

## Did Jesus carry the Cross or the patibulum?

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### Abstract

About forty years ago G. Ricci suggested that Jesus carried only the patibulum on his shoulders and not the entire cross. In support of this hypothesis, G. Ricci alleged the two roundish spots appearing on the back of the Man of the Shroud. Those spots were caused by the epidermis of the Man of the Shroud rubbing on scraggy wood of the patibulum. Nevertheless, this hypothesis does not seem realistic for two main reasons. The first is that Jesus wore a robe of honor and, more probably, an underwear put on his skin. These two garments acted as a pad between the skin and the rough wood of the patibulum. The other reason was the prohibition to keep permanently impure objects, because they were cause of contamination, according to the Jewish belief.

**Keywords:** Cross, patibulum, Shroud stains.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Bibliographical tradition scarcely reports about the kind of cross Jesus carried from Lithostrotos to Golgotha. The four Gospels relate no more than He bore the weight of the Cross [1]. The verbal expression used is *bastazo* which, in a literal sense, means “to lift”, “to put on”, “to load with a burden”. Nothing has been recorded about the cross Jesus actually carried.

First of all, we have to leave out the pictorial tradition or whatever illustration that represents Christ while dragging the Cross formed by stipes and patibulum [2]. Until the first half of last century it was generally accepted that Jesus had carried the Cross as a lot of images used to portray him.

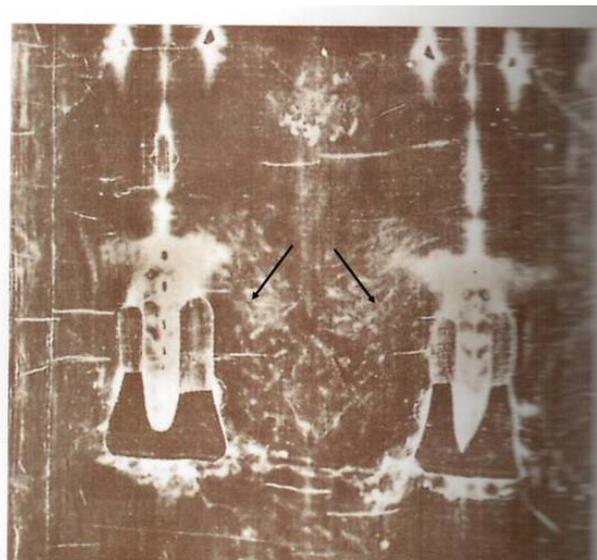
At the end of the Fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mons. Ricci, member of a small group of researchers deeply concerned with the Holy Shroud, suggested that Jesus had carried only the patibulum (i.e. the horizontal pole) and not the Cross [3]. In order to uphold such a supposition, Monsignor Ricci showed two large round blood stains, which can be seen close to the shoulder-blades on the dorsal image of the Holy Shroud, see figure 1.

### 2. DISCUSSION

At first this hypothesis was regarded with some skepticism, but it was gradually taken into account and accepted by most of the Shroud researchers. I have been thinking a lot about this hypothesis that, in some way, seemed to be quite inexplicable. How was it possible, I wondered, that abrasions with blood stains were close to the shoulder-blades and not to the rachis that is the most protruding part of the back? If Jesus was burdened only with the patibulum, this should weigh heavily on the

backbone too and not only on His shoulder-blades. But even such a position of the patibulum seemed to me quite unrealistic. Therefore I loaded on my back a rounded piece of wood and so burdened I tried to walk up a gentle slope. The length and weight of the pole were, respectively, 2,3 m. and 8,2 Kg. (see figures 2, 3 and 4).

But I was not able to hold the piece of wood on my shoulder-blades. I tried also to put my arms under it, in the attempt to wrap it, but nevertheless it was impossible to hold it, see figures 2a, 3a and 4a.. I should have untied and longer arms, at least twice their length. I tried other positions, but the pole never stayed on my shoulder-blades. In such position it pushed me backwards and forced me to bend my back otherwise I could fall down!



**Figure 1.** Detail of the dorsal image of the Shroud of Turin (negative). Arrows indicate two large round blood stains.

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I have asked many friends to do the same attempt and when I was serving as an officer the Alpine Army I asked also many of my colleagues. The outcome was always the same: it was absolutely impossible to carry the pole on the shoulder-blades! The weight is carried on the shoulders, not along the back and so it burdens the shoulder-blades, see figures 2, 3 and 4. The blood stains, therefore, could not justify the weight and the rubbing of the patibulum on the shoulder-blades. Besides, there was the tunic Jesus was wearing, a garment made of a cloth without seams [4] that meant it was very precious.

