The Tradition of the Image of Edessa

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By

Mark Guscin

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PREFACE

Over the last two millennia the person and image of Jesus Christ has been at the heart of the Christian faith and worship. One of the most powerful visible symbols of Christ's humanity and divinity is the depiction of his human face on what is commonly known as the Image of Edessa or the Mandylion. Since the fourth century, when the historian Eusebius first mentioned the *Epistula Abgari*, the letter purportedly written by Christ and sent to Abgar, ruler of Edessa, through which he was cured, the story of the Image of Edessa grew, developing from a letter to an image, on a board or tile and finally on cloth, where the face of Christ was miraculously imprinted. The story is mentioned in a number of works including those written in defence of the veneration of holy images against iconoclasts. Following its translation from Edessa to Constantinople in 944, the Image was officially incorporated into the Church feast calendar with the *Narratio de imagine Edessena*. Though the traces of the Image are lost in Byzantium after the conquest of Constantinople by the army of the Fourth Crusade in 1204, this is not the end of the story. In the West the tradition developed with relation to the Veronica legend and other tales. The tradition of the holy Image of Edessa continued in different forms through the centuries and is still very much alive among Christian communities today, especially in the Orthodox world. Its appearance in recent popular fiction and television documentaries on Christ's physical appearance reflects another aspect of its use and its tenacity.

For many years now Mark Guscin has been travelling in space and time single-mindedly exploring the story and tradition of the holy Image of Edessa. In the course of his research he has collected and analysed an exhaustive corpus of published and unpublished sources, including historical, hagiographical and literary texts, paintings, icons and other devotional objects and magical amulets, often personally visiting sites where he discovered and recorded new evidence. Challenged with the enormity of the extant material, he chose to present the results of his research in a chronological and thematic order placing them in the historical and cultural context. Not all questions raised in this study have found an answer, nor has the journey ended. Ultimately, what this ongoing exploration reveals is the need of the human psyche to approach the divinity through its humanity – these two elements being in close and

constant dialogue. I am grateful that through this study I became a fellow traveller in this quest.

Charalambos Dendrinos
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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the Image of Edessa, an image of Christ, which according to tradition was of miraculous origin. According to the underlying legend, Abgar, the king of Edessa and contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, suffered from a skin disease, and thanks to one of his messengers who was passing through Jerusalem, found out that there was a miracle worker and healer in the city. Abgar decided to write a letter to Christ and invite him to come and live in Edessa (the setting was just a few days before the crucifixion, and Abgar knew that the Jews were planning to kill Jesus). The messenger, sometimes called Ananias and others Hanan, returned to Jerusalem. Some accounts relate how, following Abgar's orders, Ananias tried to sketch Christ's face to take back to Edessa, but was unable to as Jesus kept looking this way and that (in other versions, Jesus calls him over before he has time to paint his likeness). Eventually Jesus sent one of the disciples to call Ananias over, and before the messenger could hand him the letter from Abgar, Jesus told him of its contents. Jesus then wrote a reply to Abgar explaining that it was impossible for him to go to Edessa as he had a mission to fulfil. When he had ascended into heaven, however, he would send one of his disciples to cure Abgar and lead him into all truth.

Before Ananias could leave, Jesus fulfilled the second part of Abgar's request. Asking for a cloth, he wiped his face with it and left a miraculous imprint of his features on it. Ananias then took the cloth with Christ's image back to Edessa. Abgar touched it to his whole body and was cured from his skin disease, except for a small spot that was left on his forehead and which eventually disappeared when the king accepted baptism. He had the cloth with the image on it placed in a niche above the city gate, in the place of a pagan idol. In time Abgar died, as in turn did his son. When his grandson became king he reverted to paganism. Wishing to destroy the Image of Edessa, he placed a pagan image back over the city gate.

The bishop was made aware of the king's intentions and bricked the Image up into the niche, together with a lighted lamp, and covered it with a tile and bricks just like the rest of the wall. The hiding place was so successful that the Image fell out of knowledge and memory, until the Persians under King Khusro (Chosroes) attacked Edessa in 544. The attackers were tunnelling their way under the city walls when the city's

bishop had a dream in which a woman told him about the Image and where to find it. Following her instructions, he took the Image to where the Persians were lighting a fire, and the flames were blown back onto the invaders, defeating them.

