this – and they have been made – would really not do justice to the evidence. In the case of the 9th century Stuttgart Psalter, its illustration showing the back of Jesus during his flogging, indeed his entire dorsal aspect from head to heels (Fig. 1), is such a rare one as to be ‘virtually unique’ among medieval paintings or manuscript illustrations.¹ It is certainly the only case that I personally know of, having searched online for medieval paintings of Jesus and browsed heavily in a few dozen books specifically devoted to medieval art, mostly on him or the New Testament, which altogether contained hundreds of representations of him. But if any readers know of other examples, please speak up. There may indeed be others, tucked away obscurely somewhere in the churches and medieval manuscripts of Europe, though never reproduced in modern books, or only rarely so. Yet surely not many such. If two or three more eventually do pop up, that might make a total of three or four out of, perhaps, 10,000 medieval representations of Jesus, an utterly minimal percentage.



Fig 1: An illustration from folio 43 verso of the Stuttgart Psalter, from the State Library of Württemberg

One borderline case I know of showing the back of Jesus well in a scourging scene and the only other instance I’ve encountered so far (the subject is difficult to research because it apparently is not even recognized as one), has been titled ‘Flagellation of Christ’ and is found in a ‘Prayer book (fifteen Odes of St. Bridget)’ in the British Library. It is searchable online.² However, while the perspective is mostly a back view, it is also oblique, revealing the left side of his beard and his left cheek. Moreover, the work is dated to “Last quarter of 15th century or first quarter of 16th century”, and is thus very late medieval or even early Renaissance, by which time art styles and subjects had considerably changed, becoming more realistic than in the 13th or 14th century. And the Turin Shroud is definitely documented as far back as the 1350s, its possible prior history disputed by some. That illustration also shows Jesus wearing a loincloth or ‘modesty cloth’, thus not revealing his entire dorsal aspect. The illustration, or the page in the manuscript on

¹ The Stuttgart Psalter illustration of Jesus being flogged was discussed for a very different reason in the BSTS Newsletter No. 78 of December 2013 issue, pp. 25-27.

² See <https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/644680/view/flagellation-of-christ>

which it is found, apparently measures only 36.8 cm by 54.9 cm (14.5 in. by 21.6 in.), which is rather small.

The reason for this near-total lack of painted depictions of the back of Jesus, by which his full back or dorsal aspect is meant, not merely part of it, is obvious. No medieval Christian, high or low, would have been interested in seeing it. The back of his head? No. The back of his legs? No. This man was God to them. Why bother? And besides, it would almost be an insult. This realization, based on the absolute dearth of such examples, adds strength to that evidence. Not only are examples lacking, but also there seems a very good theological reason for that absence: a taboo.

As for the back of Jesus' *torso*, that would certainly be of some interest if it displayed the wounds from his scourging (as does that Stuttgart Psalter illustration), a famous event in his Passion. But such scourging wounds could easily have been shown, as indeed they sometimes were, by means of a partial back view only, which also showed, at least partially, his all-important divine face. There are examples in medieval paintings of such poses involving a side or partial back view of Jesus' scourging, yet still showing a glimpse of his face. But there are overwhelmingly more examples that show Jesus in a frontal pose and even completely without wounds, his scourging merely implied by the presence of Roman soldiers with whips.

It might be mentioned at this point that the Stuttgart Psalter is a manuscript containing, within its 130 pages, some 316 color illustrations including several others of Jesus which are invariably face-out frontal or profile poses. It is also a small manuscript, its illustrations all miniatures, so each one did not take long for the artist to produce. The Turin Shroud, by contrast, presents a fully life-size image of Jesus (actually two) that would have taken – assuming for a moment that it could be a medieval creation – far longer to prepare and produce than a mere miniature in a manuscript. Again, one wonders if any medieval artist would have spent so much time on a life-size rendering of such an uninteresting perspective as the back of Jesus' head, the back of his legs, or even the back of his torso unnecessarily viewed straight-on.

Jesus Depicted as Naked.

The 'back question' is closely related not only to the double image question but also to another unique or nearly unique macroscopic feature of the Turin Shroud in comparison to medieval art: the *nakedness* of Jesus.

We should first define our terms. 'Naked' here means a depiction of Jesus' body showing either his genitals or his buttocks. If he is depicted almost completely unclothed, yet still with a loincloth, a modesty cloth, or some other object discreetly blocking the view of such body parts, that does not count as naked here, as most readers, aged Victorians aside, will surely agree.

Actually, if *body size* is also used as a criterion, as it really should be, the nakedness of

Jesus on the Shroud may indeed be unique. I know of no definitely medieval, *life-size* depiction that shows him so obviously naked. Almost all of the few such depictions of him 'naked' are only half life-size, quarter life-size, or much less.

