THE VERA ICON, KING ABGAR, AND ST. VERONICA.

BY THE EDITOR.

NO authentic picture of Christ is known to have existed among the earliest Christians, but when Christianity spread there soon arose the desire among large classes of believers to know what Christ looked like, and as a result thereof a certain type of portraits developed which claimed to have been made in a supernatural way. They were said to be pictures not painted by artists but made without hands, and were for this reason called acheiropoietoi.\(^1\)

We must remember that a large number of the earlier Christians possessed the Jewish prejudice against images and looked upon artists as idol makers who were classed among the disreputable professions and deemed unworthy to belong to the congregation of the Lord. This tendency dominated the Church through the first, second and third centuries but it soon yielded to the natural desire of seeing with bodily eyes those things which are dearest to man's heart.

Christ was represented by the majority of the early Christians as ungainly, because Isaiah (liii. 2) says of him "He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him."

This same chapter is most significant because it describes the expected Messiah as "a man of sorrows" and contains among other verses the following passage:

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him: and with his stripes we are healed."

There were Christians at the end of the third century who were in possession of pictures of Christ, but the Church fathers looked

\(^1\) εἰκόνες ἄχειροποιήτοι,
with scorn upon this practice. Eusebius plainly says to the Empress Helena that “such images are forbidden by the Jewish law and should not be found in churches.” He continues: “Some poor woman brought me two painted figures like philosophers, and ventured to say that they represented Paul and the Saviour—I do not know on what ground. But to save her and others from offence, I took them from her and kept them by me, not thinking it right, in any case, that she should exhibit them further, that we may not seem idolaters to carry our God about with us.”

When the fear of idolatry began to abate, Christians remembered the passage in Ps. xlv. 2: “Thou art fairer than the children of men; grace is poured into thy lips, therefore God hath blessed thee forever,” and under the influence of this thought, Christ was regarded as an ideal man, beautiful and majestic in appearance. This view gained more and more influence and found expression in a description of the personality of Christ which in former centuries was assumed to be genuine but is now almost unanimously regarded as spurious. It is a letter which purports to come from a certain Lentulus, who calls himself “President of the people of Jerusalem” and addresses his epistle “To the Roman Senate and People.” It reads as follows:

“There has appeared in our times, and still is, a man of great virtue named Christ Jesus, who is called by the Gentiles a prophet of truth, whom his disciples call the Son of God, raising the dead and healing diseases. He is a man of lofty stature, handsome, having a venerable countenance which the beholders can both love and fear. He has wavy hair, rather crisp, of a bluish tinge, and glossy, flowing down from his shoulders, with a parting in the middle of the head after the manner of the Nazarenes. His forehead is even and very serene, and his face without any wrinkle or spot, and beautiful with a slight blush. His nose and mouth are without fault; he has a beard abundant and reddish, of the colour of his hair, not long but forked. His eyes are sparkling and bright. He is terrible in rebuke, calm and loving in admonition, cheerful but preserving gravity, has never been seen to laugh but often to weep. Thus, in stature of body, he is tall; and his hands and limbs are beautiful to look upon. In speech he is grave, reserved, and modest; and he is fair among the children of men.”

Another description of the personality of Jesus is preserved by John of Damascus, an author of the eighth century who claims to rely on older authorities. His description differs from that attributed to Lentulus mainly by describing the hair of Jesus as curl-
ing and of a glossy black, his complexion as of a yellowish color like that of wheat (in which particular it is said he resembled his mother), and further it is stated that his eyebrows touched one another.

When the early Christians thought of Christ they associated his name first of all with his passion and crucifixion. Hence the early pictures of Christ showed a face filled with agony and crowned with thorns. There are many churches which possess such paintings and legend connects them either with Abgar, King of Edessa, or with St. Veronica.

Edessa was a small kingdom north of Palestine which flourished between 137 B.C. and 216 A.D. Most of its rulers bore the name Abgar, but the one in question who became connected with the picture of Christ was called Abgar XV (surnamed Ucomo, i.e., "the black one") and ruled 13-30 A.D. There is an Apocryphal correspondence extant between Abgar and Christ which was preserved in the archives of Edessa and was known to Eusebius who translated it from the Syrian text into Greek. It consists of a letter written by Abgar to Christ inviting Him to come to his kingdom and to heal him of a disease. He had heard that He was persecuted by the Jews and promised Him protection in his kingdom, but Christ answered that He had to stay to accomplish His mission, but after His ascension He would send him one of His disciples who would heal him.

The text of the letters reads in an English translation as follows:

"Abgar Ucomo, chief of the land, to Jesus, the good Redeemer, that hath appeared in the land of Jerusalem: Greeting.

