



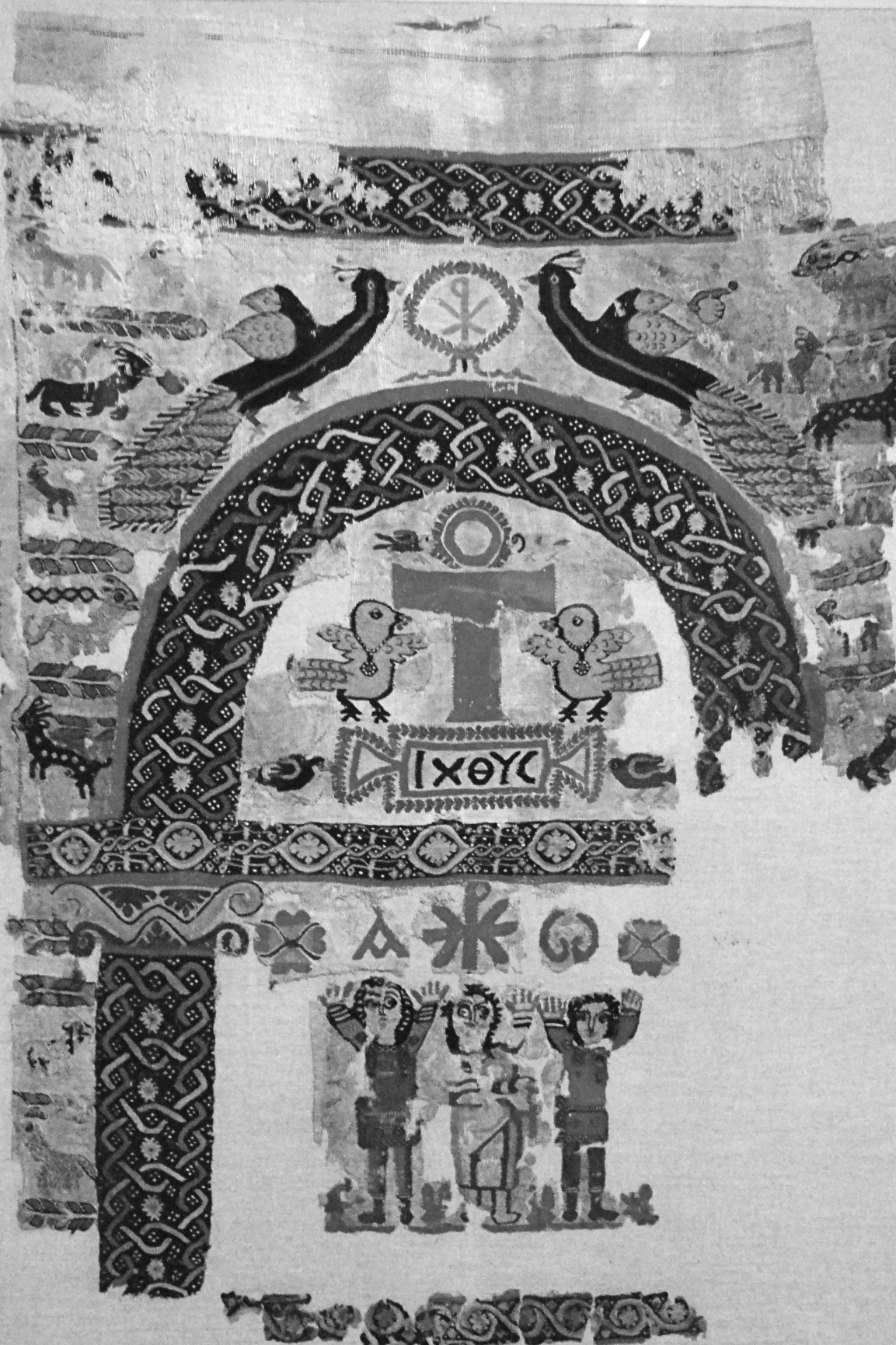
A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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CLOTHED IN WHITE LINEN

by Bruce Clark

Foreign correspondent for *The Economist* and long-time secretary for the Friends of Orthodoxy on Iona, Bruce Clark describes linen harvesting and processing, its frequent mention in the Bible, and the use of linen from pre-historic Georgia to the Shroud of Turin. As the son of nine generations of Irish linen makers, Bruce leaves the management of the business to others, but he rejoices in his family connection to a linen-making world that mixes ultra-traditional methods with modern machinery. ¹

Linen is one of the great, primordial products of human labour, and I have been hearing about it all my life. However, only recently have I begun thinking more deeply about the role which this extraordinary fibre has played in man's material and spiritual history.

