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Which Burial Ointments were present on the Shroud of Turin?

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Abstract:

Regarding the Shroud of Turin: data, information, measurements, and hypotheses coming from different research areas are welcome because they can help understand what seems like a Mystery. Recently, one of our articles highlighted that the mixture of Aloe and Myrrh (two aromatic substances) was not used to anoint the body of Jesus Christ, even though it had already been brought to the Tomb by Nicodemus on the day of the preparation. At the same time, an article appeared in the scientific literature describing how myrrh had been found on the Shroud. This result adds to another from the 80s that reported the presence of Aloe and Myrrh. So, we are facing two different outcomes: one in line with the absence of the above aromas, the other with their presence. Our picture is supported by the fire in Chambery, the thermal values reached in the Reliquary, and the thermolability of the aromas, but above all by a thorough investigation of the Gospels. In this new writing, we want to reconsider and compare the Sacred Texts, which are the strength of our ideas, to be certain about the absence or presence of the two aromas on the Burial linen of the Nazarene.

Key words: Shroud of Turin, Aloe, Myrrh, Aromatic Perfumes, Anointing of the Nazarene.

Introduction

The Shroud of Turin is a very complex archaeological finding (Jumper et al., 1984; Schwalbe and Rogers, 1982), difficult to fully understand. Consequently, considering what it could represent (the Burial linen of Jesus Christ), it is necessary to acquire as much knowledge as possible and have enough information for a definite answer. We are sure that the image on the cloth is that the Nazarene because this crucifix, beyond the correspondences with the Gospels, has two wounds that are not part of Roman torture: forehead-nape and side. For example, verifying the presence of aromas and/or burial ointments on the Shroud of Turin is very important: if the result was positive, it would allow us to claim that we are investigating a burial sheet. Even the characteristics of these chemical substances, if known, could give us useful information about the origin of the above burial linen.

Recently, we investigated the possible presence of Aloe and Myrrh on the burial linen of the Nazarene (Roberto et al., 2013). We are sure of the presence of these aromas at the Tomb, but we are not certain they were used (Fazio, 2026). The Apostle John in his Gospel (19:39) writes: 'Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds' (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010). This verse, regarding the burial of Jesus Christ, is the only one that mentions Nicodemus and the enormous amount of Aloe and Myrrh mixture brought to the Tomb.

In the 1980s, a study by Baima Bollone that claimed the presence of Blood, Aloe, and Myrrh on the Shroud, appears (Baima Bollone, 1983; Baima Bollone and Gaglio, 1984). This work on the two aromas had no follow-up for more than four decades. So, our conviction, linked to the absence of these two aromas on the Shroud, grew stronger, and while we were drafting our article (Fazio, 2026), we noticed another study by Fanti, who reported having found traces of one of the two aromas on the Shroud: Myrrh (Fanti et al., 2026; Fanti and Pappas, 2026). Now, even though one swallow doesn't make a summer, two are worth an explanation.

Discussions

So, we decided to dig deeper into our investigation to be even more sure of what we had already written or to see if our picture was wrong. A point in favor of our ideas is the Chambery fire in 1532. There, in the Reliquary, the thermal state should have been fatal for aromas and/or burial ointments, chemical substances, very sensitive to heat (Stevenson, 1977). The traces of silver (melting around 960 °C) indicate that part of the

Reliquary melted, and the drops of metal that burned small portions of the Shroud show the high temperatures reached even in the areas farthest from the fusion zone. Anyway, the cloth underwent a first restoration in 1534 in Chambery and a second one later in 2002 in Turin. Figure 1 shows an image of the Shroud where the missing portions of fabric burned during the 1532 fire are visible. The symmetrical distribution of these portions on the burial linen is due to the fact that the cloth was placed in the Reliquary after being folded multiple times.

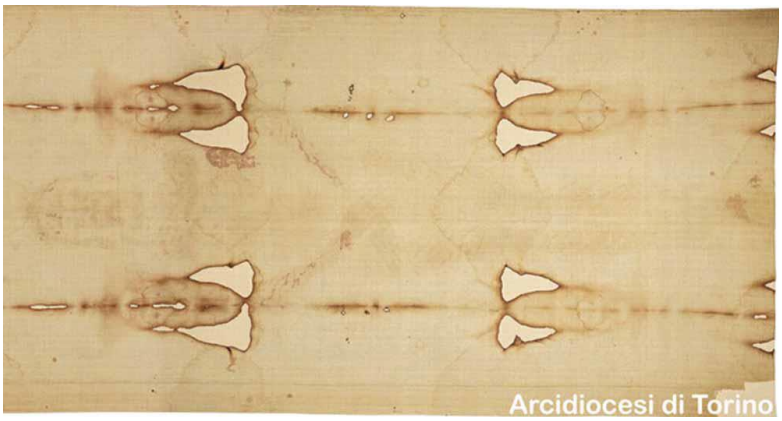


Fig. 1. Full frontal Image of the Shroud of Turin just as it appears to the visitor after the 2002 restoration happened in Turin and carried out by Mechthild Flury Lemberg and Irene Tomedi. The two experts removed the patches, cleaned up the edges of the burnt areas, and replaced the Holland cloth. In these conditions it is easy to see the missing linen portions and their symmetrical distribution.

Also, the differences between the body image and the burned areas are due to the presence, in the latter, of pyrolytic products that appear in the complete absence of oxygen. If oxygen had been present, the combustion would have completely destroyed the Shroud. Anyway, these actually confirm the high temperatures reached inside the Reliquary, as also R.N. Rogers and D. Soran, quoted in (Pellicori, 1980), affirm. So, if there had been aromatic substances, they would have been destroyed during the fire. Assuming that these substances had contributed to the coloring of the linen, after the fire the color (or Image Intensity) in the burned areas should have looked altered. On the contrary, in these areas there are not changes.