"I have heard of thee and of the healing which is performed by thy hands without medicines and herbs. For, as it is said, thou makest the blind to see, and the lame to walk, and thou cleansest the lepers, and thou castest out unclean spirits and demons, and those that are tormented with lingering diseases thou healest, and the dead thou raisest up. And when I heard all these things of thee, I settled in my mind one of two things: either that thou art God who camest down from heaven and dost these things, or that thou art the Son of God and dost these things. For this cause, therefore, I have written to ask of thee that thou wouldest trouble thyself to come to me and heal this sickness which I have. For I have also heard that the Jews murmur against thee, and wish to injure thee. Now I have a small and beautiful city which is sufficient for both."
“Copy of the things which were written by Jesus, by the hand of Ananias the tabellarius to Abgar, chief of the land.

“Blessed is he that believeth in me when he hath not seen me. For it is written concerning me that they who see me would not believe in me, and they who see me not would believe and be saved. Now as for this thou hast written to me, that I would come to thee, it behooveth that I should accomplish here everything because whereof I have been sent. And after I have accomplished it, then I shall be taken up to Him that sent me. And when I am taken up I will send thee one of my disciples to heal thy sickness; he shall also give salvation unto thee and to them that are with thee.”

The translator, Mr. B. Harris Cowper, thinks that this correspondence is a forgery of the middle of the third century. It must have originated at the time when Christianity was introduced into Edessa, which event took place under Abgar IX, 179 to 217 A.D. Local patriotism regarded the correspondence with Jesus as genuine, and even at an early date it was held to be a talisman against all sorts of evil. We know that the entire correspondence was inscribed above the city gates of Edessa as a means of protection against hostile attacks. A later redaction even contains a passage in which Jesus himself recommends his letter for this purpose. It was inscribed upon private houses, and its use spread outside of Edessa over the Christian world. Even in England it has been found inscribed upon the door posts of farm houses as late as the nineteenth century.

The report of Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical History (1, 13, 6-22) contains the oldest, and in its way the most complete, report of this interesting document which was accepted as true, and found credit in the Orient as well as in the Occident. In spite of the fact that St. Augustine and St. Jerome explicitly declare that nothing written has come down from Jesus, the story is contained in the Syrian Doctrina Addai² and in the Acts of Thaddeus, while at the Council held under Gelasius in 494 it was discredited and counted among the Apocrypha.

The legend of the Abgar portrait has reference to these letters and states that Abgar’s messenger, Ananias, was a painter and had been requested to paint a picture of Jesus, but he was unable to do so on account of the crowds that surrounded the Lord. Having received the reply from Jesus, he still lingered, whereupon Jesus called for water to wash his face and he dried it on a cloth which

ABGAR'S LETTER RECEIVED AND DELIVERED BY ANANIAS.
(Reproduced from the New York American.)

CHRIST SENDING HIS PORTRAIT TO KING ABGAR.
retained a perfect portrait of his features. This he handed to Ananias as a present to his master, who on beholding it was at once cured of his disease. This legend must be later than the letters, for

in the correspondence we find a promise that the king will be cured later on by one of Christ's disciples.

Emperor Constantinus Porphyrogenitus (who died in 959)
informs us in a treatise written on the subject that this picture, called the Edessenum, had been preserved at Edessa for a long time until in 944 it fell into the hands of the Saracens when they conquered the place, but Emperor Romanus Lacapenus recaptured the relic and sent it to his capital Constantinople.

At the time when Porphyrogenitus wrote his treatise on the Edessenum with the intention of proving that the portrait of Christ then preserved at Constantinople was the genuine, we are told that a counterfeit copy of it was in the hands of Khosroes, King of Persia, who had demanded its possession for the purpose of healing a daughter who happened to suffer from obsession by evil spirits. It seems credible that this picture might be the original portrait fabricated at Edessa and for a long time preserved in the possession of the Abgar kings. Modern readers will naturally feel tempted to believe that the story is rather an evidence in favor of the contention for the refutation of which it has obviously been invented, and so we may assume as most probable that the original Edessenum after having fallen into the hands of the Saracens was kept for some time
THE ABGAR PORTRAIT OF CHRIST AT GENOA.
(Reproduced from the *New York American.*)
at the court of the Persian king and finally, its significance being forgotten, was lost or destroyed.

What has become of the picture described by Porphyrogenitus is not known. It is not impossible that it was destroyed when Constantinople was taken by the Turks. Some say, however, that the Venetians carried it to Rome in 1207, where it is now preserved in St. Sylvester’s, while others claim that its home is at Genoa.