The word "linen" has been in my ears since childhood because I grew up in a Northern Irish village which owes its existence to a linen-making business. This activity was started by my forebears in the mid-18th century, nine generations back. The village is called Upperlands, and it lies at the foot of the Sperrin Mountains in the southeastern corner of County Derry.

At least from early Christian times, flax was grown and linen was woven in Ireland, as it was all over Europe. There are references to linen in the lives of Saints Brigid, Patrick, and Columba, but only in the 18th century did Irish linen become a commercially important product, as part of the British-dominated North Atlantic trading system. Ireland was virtually prevented from exporting wool and was encouraged instead to produce linen of a width and quality which customers in England and North America required.

¹ "Clothed in White Linen" is based on a talk given by Bruce Clark in August 2014 on the island of Iona.

Opposite: Egyptian linen hanging with wool embroidered Christian images, 500 AD, Byzantine period, Cleveland Museum of Art.

Irish Linen-Making

Techniques for producing flax and linen more efficiently were introduced to Ireland by migrants from France and the Low Countries. But people in Ireland had a particular genius for harnessing water-power to the processing of linen, and my family is part of that story.

Sometime in the early 18th century, my forebears identified a modest river, not much more than a stream, which could be used to drive linen-finishing equipment. Paradoxically the first part of the production cycle to be mechanized was the final stage: the pounding of linen cloth with wooden blocks, which drives the fibres together and makes the fabric smoother and shinier. That is known as beetling, and it so happens that the only place in Ireland, and probably the world, where linen-beetling continues on a commercial basis is my home community of Upperlands.

Between the first rumble of a beetling engine and the present day, many things happened in the village. The business expanded hugely in the late 19th and early 20th century, to become the biggest industrial employer in the county. At its height the work-force numbered 600 or so. Between 1911 and 2003 it was intensively engaged in weaving linen, as well as bleaching and finishing the fabric. In the early 20th century, Northern Ireland accounted for at least half the linen-making in the world. Now the business survives on a comparatively tiny scale, with around 30 employees. Most other firms in the sector have closed, and it is a small miracle that our local business survives at all. (I disposed of my own small share in the business so as to write and speak more objectively about linen.)

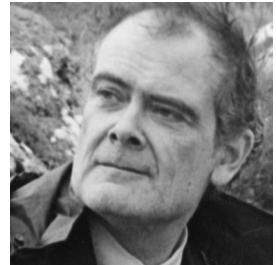
That is the reality to which I returned a few years ago when, after a life as a roving foreign correspondent, family obligations forced me to spend the majority of my time on my home patch. I was moved when I discovered that my great-grandfather, a brilliant entrepreneur with an intensely practical cast of mind, had found time to list many of the scriptural references to linen in the fly-leaf of his copy of the Bible. So I began to make my own study of the role of linen in the Bible, helped by a distinguished Old Testament scholar, Margaret Barker. The scriptures contain more than 100 references, direct and indirect, to flax and linen.

Linen in the Old and New Testament

I found that like so many powerful symbols, linen is a contradictory one. It has many different meanings and sometimes diametrically opposed meanings. Among the most striking references to linen in the Old Testament are the descriptions in the Book of Exodus of the tent or tabernacle which was the first place where the Children of Israel worshipped. The design and color scheme of the tabernacle was then reproduced in the Jerusalem Temple.

In Chapters 26 and 28 of Exodus, very detailed descriptions are given both of the furnishings of the tabernacle, and also of the priest's garments. A particular design was laid down for both, and the colors were blue, purple, scarlet and "fine twisted linen". The first three colors are assumed to have taken the form of woolen yarn. We find this four-fold combination prescribed again and again, in references to the curtains of the tabernacle and to the priests' robes.