Two possible exceptions to this rule are the 5th and 6th century dome ceiling mosaics in the Orthodox and Arian baptisteries in Ravenna, Italy. Jesus, in each case pictured at his baptism in the Jordan River, is apparently shown about life-size and also frontally. But these examples are still discreet, with Jesus submersed to the waist in white or dark blue waters. The mosaics do not really count as medieval, either, having been created at the very end of the classical period by artists clearly schooled in the natural, realistic styles and values of that period (even Roman emperors were shown naked in some statues). The mosaics may be somewhat difficult to see, too. One must crane one's neck back and look up at the ceilings, not a posture convenient for lengthy contemplation. Also, at the distance of about nine meters from one's eye level to the figure of Jesus on the Orthodox Baptistery ceiling (in antiquity it was about twelve meters, or thirty-nine feet, because the floor was much lower then), he appears considerably smaller than life-size. The optical situation is similar with the Arian Baptistery Jesus.

With regard to the truly smaller sized nudes, the aforementioned Stuttgart Psalter does show Jesus fully naked from the rear. But the Psalter's overall measurements are only 26.5 cm (height) by 17.5 cm (width), and in the small illustration within it, he appears to be merely a dozen or so centimeters in height, with his buttocks comprising just a couple centimeters thereof. The Turin Shroud dimensions present a vast contrast. And so, to imagine – as some authenticity skeptics do – that the Shroud, with that life-size rear view of a naked Jesus, would have been produced in the Middle Ages for regular liturgical use as an altar frontal cloth, a mere decoration with no claim, or excuse, of authenticity to it, stretched out in front of the faithful in some French cathedral for services lasting an hour or more, is surely a prodigious feat of imagination. That the Turin Shroud itself, with its nakedness, has attracted vast crowds over the centuries is very largely due to its aura of authenticity and even supernaturalism, since so many of those who have come to see it have believed the image formed in the 1st century during a resurrection of Jesus. Others have been attracted by its highly touted mystery.

It is sometimes objected by Shroud authenticity skeptics that plentiful medieval paintings do show Jesus naked – in the nativity scenes, for example, or at his baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist (Fig 2) – and therefore that the Turin Shroud is not so rare or unique, but could easily be a medieval work. With regard to those *nativity* scenes, however, they are not very daring or revealing. Authenticity skeptics who cite them as evidence in this question may be unaware that babies are usually born naked, not fully clothed. And even apart from that nativity occasion and Bethlehem manger setting, Jesus as a baby is simply not risqué. In a word, the nativity scenes are *irrelevant* to this question. So are attempts by skeptics to confuse the issue by changing the subject from a naked Jesus Christ to nakedness in general in medieval art, including that of the lowly sinners Adam and Eve.



Fig 2: Baptism of Christ by Piero della Francesca. Courtesy National Gallery, London.



Fig 3: Baptism of Christ by Giovanni Baronzio. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.

As for the scenes of Jesus' *baptism* in medieval art, the authenticity skeptics' case seems likewise weak. It is sometimes claimed that Jesus is "almost always shown naked in baptisms, even to the extent of showing his genitalia sometimes".³ However, in addition to the "almost always ... even ... sometimes" discrepancy or self-contradiction here, and the lack of any specified sample size for this claim, Jesus, at least in my considerable though not exhaustive search experience (involving well over a hundred baptism scenes viewed online), is shown wearing a loincloth about half the time in such baptism scenes, and at times even a flowing robe – the artists' grand nod to discretion. In cases where he is shown without such apparel, the artists typically bring in a conveniently placed

³ Hugh Farey, a major Shroud authenticity skeptic, speaking during a late 2022 Shroud discussion on the 'Real Seekers' blog, which then moved all too quickly on to other topics. See also Farey's medievalshroud.com blog post '*Medieval Modesty and Barbecued Saints*' of Feb. 28, 2023, again containing that 'almost always' mistake, and various clever diversions. Hugh Farey's earlier, January 24, 2021 blog post "Giotto's Jesus" details a few very general similarities between 14th century Western European artistic depictions of the crucified Jesus and the appearance of Jesus on the Lirey-Turin Shroud. Farey suggests that the Shroud was therefore an early 14th century creation. I think he has the relationship somewhat backward. With the fall of the classical world in the 5th century and the rise of Christianity, otherworldly values came to dominate life, and art was accordingly symbolic and highly stylized for centuries. Only gradually, but inevitably, did artists rediscover realism. So, by the mid-14th century, Western art had finally caught up to some (not all) of the brutal realities of 1st century crucifixions, as seen on the Turin Shroud, assuming it is authentic. Perhaps a personal awareness of the more honest and realistic depictions in 14th century art even partly influenced the owners of the Shroud to display it when they finally did.

forearm to assist with his modesty, or else the waters of the River Jordan, in which he is shown standing waist-deep. The waters are usually dark, a bluish or greenish color, often with little ripples indicated by wavy lines, all of which together considerably obscure his nakedness. Rarely in these baptism scenes is he depicted truly naked (and never from behind, in my search experience). When so, he oddly appears without visible genitalia. Sometimes there is only a vague dark patch at the groin. See, for example, *The Baptism of Christ* by Giovanni Baronzio, circa 1335, 46 cm by 49 cm, with the figure of Jesus himself merely about 25 cm or 10 inches high (Fig 3). Should such a portrayal really be counted as ‘naked’, and, if so, on the same scale of nakedness as that of the Turin Shroud? No and again no.