The Image was kept in Edessa even when the city was lost to the Byzantine Empire and was thus conveniently far removed from the iconoclastic crisis. Towards the middle of the tenth century it was finally taken to Constantinople. After a ceremonious arrival, it was kept in the Boucoleon and, apart from making an appearance in some pilgrims' lists of relics they had seen, is hardly mentioned again. After the sack of the capital during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, the Image of Edessa disappears from recorded history.

The Image itself and the related texts are significant in numerous aspects of our history; they cover a period of almost two thousand years, from the textual origins in Eusebius (and the legendary origins dating back to the life of Christ in Jerusalem) to the most recent painted icons. Edessa was in fact the first kingdom in the world to adopt Christianity as its official religion (most probably ca.200 AD), and both the Image and the supposed letter from Abgar to Christ and the latter's reply are major components in the argument to establish the early arrival of the new religion in the area.

The Image played a major role in the Iconoclast crisis. It was used as proof that Christ miraculously produced his own image on a cloth and therefore showed himself to be circumscribable (περιγραπτός). This became an irrefutable argument which legitimised holy images in general. The actual Image survived the crisis as it was not in Constantinople at the time, but safe in the Muslim city of Edessa. After being taken to Constantinople and assigned its own day in the Synaxarion (16 August), the Image was caught up in the events of 1204 and the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders. Despite its loss, the Image retained its importance and apotropaic functions in churches throughout the Orthodox world, and is still regularly included in icon-painting patterns. The very use of the Image as a protective force, placed over an archway in memory of its placing over the gateway to Edessa, forms part of the complex story of how pagan customs were adopted and taken over by the Church; an ancient Greek custom of placing statues of the Gods at the gate or in a niche above it to protect the city was simply adapted to Christian use by replacing the pagan deity with the Image of Edessa[1]. The idea of the face

[1] Cf. Arja Karivieri, "Magic and Syncretic Religious Culture in the East", in *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, ed. David M. Gwynn and Susanne Bangert (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 404: "Another form of protective image, the *apotropaion*,

of Christ being imprinted onto a linen cloth is also present in western Christianity (especially so in Roman Catholic countries); although we should not forget that the Abgar legend was in existence centuries before the legend of the Veronica became popular in the West.

Christ's answer to Abgar was used from very early times as a magical amulet, initially because of the promise to safeguard the city of Edessa from enemy attacks and later, absolutely decontextualised and with numerous "magical" additions, to keep the bearer safe from thunder, lightning and other evils both natural and manmade, in consonance with so many other medieval magic charms.

Apart from my own previous book on the Image of Edessa, mainly concerned with the related texts[2], there are no studies devoted entirely to this subject. There are books and studies concerning Edessa (especially the history of Christianity in the city)[3], and in recent years the Image and the Abgar correspondence have taken up a significant part of several books in various languages on the face of Christ, icons, relics and art[4]. In addition,

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was usually placed by the gate of a city or a building to avert evildoers. This could be placed in niches in city walls, near to the gates. The Greeks erected stationary *apotropaia* especially to Apollo and Herakles".

[2] Mark Guscin, *The Image of Edessa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[3] The earliest academic book devoted to the subject in general is W. Cureton, *Ancient Syriac Documents relative to the earliest establishment of Christianity in Edessa and the neighbouring countries from the year after our Lord's Ascension to the beginning of the fourth century* (Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1864). This was followed by a landmark study of the Abgar legend and its relationship to the new religion in the area: Joseph Tixeront, *Les Origines de l'Église d'Édesse et la Légende d'Abgar, Étude Critique suivie de deux textes orientaux inédits* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Ch. Laclerc, 1888), which was the object of severe criticism (most of which is unfounded) in another book published the following year under a very similar title: J.P.P. Martin, *Les Origines de l'Église d'Édesse et des Églises Syriennes* (Paris: Revue des Sc. Eccl., 1889). A large proportion of Ernst von Dobschütz's seminal work *Christusbilder, Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1899) was devoted to the Image of Edessa, and included for the first time critical editions of the related texts as they stood towards the end of the nineteenth century. The subject then seemed to lose its interest for scholars until 1970, when J. Segal published the unsurpassed history of the city, *Edessa 'The Blessed City'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), with a profound analysis of the Abgar legend. For more recent publications see below, notes 4-5.