What was the symbolic meaning of these colors and materials? There were different interpretations. One is that linen was a symbol of the earth because it comes from flax, part of the vegetable kingdom. The scarlet wool represented fire, and the purple and blue represented water and air respec-

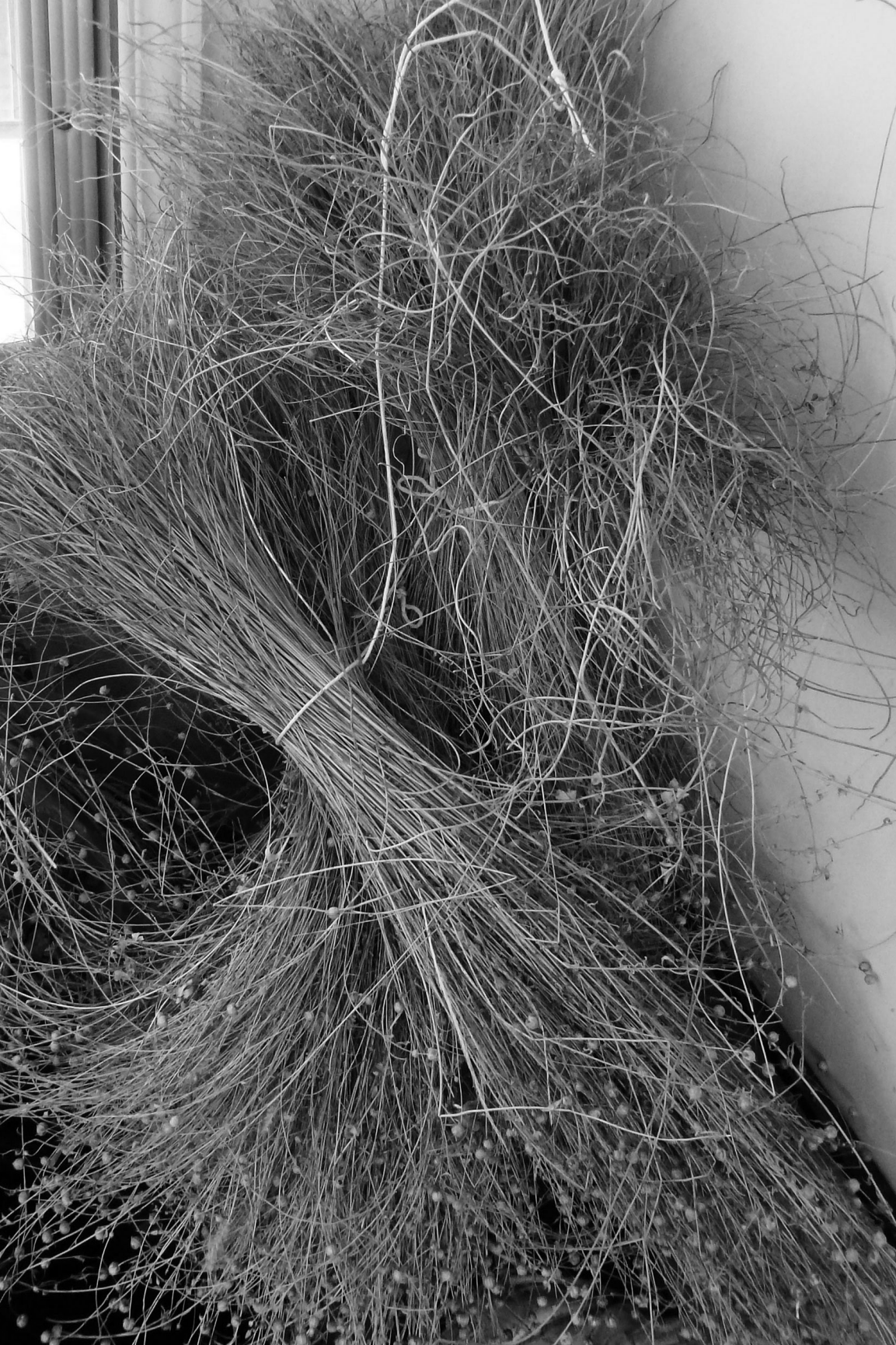


Bruce Clark

tively. Another interpretation was that wool represented mortality because it came from the mortal, animal kingdom, while linen stood for eternity.

