

Investigating Veronica's Veil

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Christ and Veronica, French 18th Century

Most of us know the story of Veronica and her veil. Jesus was carrying his cross on the road to Calvary when he either paused or fell. A woman rushed out of the crowd, whipped off her veil, and wiped his face. As her reward, the image of his face was miraculously imprinted on the veil. It's a story that's been told and retold. Zefferelli included it in his movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*. I included it in my book, *Witness*.

But it doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible.

Critics would say this is proof that it's nothing but pious fiction. They also claim that the name, Veronica, is a combination of the words true – *vera* (Latin) and image – *eikon* (Greek).

Let's put the name thing to rest first. The idea of a manufactured name can be traced back to the *Otia Imperialia* of Gervase of Tilbury in Essex, England (d. 1211). His work was translated and distributed throughout Europe and the idea took hold. We all know that names move from one culture to another. For instance, in Russian John is Ivan, in Scottish Ian, and in German Yohan. The same thing existed in Biblical times. People often had two names one Greek and one Aramaic. The apostle Simon was called *Cephas* in Aramaic and *Petros* in Greek. The Greek form of Berenice is *Berenike* which in Latin becomes... Veronica.

Now to the veil itself. It has a verifiable history exceeding that of the Shroud of Turin. For hundreds of years it was enshrined in St. Peter's Basilica then, 400 years ago, it mysteriously disappeared and re-appeared in a Capuchin church in the town of Manoppello, in Italy's Abruzzi region. There farmers and fishermen have revered this veil for centuries as the "Holy Face" (*Il Volto Santo*). Before it came to Rome, it was in Constantinople, and before that in the Middle East. A Syrian text from Kamulia in Cappadocia from around 500 tells us that the image was on a material "drawn out of the water."

The veil is transparent, like a silk stocking; the image less like a painting and more like a large photographic slide. The delicate cloth is gold and honey-colored, just as the face of Christ was described by Gertrud of Helfta in the 13th century. Held up to the light, it is transparent and shows the countenance in three-dimensional, almost holographic clarity on both sides.

By its consistency, the veil would seem to be nylon — though nylon clearly hadn't been invented yet. What is it, then? Cotton, wool and linen are all much too thick to allow its immaterial transparency, even silk does not permit this.

Enter byssus.

Chiara Vigo lives on the small island of Sant' Antioco off the coast of Sardinia. Descended from Chaldaeans and Phoenicians, she is the last byssus weaver on earth and heir to an unbroken tradition dating to ancient times . Byssus is produced from threads a certain variety of sea mussel, *pinna nobilis*, generates to cling to the ground. Every May Chiara dives into the sea to collect and harvest them. She examined the veil and confirmed that it is made from byssus.

Byssus was the most costly fabric in the ancient world. It has been found in the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs, and is mentioned in the Bible, where it is said to be obligatory for the carpets of the Holy of Holies and for the *Ephod*, the vestment of the high priest.



Enhanced Image of Veronica's Veil

As for the image itself, its proportions conform to the measurements of a human face and there is no trace of color or paint on the cloth. Sister Blandina Paschalis Schlomer, a German Trappist nun, pharmacist and icon painter, made painstaking comparisons of the image on the Manoppello cloth and the face of the man depicted on the Shroud of Turin, and concluded they were images of the same person. Every detail of both faces is exactly congruent: the same size, the same shape, the same wounds.

Yet none of this convinces the skeptics. Nothing ever will. In the final analysis it's more about faith than science, and each person must make up their own mind.