[4] Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeiter der Kunst* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1990), translated into English as *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Alain Desreumaux, *Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*

numerous articles concerning just about every aspect of the Image and the letters have appeared in journals[5], though by their very nature, articles are

(Turnhout: Brepols, 1993); Jacinto González, *La leyenda del rey Abgar y Jesús, Orígenes del cristianismo en Edesa* (Madrid: Editorial Ciudad Nueva, 1995); Herbert Kessler and Gerhard Wolf, eds., *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation. Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1998); Glenn Peers, *Sacred Shock: Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Andrea Nicolotti, *Dal Mandylion di Edessa alla Sindone di Torino. Metamorfosi di una leggenda* (Torino: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2011), translated into English as *From the Mandylion of Edessa to the Shroud of Turin: The Metamorphosis of a Legend* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

[5] Kurt Weitzmann, "The Mandylion and Constantine Porphyrogenitus", *Cahiers Archéologiques* 11 (1960): 163-184; Patrick Considine, "Irish Versions of the Abgar Legend", *Celtica* 10 (1973): 237-257; Jan Nelson, "The Holy Mandylion of Edessa and the Legend of Saint Alexis", in *Medieval Studies in Honor of Robert White Linker*, ed. Brian Dutton, J Woodrow Hassell and John E Keller (Valencia: Castalia, 1973), 155-161; Nicole Thierry, "Deux notes à propos du Mandylion", *Zograf* 11 (1980): 16-19; Averil Cameron, "The History of the Image of Edessa; the Telling of a Story", *Okeanos: Essays Presented to Ihor Sevcenko* (= *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 7 [1983]): 80-94; Getatchew Haile, "The Legend of Abgar in Ethiopic Tradition", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 55 (1989): 375-410; Évelyne Patlagean, "L'entrée de la Sainte Face d'Édesse à Constantinople en 944", in *La religion civique à l'époque médiévale et moderne (Chrétienté et Islam)*, *Colloque, Nanterre, France (21.06.1993)*, *Collection de l'École française de Rome* 213 (Rome: L'École Française de Rome, 1995), 21-35; Bernard Outtier, "Une forme enrichie de la Légende d'Abgar en arménien", in *Apocryphes arméniens: transmission, traduction, creation, iconographie, Actes du colloque international sur la littérature apocryphe en langue arménienne, Genève 18-20 septembre 1997*, ed. Valentina Calzolari Bouvier, Jean-Daniel Kaestli and Bernard Outtier (Lausanne: Éditions du Zèbre, 1999), 129-146; Melita Emmanuel, "The Holy Mandylion in the iconographic programmes of the churches at Mystras", in *Eastern Christian Relics*, ed. Alexei Lidov (Moscow: Progress-Tradition, 2003), 291-298; Sebastian Brock, "Transformations of the Edessa Portrait of Christ", *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 18/1 (2004): 46-56; Sysse Gudrun Engberg, "Romanos Lekapenos and the Mandilion of Edessa", in *Byzance et les reliques du Christ*, ed. J. Durand and B. Flusin (Paris: Association des Amis du Centre d'Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2004), 123-139; Emran El-Badawi, "Tales of King Abgar: A Basis to Investigate Earliest Syrian Christian Syncretism", *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 20.2 (2006): 1-20; Irma Karaulashvili, "The Abgar Legend Illustrated: The Interrelationship of the Narrative Cycles and Iconography in the Byzantine, Georgian and Latin Traditions", in *Artistic Interchange between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period,* ed. Colum Hourihane (Pennsylvania: Princeton University Press, 2007), 220-243; Alexei Lidov, "The Mandylion over the Gate. A mental pilgrimage to the Holy City of Edessa", in

limited to discussing specific aspects of the overall story. Thus there is very little that takes on a general view and most articles are often limited in terms of original research. This book aims to fulfil both goals, in the sense that it is a detailed critical study of just about everything we know about the Image of Edessa, its origins and sources. It is extensively based on original research both textual and artistic, analysing hitherto unpublished texts and unrecorded frescoes and icons and re-interpreting published ones. Admittedly, no study of this kind can claim to be complete; there are without doubt further unknown versions of the legend in monastic archives and pictorial depictions of the Image in churches and monasteries not studied before.