Reading on through the Old Testament I found a recurring paradox. Linen is both earthy and heavenly. Here is a nice example of an earthy reference to linen and flax: During the siege of Jericho, there was a woman called Rahab who helped the two spies from the army that was besieging Jericho. To hide the spies, as you may remember, she hid them under piles of flax straw. If you've been around a flax harvest, you can vividly imagine how these envoys were buried under a huge pile of long scented stalks, brownish-grey in color, dried to a bone by the sun's searing heat. It was a good place to hide and no one would have suspected their presence.

In the Book of Daniel we find a reference to linen which is very different in tone. There is a beautiful image of Daniel waiting by a river and suddenly seeing an angel hovering over the river, wearing white linen and with a golden belt around his waist: "And in the four and twentieth day of the first month, as I was by the side of the great river, which is Hiddekel; Then I lifted



up my eyes, and looked, and behold a certain man clothed in white linen whose loins were girded with fine gold....” (Dan. 10:4-5)

For another reference to shining white fabric, which can only have been linen, turn to the story of Christ’s Transfiguration, as told by Saint Mark: “His raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow, so as no fuller on earth could make them.”

Now what is a fuller? A fuller is someone who applies detergent to cloth. In modern language, perhaps, a bleacher. Now this is not exactly like dry cleaning where you apply chemicals. The process of bleaching cloth (and this is true of linen, of wool, or of any other fibre) involves removing the impurities and bringing the natural white color out. This is what a fuller does, and to bleach linen you have to use alkali, sunlight, acid, and quite a lot of water. The process is repeated again and again. This is not putting new color into a cloth, but simply taking out the impurities so that the original white color shines through. The natural color of linen is light brown and in the pre-industrial age it took several months of work over the summer to turn a piece of linen from its natural light brown to white. This involved using different alkaline materials including cow dung, seaweed or whatever natural alkali was available. In Ireland of course, the sunshine is very mild and it could take weeks of lying out in this mild sunshine for the light brown color to drain gradually and be replaced by white.

Then in the Resurrection story itself we have echoes of linen as a very earthy substance that denotes mortality, finitude, but also linen as a carrier, a vehicle of heavenly light. Think of the varying accounts of the one or two angels who delivered the news of the Resurrection. The angel or angels were wearing brilliant white clothes, which in some ways foreshadows the miracle of the Resurrection itself. This is Matthew’s account:

And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow.... (Matt 28: 2-3)

Here again is the image of cloth which has been rendered brilliantly white as in the Transfiguration. It is a wonderful symbol of the removal of impuri-

Opposite: Drying flax sheaves.

ties to leave cloth in a state where it reflects heavenly light and becomes a repository of light.

And yet in an earlier part of the Resurrection story we have the idea of the linen shroud as the ultimate symbol of mortality. This is Luke's account:

Then arose Peter, and ran unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and departed, wondering in himself at that which was come to pass. (Luke 24:12)

Thus described, the linen clothes that Peter saw are a very vivid picture of what is left behind in the empty tomb. They stand for finitude, mortality, that which is abandoned, that which comes to an end.

One can hardly mention the Gospel account of Our Lord's discarded clothes without also mentioning the most famous piece of linen in the world, the Shroud of Turin. Is this the cloth in which the crucified Christ was laid in the sepulchre?

Neither the Vatican nor the Orthodox Church has offered any final judgment as to the status of this 14-foot long piece of linen, bearing the image of a man who has been scourged, crowned with thorns, pierced on one side, and had nails driven through his wrists and feet. But the late Father Gleb Kaleda, a Russian priest who was also a physicist, has written powerfully on the subject of the Shroud. As a scientist he wondered what to make of the carbon-dating carried out by several laboratories which pronounced that the linen had been made no earlier than 1290. It occurred to Father Gleb that there was one kind of occurrence that could skew all carbon-dating results: a matter-changing event comparable, at least, to the flash of a nuclear explosion. Father Gleb writes that when he realized that point, his own faith in the Resurrection deepened; he felt that he had experienced a powerful moment of revelation just as Saint Thomas did when he was invited to touch the wounds of His Lord.