Today, we have fairly reliable information about the aromatic substances present on the Shroud. In fact, after analyses and observations, Boi (2017 and 2020), a botanist from the University of the Balearic Islands, identified the pollens of these plants whose flowers are the source of the aromas. She did this without having access to the pollens traced on the Shroud, by examining images of those already present in the scientific literature and the modern pollen grains under optical microscopy (OM) and scanning electron microscopy (SEM). This gave her the certainty that the pollens extracted from the Shroud of Turin were different from those described in the literature. Moreover, the same scientist is convincing when she writes that pollens stick to linen fibers for a very long time (Boi, 2015). The plants that left pollen on the Shroud are:

i. Helichrysum, Asteraceae family

ii. Cistus, Cistaceae family

iii. Ferula, Apiaceae family

iv. Pistacia, Anacardiaceae family

The pollen distribution was as follows: Asteraceae (29.1 %), Cistaceae (8.2 %), Apiaceae (4.2 %) and Anacardiaceae (0.6 %). Gundelia tournefortii and Zygophyllum dumosum were absent even though their presence was supported by many writings of authoritative scientists (Frei, 1982; Scannerini, 1997; Danin, 1999 and 2010). This result was accepted for several decades because it suggested a Middle Eastern origin for the Shroud. Today, from this point of view, nothing changes for the Turin Linen. Considering the geographical distribution of these plants, we can continue to state that the above burial linen is Middle Eastern.

The flowers of the four plants listed above, the best for producing perfumes and high-quality aromatic oils, were also used to treat corpses before burial. These burial ointments were certainly used for anointing the Nazarene, as evidenced by the pollen found on the Shroud.

Now, even though the topics discussed are in line with what we advocate, the strength of our ideas comes from the interpretation of the Holy Scripture. So, with more attention than what has already been done (Fazio, 2026), we have considered the four Gospels, and we did this first with a comparison among the Synoptics, followed by a second comparison between the three Gospels and John. Below, we provide chapters and verses related to the burial of Jesus Christ:

a) Matthew (27: 57-66)

b) Mark (15: 42-47)

c) Luke (23: 50-56)

d) John (19: 38-42)

Among all the verses mentioned above, we were struck by Matthew (27: 57): “When evening came, there came a man from Arimathea named Joseph, who had become a disciple of Jesus” and Luke (23: 54): “It was the day of Preparation, and the lights of the Sabbath were already shining.” Joseph of Arimathea had gone to Pilate in the evening to ask for the body of Jesus Christ, secretly, for fear of the Jews. He was secretly a follower of the Nazarene and had to act discreetly. Pilate, asking the centurion, made sure that the death had occurred and granted the body. It was the day of preparation (parasceve) for the day of complete rest, and it was already late, the lights signaled the arrival of the Sabbath. These are two verses that give information about the available time to be able to complete all the operations necessary for the burial in accordance with the Jewish rules in force twenty centuries ago in Asia Minor.

Meanwhile, as is clear from reading the Gospels, Jesus was treated with aromatic oils, wrapped in a cloth, and placed in the new tomb that Joseph of Arimathea had carved out of the rock. Finally, a large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb, sealing it. These events are described by both the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and by John.

Timing issues meant that the anointing of the Nazarene wasn’t completed. Luke, in his Gospel (23: 54-56), wrote: “The women who had come from Galilee with him followed behind, and when they had seen the tomb and the way in which his body was laid in it, they returned and prepared spices and perfumed oils. Then they rested on the sabbath according to the commandment”. Apparently, the mixture of the two spices brought by Nicodemus, which were already available at the tomb, couldn’t be used. So, we can say that Aloe and Myrrh were present at the tomb but absent on the Shroud.

Conclusion

Here, we need to ask ourselves a question: why did Nicodemus bring that large amount of a mixture of Aloe and Myrrh? To answer this question it is necessary to know Nicodemus: a Pharisee, an influential member of the Sanhedrin, a man of great learning in Israel, and secretly a disciple of Jesus Christ. He knew the Scriptures like no one else, all of them and deeply. To understand his intentions, it’s necessary to read the “Books of Chronicles,” which cover topics left out by the “Books of Kings.”

Nicodemus, obviously, knew that in the Chronicles burials of Kings are described. Here it also talks about Asa, a King who at first respected and made others respect God's law, but later drifted away from Him completely. Among many aberrations, he sold gold, silver, and valuables that were in the Temple to gain allies and wage war against enemies. Despite behavior contrary to the will of the Almighty, he received an extraordinary funeral from his trusted men: Asa's body was laid on a sheet full of aromatic substances while another large amount of spices was burned to honor the King with their scents.

We believe that Nicodemus couldn't agree with the burial methods used for Asa, a king who had long turned away from God. So, for the Son of God, he wanted a very special burial. With this exact purpose, he brought an enormous amount of spices, a hundred pounds of a mixture of aloe and myrrh, which, given the difficulties encountered due to the lack of time, would be used the day after the Sabbath.

The subsequent events prevented the use of the mixture of the two scents because the Miracle of the Resurrection took the Nazarene away. So, based on what has been described, we are led to believe that Nicodemus' scents were not used. Even with the two results already mentioned above (Baima Bollone, 1983; Baima Bollone and Gaglio, 1984; Fanti et al., 2026; Fanti and Pappas, 2026), which would show their presence on the Shroud of Turin.

The scientific literature on the Shroud shows many pairs of articles that contradict each other. It's normal, no one is shocked because it's like that for all Relics. In conclusion, let's remember that for our goal, we use the Chambery fire, but above all, we consider the analysis done with the Sacred Texts to be decisive.

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