Routes of Faith in the Medieval Mediterranean, Proceedings of an International Symposium, ed. Evangelia Chatzetryphonos (Thessalonike: European Centre of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Monuments, 2007), 179-192; Bernard Flusin, "L'image d'Édesse, Romain et Constantin", in *Sacre Impronte e Oggetti "Non Fatti da Mano d'Uomo" nelle Religioni: Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Torino 18-20 maggio 2010*, ed. Adele Monaci Castagno (Alessandria: Università di Torino, 2011), 253-278.

CHAPTER ONE

THE IMAGE IN HISTORY I

The Image before the Translation to Constantinople in 944

Edessa (today's Şanlıurfa in eastern Turkey) was a city in Upper Mesopotamia, close to the current border with Syria. The Hellenic city was built over a previous settlement by Seleucus I Nicator in 304 B.C., and on the disappearance of the Seleucid monarchy local kings ruled, many of whom were named Agbar. Located at the geographical limits of both the Roman and the Parthian and then Persian states, to the west and east respectively, the city was involved in an ongoing political struggle between the two to include it under their respective rules. It was in 53 B.C. that Marcus Licinius Crassus was routed by the Parthians at Carrhae, near Edessa, and in 260 A.D. Shapur became the first foreign enemy to capture a Roman emperor alive (Valerian) in what is now known as the Battle of Edessa.

The city's only natural advantage was an abundant water supply, still evident today in the abundant fish pools mentioned by the travelling pilgrim nun Egeria in the fourth century (Figure 1-1). It was also a crossing point on both the Silk Road and on the route from Armenia to southern Mesopotamia. By the end of the second century Edessa was firmly established as a client kingdom of Rome, to such an extent that coins from the years 161 to 169 describe King Maʿnu as φιλορώμαιος (a friend of Rome). Coins from the reign of King Abgar VIII (Maʿnu's son, who reigned from 177 to 212) show the monarch on one side and firstly the emperor Commodus (177-192) and then Septimius Severus (193-211) on the other. For some reason Abgar rebelled against his "friend" Septimius Severus, although soon submitted and was allowed to keep his throne. In 212/213 the emperor Caracalla (211-217) put an end to the monarchy in Edessa and converted the city and its area of influence into a Roman colony. There was a brief resurgence of the Abgar dynasty under the emperor Gordian III (238-244), which most probably lasted around

two years, after which the city reverted to Rome, and after the division of the empire into two in the fifth century, to Constantinople.

Edessa surrendered to the Muslim onslaught in 639. In one way the surrender of the city to its new masters was an improvement, as the political frontier between the new Rome and the Persians was wiped out and Edessa was no longer the battlefield for the eastern and western powers they lived between. The Christians in the city were free to practice their religion, as long as they paid *gizya* tax, but they were obliged to support the Muslim cause and could not attempt to win converts from Islam; neither could they display the cross publicly nor ring bells during Muslim prayer time. These same conditions were then applied to other cities in Mesopotamia that surrendered to the Muslims. When both religions fulfilled the conditions life could continue under a peaceful guise, although there were times when the governors of Mesopotamia charged more tax than had been agreed, and even executed Christians who refused to convert to the new religion. Whenever events of this kind took place, the Christians could do nothing to protect themselves; they were far away from the centre of power and even if they had lodged complaints, it would have been very difficult for judgement to be given in their favour against the Muslims. Little by little the Christian community dwindled until it finally disappeared altogether. Apart from the citadel (Figures 1-2 and 1-3), very little now remains of pre-Muslim Edessa.

Such, in brief outline, is the place which gave its name to the icon of Christ that still preserves its name long after the city itself lost its own. The Image of Christ remained in the city for just over three hundred years after the surrender to the Muslims, which would suggest that even if, as can be imagined, the Christians kept a low profile and did not draw unnecessary attention to either themselves or their sacred objects, Muslim persecution did not become general blind and wanton destruction.