According to Grimm, one of the best German art critics of modern times, the picture in St. Sylvester’s is a product of the sixteenth century and does not possess any artistic value. There are only isolated voices that dare defend its claim to genuineness, but even so conservative an archaeologist as Franz Xaver Kraus treats this view as a strange aberration.

It is claimed that Emperor John Palaeologus had presented the picture to Leonardo Montaldo, in recognition of the great services

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he had rendered to the Greek empire in the wars against the Turks, and this gentleman carried the precious relic to his native city Genoa sometime between the years 1361-1363. There it passed into the possession of the Doges and was given at last in 1388 into the custody of the church of St. Bartholomew, where it is still guarded by six locks the keys to which are kept by trustees chosen from six noble families; and at Whitsuntide it is exhibited for three days to the general public.

The Abgar picture at Genoa is framed in a golden case and covered with painted canvas, leaving the face alone open to view. Ten small pictures on the cover can no longer be interpreted with certainty, they seem to illustrate the fate of the holy relic and its final recovery. On panels under the abbreviations IC and XC, meaning ΙΗΧΟΥϹ and ΧΡΙΣΤΟϹ, the words τὸ αἷμα μανδύλιον, "the holy cloth," may be read.

The Abgar pictures preserved in these and other churches have suffered much by age, and the colors are too much faded to have them properly reproduced. They are painted in the style of Byzantine art, and are painfully severe, nor can they be said to possess artistic value.

*KING AGBAR RECEIVES THE PORTRAIT OF CHRIST.*
Detail of the Late Edessenum preserved in the Prince Consort's Collection of the National Gallery. (After Mrs. Jameson and Lady Eastlake.)

The form μανδύλιον is a diminutive of μανδίνα, a woolen cloth, which word philologists deem to be of Persian origin. In our picture the inscription is illegible. We find another reproduction of it in Scheible's Kloster, Vol. VII, part I, plate 4, facing p. 152, where the letters are plain, but the Greek is incorrect (it reads ΤΟ ΑΓΙΟΝ ΜΑΝΔΙΔΙΟΝ) which, if this is the faithful transcription of the original, would indicate that the painter was not familiar with Greek.
A later portrait made in imitation of the Edessenum, not a counterfeit but apparently a legitimate copy, is preserved in the National Gallery at London and belongs to the Prince Consort’s Collection. It retains the severity of the Byzantine style but has lost much of the gruesome character of the older pictures. The three letters in the halo are intended to mean 'O ὌΝ, i. e., “the Being,” or “he who is the life.” The inscription alone proves that the artist’s home was probably Italy or some West European country, but assuredly not Greece or the Orient.

The portrait is surrounded by illustrations of the Abgar legend, one of which is here reproduced after the cut published in the History of our Lord by Mrs. Jameson and Lady Eastlake.

Abbé Gaffre, a French priest, has discovered of late an illuminated manuscript which tells the Abgar story in Greek, and we have here reproduced the most interesting pictures of it from photographs kindly loaned us by Mr. Morrill Goddard, Sunday Editor of the New York American.\(^5\)

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The most important rival pictures of the Edessenum are the Veronica pictures which, legend relates, were procured through St. Veronica. The story is given in several versions. One of them states that Veronica was a lady of distinction and lived in a house which Jesus passed on his way to Calvary. When she saw him in his agony she wiped the perspiration off his forehead with a handkerchief, and the portrait of Jesus remained impressed upon it forever.

The day dedicated to St. Veronica in the Roman Catholic calendar is the fourth of February.

There are several Apocryphal gospels which mention this story,\(^5\) The pictures were published in the New York American in the spring of 1908.

ABBÉ GAFFRE’S SCROLL.
(Reproduced from the New York American.)
especially two, entitled "The Revenging of the Saviour" and "The Death of Pilate," both late productions written in a most barbarous Latin by a man who exhibits an astonishing ignorance of things historical and geographical.

We read in these late gospels that Tiberius Caesar suffered from leprosy and was informed that his disease was a punishment for the bad laws of his empire which made it possible for an innocent man to have been crucified in Jerusalem by the Jews under Pontius Pilate. Anxious to be cured of his ulcers Tiberius sends Velosianus, one of his officers, to procure a picture of the Saviour, and the messenger returns to Rome together with Veronica who brings her portrait of Christ. When Tiberius saw the picture he bent his
knees and worshiped before it and was miraculously healed. Incidentally we are told that the most terrible revenge was taken upon the Jews and also on Pontius Pilate.

A manuscript book with pen-drawings of the fourteenth century containing the complete legend of St. Veronica, is preserved in the Ambrosian Library at Milan, and we here reproduce from it the illustration representing the scene of St. Veronica's appearance before Emperor Tiberius.