Earthly Processes and Heavenly Symbolism

Returning to the subject of linen and its meanings, I was impressed again and again by the fact that this fibre had two symbolic associations, one to do with earthiness and one to do with heavenly light.

To try and make sense of all this, I delved into my own knowledge of linen-making, whether it was derived from reading and academic study, or from the experience of living in a linen village. There is a long passage in the Roman writer Pliny, written about 2,000 years ago, which describes the flax-and-linen process; and to anybody who knows how things were done in recent memory in Ireland, it is uncannily familiar.

As Pliny realized, and my Northern Irish neighbors also know, it takes almost exactly 100 days from planting the seed to harvest time. There is a brilliant blue flower which appears about 75 days after the planting; just over three weeks later, you must carefully pick the moment to start pulling up the flax-stalks by hand. It is essential to pull the whole stalk out of the ground; machines can do this now, but hard human labor probably accomplishes the job better. Then you must loosen the fibers by putting the stalks in water or dew for up to twelve days. That is a very smelly, muddy process known as retting; the water takes on a terrible smell and becomes toxic.

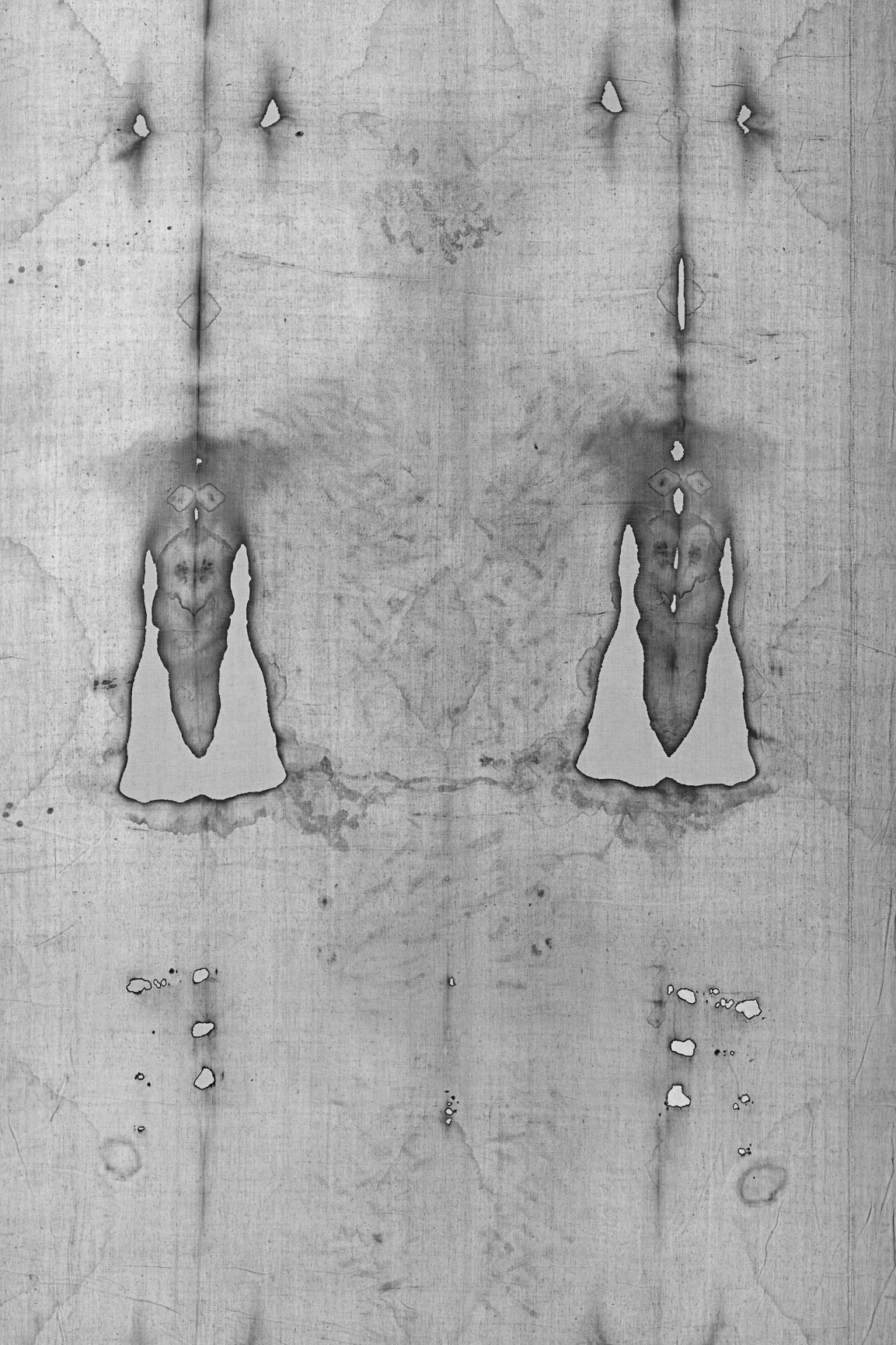
Pulling the stalks out of the water is a laborious task and people who perform it find it hard to get the smell out of their clothes and bodies for weeks afterwards. The flax is then dried, cut and combed in various ways until it looks like human hair and then, of course, it is spun, woven, and eventually, at the very final stage, it's bleached.