If a rubbing had taken place, it would have torn the tunic of Jesus and so it would have lost its value.

Let us go back to the patibulum: even if the pole had been tied with ropes, fastened in some way to the forearms, the weight the forearms would have borne, should have borne down on the shoulders, not on the shoulder-blades. In this case (weight on the shoulder-blades) a blood stain was expected to be on the rachis and, I want to stress, not on the shoulder-blades because it was just there that the pole would have moved as a pivot. In order to leave the rachis without any marks, the pole should have had a kind of hollow exactly in its middle section, so to rest only on the shoulder-blades. However this is an absolutely improbable and inexplicable hypothesis.

Those round blood stains on the shoulder-blades were not a consequence of the rubbing caused by the patibulum along the way from Lithostrotos to Golgotha. In my opinion they have a different explanation, I will examine later.

At this point, let us place the torture of the Roman crucifixion in the Jewish (Hebrew) society. According to Monsignor Ricci, Jesus carried only the patibulum. His supposition was based on the fact that the Romans used to keep the stipes or the stipites in the appointed place of the crucifixion of the convicts.

This supposition is right, but not suitable for Palestine and for Jerusalem in particular, where the Temple and the presence of many priests who served in it involved that the observance of the Jewish rules was more strict and rigorous than elsewhere. According to the Jewish belief, people had to avoid any contamination with all that had touched the blood of a convict or a victim of a violent death. The rule stated that everything had to be burnt or removed.

Moreover, all that was touched by a corpse, was considered "impure", so that anyone, who had to face such an event (because of love, work, or compassion), had to submit himself to purification according to strict rules.

The above mentioned rules are listed in Numbers (19:11-21; 31:18-24). The same rules, but much more detailed, have been quoted by the Jewish tradition in the Talmud, where they have been carefully codified.

It was impossible, therefore, that in the Jewish environment and above all in Jerusalem, the Romans could keep the stipites permanently in a place, in spite of

the fact that they were polluted by the blood and the feces of the convicts. The Roman crucifixion was a spectacle, both enlightening and warning. The convicts were derided, insulted and scorned and even filthy and blunt objects were thrown against them [5].

The Romans used to give to the convicts to the crucifixion some drugged drinks that excited their reactions, without softening their consciousness. The behaviour of the people irritated the convicts, who reacted violently and their reaction, of course, incited the people to persist in their provocations. This performance could last for a long time, even for several days. Only a feast-day could stop both the spectacle and the tortures, so hastening the death of the convict. Once the convict's corpse was buried in an unknown mass grave, the crosses had to be buried or burnt in a unconsecrated ground, far from any town or village.

Rufino of Aquileia (340-410 A.C.) priest, theologian, historian and particularly translator, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, wrote that the Cross of Jesus, together with those of His fellows of torture, was discovered by Makarios, bishop of Jerusalem inside a cistern under the temple of Artemis, built under the emperor Hadrian, just on the place of the Holy Sepulcher. The discovery of three crosses all together in the same place proves that crosses were actually buried. In this case, all of them were buried together with the *titulus crucis* [6] of Jesus. A significant fragment of it is preserved in Rome in the Basilica of Saint Cross in Jerusalem, together with a large piece of one of the two poles of the Cross.

The narrative is confirmed by Ambrose, bishop of Milan (*De Obitu Theodosii*) and by Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem. The latter informs that a lot of cross fragments were spread over all the Empire.

As I have already said, the Romans never left the stipes on the ground of the execution when it took place in Jewish towns or villages. Moreover, we have to deduce they did not help the local convicts by driving in those poles the very day of their crucifixion. Such a care towards men condemned to the slanderous torture of the crucifixion would have been quite unbelievable. The convicts had to carry their own cross to the appointed place of their execution. This is the reason why Jesus was so quickly set free from the burden of His cross which was given to the unfortunate Simon from Cyrene.

If Jesus had carried only the patibulum, this should have been tied to the arms and forearms with ropes that would have been untied in order to transfer the cross to Simon and this task would have requested a lot of time. The forearms of Jesus, besides, do not show any marks of knotted ropes (the question does not exist for the arms, since the image was burnt in the fire of Chambéry). The Shroud does not show any marks which may entitle us to think about ropes or other devices for tying the forearms to the patibulum. The patibulum had to be caught by the hands while the ropes had to wound round the wrists.

About this thesis, it might be objected that, since the

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crosses were very heavy, it was necessary to drive in advance the stipes in the ground where the execution had to take place and leave to the convicts just the burden of the patibulum. This hypothesis does not fit for Jesus, since He was condemned a long time after the third hour of Friday and there was not enough time to drive a pole just for Him on the Golgotha.