In searching through many dozens of medieval paintings, mosaics, or miniatures of Jesus baptism scenes online (Google Images), I have seen only two or three of him openly naked, without any discretionary object in front, yet even then, without any such object in front, the private parts are actually omitted, ‘air-brushed’ completely away, medieval style. In fairness to the Turin Shroud Jesus, too, any such ‘naked Jesus’ scenes in art referenced by Shroud authenticity skeptics really should date from before 1400 (or even about 1356, the earliest confirmed date for the Shroud’s existence), given the increasing naturalism in medieval art in the course of the 15th century. They might also best be found geographically closer than Cappadocia, some 2100 miles or 3400 kilometers southeast of Lirey, France, the location of that first documented (Turin) Shroud appearance.⁴ It should also be said that these few examples of (quasi-) nakedness are entirely to be expected in baptism scenes, since ancient baptism involved submersion – dipping or dunking adults in river waters, not just sprinkling water on infants’ heads as later was done. Clothing was presumably dispensed with or was minimal in first century baptisms (for men anyway). After all, the rite symbolized spiritual cleansing, a leaving of one’s old life or ‘old clothes’ for a new life.

As for first century *crucifixions* in faraway Palestine, people of late medieval Western Europe presumably did not know the victims were naked, or did not know for certain. With specific regard to Jesus’ crucifixion, and then the honorable entombment of his body, the four gospels say nothing about nakedness. One gospel, Matthew, states that the Roman soldiers “divided up his clothing by casting lots” (27:35), but that would not necessarily have left him completely naked. So, a loincloth or other such cloth was assumed or was easily added to such medieval painted scenes. The one or two exceptions I have seen are tiny in size, with Jesus about ten inches (25cm) tall.

Finally, with regard to Jesus as shown naked in his *tomb*, or his body in preparation for it (search Google Images for his ‘entombment,’ ‘lamentation’) the number of such instances in medieval art that I am so far aware of is absolutely minimal, only two or three. And they each reveal only a naked hip, not the genitals.⁵ The famous illustration of a dead and

⁴ Hugh Faley, *Medieval Modesty and Barbecued Saints.*

⁵ Significantly, too, all of those entombment and lamentation paintings show other objects or figures, either the mourning women followers, angels hovering in the sky, or landscapes in the background, or all three. The Turin Shroud, by contrast, is barren of all such artistic clutter.

naked Jesus being prepared for his tomb in the Hungarian Pray Manuscript, circa 1190, which reveals one buttock as well as a hip, does not count, because there are excellent reasons to conclude that it was based heavily on an earlier viewing of the (Turin) Shroud in Constantinople (see shroud.com for articles on that manuscript). Besides, that illustration is tiny in size, and later paintings of its type, by Lorenzetti or di Martini, are also small. Still other tomb paintings or illustrations, very few in number and small, showing Jesus wearing a half-transparent loincloth revealing little or nothing, may also be questionable evidence in this case. To see any more details, the microscopes dispensed with at the beginning of this article might be needed after all.

Conclusion

In sum, the full back view, the double image, the nakedness, and the life-size proportions of the Turin Shroud Jesus all combine, as very rare or unique features easily recognizable by any layperson, to strongly support the authenticity of the Shroud.

It has often been said that the Shroud of Turin is the most studied object in all of history. That may or may not be true. It is certainly one of the most studied. But I have recently realized another ‘superlative’ that applies to the Shroud, especially in the context of the art world, a field that should be more aware of such larger artistic questions as those related above. It seems to me that the Shroud of Turin is actually the *least studied object* in history among art historians, with very few exceptions so far.⁶ And why? Perhaps because they are afraid of it.



John Loken is the author of *The Shroud Was the Resurrection* (2006), supporting the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin and also supporting a purely natural formation of its image of Jesus, not a supernatural or man-made one.

⁶ Ernst Kitzinger, art historian at Harvard University, interviewed in 1979 by Gilbert Lavoie, stated: “The Shroud of Turin is unique in art. It doesn’t fall into any artistic category. For us, a very small group of experts around the world, we believe that the Shroud of Turin is really the Shroud of Constantinople.” He continued, “As for the blood marks done by artists, there are no paintings that have blood marks like those of the Shroud.” (Lavoie, 1998, *Unlocking the Secrets of the Shroud*, pp. 65-66). Kitzinger’s ‘Constantinople’ comment would date the Shroud to at least as far back as 1204 and by implication probably centuries earlier still, while his ‘blood marks’ comment recognizes its actual uniqueness if it is a work of art, also implying that it may not be one. Another art historian, Thomas de Wesselow, wrote an entire book, *The Sign* (2012), supporting the authenticity of the Turin Shroud.