The story as related in "The Revenging of the Saviour" is still more complicated by introducing Titus and stating that he too

![Illustration of Velosianus introducing St. Veronica to Emperor Tiberius.](image-url)

VELOSIANUS INTRODUCES ST. VERONICA TO EMPEROR TIBERIUS.

Pen drawing of the 14th century from a book in the Ambrosian Library at Milan.

(After Mrs. Jameson and Lady Eastlake.)

had suffered from an incurable wound on his face which was also healed through the miraculous power of Veronica's picture, and it was he who induced Tiberius to be cured likewise.

In this gospel Veronica introduces herself to the Roman officer Velosianus by these words: "I touched the hem of His garment in the crowd, for I had an issue of blood twelve years, and straightway he healed me."

Here we have an identification of Veronica with a figure well
known in the Gospels, who for some reason seems to have been a favorite in the imagination of the early Christian churches, and there is a statue of heroic size in St. Peter's at Rome which Baroniius, a learned historian of the sixteenth century, calls the statue of Berenice.

It would be futile to trace all the Veronica pictures that exist in the different churches, for there are too many, and according to the imputed sanctity of one or another, innumerable copies were made. The two preserved in Rome, one in St. Peter's and the other in the church of St. Sylvester, represent the two different types,

*Baronius published his *Annales Ecclesiastical a Chr. Nat. ad annum 1198*, in 1588-93.*
and it happens that each one corresponds to one form of the legend. It must be remembered that according to one tradition, Veronica receives the picture of Christ in response to her expressed desire to possess a likeness of him, and so it shows Christ in the full vigor of his manhood, although according to the Christ-conception of the age, severe and stern. According to the other tradition, which in time has become the more popular, Veronica handed the kerchief to the suffering Christ on his way to Golgotha to wipe the sweat from his perspiring brow. She showed no intention to gain such a treasure as a likeness of the Saviour, and it was given to her as an unsought reward for her service. The picture in St. Sylvester's represents the former tradition, that in St. Peter's the latter, and both preserve the old Byzantine type which produces a certain wierdness in the features of Christ, by elongating the face, especially the nose. For all we know they may be imitations of the Abgar pictures.

Dante in the *Vita Nuova* alludes to the *vera icon* as "The blessed image which Jesus Christ left to us as the likeness of his most beautiful countenance" (XLI). Reference is also made in the *Paradiso* to the Veronica picture in St. Peter's (XXXI, 103-108):

"As he who peradventure from Croatia
Cometh to gaze at our Veronica,
Who through its ancient fame is never sated,
But says in thought, the while it is displayed,
'My Lord, Christ Jesus, God of very God,
Now was thy semblance made like unto this?'"

There is a letter extant written in the year 1249 by an Abbess of the Cistercians, addressed to Jacobus de Trecis, chaplain to the Pope, requesting him to send her a copy of the picture of Christ preserved at Rome in St. Peter's, and in the chaplain's answer the copy made for the Abbess is called "a veronica, Christ's faithful picture or likeness." This is one instance only of many similar cases, and we may assume that most of the many pictures of Christ originated in a similar way and were called veronicas.

It is noticeable that the word veronica is here still used in its original sense as *vera icon*, i.e., "true likeness," and the chaplain's letter makes no reference to the Veronica legend, nor does the writer seem to know anything of a saint of that name. This suggests that the legend of St. Veronica may have existed side by side with the original meaning of the term *vera icon*, and its corruption *veronica*. The Veronica legend has been incorporated into the *Legenda*
aurea and has ever remained a favorite story throughout Christendom.

The facts mentioned naturally suggest the assumption that the story of Veronica was invented to explain the existence of the

Veronica pictures, and considering the fact that we can trace the words "veronica" in two senses side by side, first as a Christ picture and then as the name of a saint, there can scarcely be any doubt as to the origin of the latter from the former. Nevertheless we some-
times find another explanation even in most modern encyclopedias. The *Century Dictionary* regards the name Veronica as "a corrupted form of Berenice (Greek *Berenike*)" and explains the connection between Veronica and *vera icon* as accidental, saying, "The name suggested the word *verum icon*, true picture, and gave rise to the fable."7

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

7 The author of this item has allowed his knowledge of the classical tongues to become a little rusty, for the words *verum icon* contain a grammatical blunder, since *icon* is a feminine noun and not neuter. But the mistake is not much worse than the derivation of Veronica given by a contributor to the *Standard Dictionary*, to whom this late Latin phrase including the Latin adjective *vera*, is "Greek."