According to the Bible, Pilate did not mean to condemn Jesus and flogged him in the attempt to save His life and with the hope He could be preferred to Barabbas. The order of crucifying Jesus was given at the very last moment; this is the reason why He was obliged to carry also the stipes: in other words, the weight of the whole cross even supposing, of course, that in Palestine the convicts had to carry only the patibulum.

This is just one of many coincidences which made the execution of Jesus more terrible and unique than others.

What stated above consolidates the opinion that Jesus carried the complete cross, according to the tradition which dates back to almost two thousand years ago.

Even the falls of Jesus, as recorded by the tradition, imply He carried the whole cross. If He had carried only the patibulum and He had had His arms and forearms tied to it, the falls would have had such an impact of His face on the ground that His physiognomy could have been altered. On the contrary, the face of the Man on the Shroud reveals that it was thumped and slapped. Nothing compared to a fall on the ground that would have caused significant ravages to His features. It was the cross (the complete cross, I mean) that reached the ground first and so His face was protected, but this did not avoid many collateral consequences for His shoulders and especially for the right shoulder, on which Jesus carried the Cross.

Nevertheless, the Shroud reveals to us a dislocation of the right shoulder of Jesus, and this cannot be justified as a wound due to a fall, but to a strain manually caused by those who nailed the wrists of Jesus to the patibulum.

And now a brief comment on the blood stains on the shoulder-blades. Since those stains have nothing to do with the rubbing against the patibulum during the way from Lithostrotos to Golgotha, they have to go back to a rubbing that took place later on the cross.

The dislocation of the right shoulder means that the arms of Jesus were nailed to the patibulum in an almost horizontal position. The attempt to drive His wrist exactly to the hole made on the wood failed, and so His right arm was stretched until the humerus went out of its glenoid cavity [7]. In that position it was very painful to press on His wrists in the attempt to raise himself up. Only very slight movements could be done, because of the dislocation and the stiff position of the arms.

What Jesus could do to rise up just for breathing, was to lean against the patibulum which, certainly, was very thick. An attempt that could be done only rubbing the shoulder-blades on the wood of the patibulum which was supposed to be very rough.

This is the same movement made by a mountaineer while climbing along a narrow vertical crack in a rock-face, leaning and bending oneself on the rock wall in order to make climbing less difficult.

Jesus was obliged to bend His back on the patibulum, since the stretching of His arms and the sharp edges of the nails scratched the bones of His wrists preventing Him from leaning on His arms. Even the stretching of His arms prevented him pulling hard His biceps, since His forearms were not bended enough to allow him to strain those muscles.

I have thought a lot about the position Jesus had on the cross. I made an experiment where I was tied fast to a cross-shaped tree, with my arms as much stretched as I could in such a position. In that position what one can do, just to breathe in, is to rise up a little bit forcing on the shoulder-blades.

Concerning the remark that the weight of the two poles (that is to say of the whole cross) could be too heavy for the convicts, it may be worth calling back to our memory the numerous commemorations of the Passion that until few years ago used to take place in Italy and in Europe. In those occasions people often used to carry big and heavy crosses.

Jesus was in precarious conditions because of the cruel flogging and it was impossible for Him to carry His own cross. In fact, He carried it for no more than few meters and at the gate of Jerusalem He fell again and this meant He was not able to bear that burden. This was the reason why the unfortunate Simon from Cyrene, coming from the country with the aim to reach the town, was forced to perform this task.

## REFERENCES

1. John 19:17. The Cross is an upright post with a horizontal bar on which Christ was crucified.
2. The Romans used two words to describe the two elements of a cross: stipes and patibulum. The stipes was the upright stake which was placed in the ground and the patibulum was the horizontal pole.
3. Giulio Ricci: *L'Uomo della Sindone è Gesù, diamo le prove*, Edizioni Carroccio, Vigodarzere (PD) – Italy (1989).
4. John 19:23-24.
5. Gino Zaninotto: *La tecnica della Crocifissione Romana*. Quaderni di Studi Sindonici, Emmaus Roma (1982).
6. The sign, or titulus, that indicated the crime the person had committed.
7. The cup-shaped structure in which the humerus articulates..

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## CORRECT WAY

This is the only way to carry a pole on a person's back.



Figure 2

## WRONG WAY

This way of carrying a pole on the shoulders is wrong, because a man cannot grasp it with hands.



Figure 2a



Figure 3



Figure 3a



Figure 4



Figure 4a