Pliny refers to the hammering of linen with wooden blocks to make it shinier. To anybody from my village that sounds very familiar. There are different stages at which this beating process can be applied; it can be done to yarn, to newly woven cloth, or to cloth which has already been bleached.

When white linen is beetled, it becomes almost as brilliant as a mirror. It is not only full of light, but reflects light like a looking-glass, or any other very flat surface. Now there is a particular Hebrew word for very white, very shiny linen—*shesh*, which can also mean marble. Some of the references to linen in the Book of Exodus translate the word *shesh*.

When Pharaoh makes a dramatic gesture of his esteem for Joseph, we find the same word: “And Pharaoh took his ring from his hand and put it on Joseph, and arrayed him in clothing of fine linen (*shesh*).” In another passage (Exodus 28), *shesh* is used in proximity with a more generic term for linen, *bad*. The first word is used for the coat and mitre woven for Aaron and his sons, the second for their under-garments.

In one of the most famous prophecies in the Bible, the Book of Isaiah says, “Behold a Virgin shall conceive...”. The location of that prophecy is in the



Fuller's Field, a place where *fulling* took place, where linen was whitened, presumably by water and sunlight; in the brilliant sunshine of Jerusalem not much detergent would have been needed.

Egypt was always the really important center of flax and linen production and when Solomon was decorating his temple, he ordered especially fine linen from Egypt. Nonetheless, that reference to the Fuller's Field as the place of the prophecy tells us that Jerusalem was also a place for bleaching linen. There are other place-names around Jerusalem which confirm that weaving and bleaching linen was an important activity in the vicinity.

More generally, by a mixture of my own experience and some study, I have come to see that flax and linen is a sort of eucharistic product, almost comparable to bread and wine. Flax as an agricultural crop is one of the very first products of human labor. There is linen in Egypt that dates to 5000 BC, and the linen covering the Egyptian mummies is still in extraordinarily good condition, so we know that linen production goes back almost as far as civilization in Egypt. In Georgia, they have found a piece of dyed linen yarn, which they think may be 30,000 years old, so it really is one of the very first human products.

The process begins with a stalk that is earthy, smelly and produces cloth which is light brown in color. Then gradually over a series of human processes it is refined, purified, washed, exposed to sunlight, beaten to make it shinier, and at the end of that process, linen becomes a carrier of heavenly light.

I don't think it is blasphemous or inappropriate to think of linen and flax, along with bread and wine, as a human product that undergoes an extraordinary transformation. It starts in a place which is very close to the soil, muddy brown in color and smelling of the earth; it ends up a glorious white fabric refined to the point where it becomes a vessel and reflector of the light of heaven. ✦

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Opposite: Shroud of Turin, Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Turin, Italy.