In the history of the Church, Edessa is famed for being the first state to adopt Christianity as the official religion. Tixeront links the origins of the Abgar legend to the establishment of Christianity in Edessa[1], or at least to the first known preaching of the religion in the city[2]. With the legend as it

[1] Tixeront, *Les Origines*.

[2] J.P.P. Martin dates Christianity in Edessa to as early as Pentecost, in *Les Origines*, 12-13: “On peut donc affirmer, dès le jour de la Pentecôte, il y eut des Chrétiens en Médie, en Mésopotamie, chez les Parthes, et à Édesse”, and “Toutes les vraisemblances se réunissent donc pour montrer que le christianisme a dû s’implanter de très bonne heure dans la haute Mésopotamie, en particulier à Édesse”. Cf. G. Bonet Maury, “La Légende d’Abgar et de Thaddée”, *Revue de l’Histoire des Réligions* 16 (1887): 281: “ ... les évangélistes du Christ arrivèrent à

stands this would seem to be a logical conclusion, although it is not necessarily applicable to either the correspondence (even accepting that it does not date from the time of Christ) or to the Image. The arrival of Christianity in Edessa is not directly linked to the origins of the Image, for no source attributes the Image's source to the city. The religion most probably took hold in Edessa before the Image was taken there, and it is highly unlikely that the Image was there before Christianity was established, as if there were no trace of the new religion there would surely have been no reason to take the Image there. Unfortunately, if the Image's presumed early history is not to be found in Edessa, there is no clue at all as to where it might otherwise have been. The present state of affairs is summarised as follows by Mirković: "Unless there is a dramatic discovery in the area of Syriac studies, we will probably never know more about the origins of the Abgar legend"[3]. Theories in general, and in this case about the origin of the Image of Edessa, require evidence of one kind or another to back them up; as there is none (apart from the story contained in the legend, and this could hardly be counted as evidence), I prefer to leave the matter at that rather than come up with yet another groundless theory. To put it simply, we do not know.

Even though there was a king of Edessa called Abgar at the time when Christ lived, general opinion seems to equate the official adoption of Christianity in the city during the reign of a different Abgar, namely Abgar VIII the Great (177-212)[4]. There was definitely a Christian church in

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Édesse sous le règne d'Abgar VII bar Izate (108-115)"; Arthur Voobus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Levant* (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1958), 7: "If, by the beginning of the second century, Christianity had already won converts among the inhabitants of the mountain village in Hadiab, then there can be no doubt that the Christian faith had been established before the end of the first century in Edessa and also in Osrhoene, which were on the highway connecting Arbel and Syria", and G.A. Williamson, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine, Translated with an Introduction* (New York: Dorset Press, 1965), 70: "It would, indeed, be surprising if Christianity, which spread over almost the whole Empire with such remarkable rapidity, should have been withheld from an area so near Palestine, and one where a similar dialect was spoken. Let us not forget that while Edessa is only 180 miles from Antioch, the starting-point of all Paul's journeys, Ephesus is 500, Rome over 1,000 and Spain 2,000". Cf. also Emran El-Badawi, "Tales", 1-20.

[3] Alexander Mirković, *Prelude to Constantine* (= *Studies in the Religion and History of Early Christianity* 15) (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), 36.

[4] According to Ilaria Ramelli, "Possible historical traces in the *Doctrina Addai*", *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 9.1 (January 2006), available on-line at http://bethmardutho.cua.edu/Hugoye/Vol9No1/ HV9N1Ramelli.html.

Edessa during the reign of Abgar the Great, and the philosopher and poet Bardaisan, a contemporary of Abgar, was most probably a Christian of sorts, or at least had some strain of Christian belief mixed up in his own philosophies and ideas[5]. There were even heretics in Edessa at the end of the second century (Valentinians and Marcionites), which means that the religion must have been established there some time before. Tixeront estimates that Christianity was first preached in Edessa in the decade from AD 160 to 170[6].

There are signs of the use of a cross during the reign of Abgar VIII, on contemporary coins[7]. A bronze coin in the Ashmolean Museum collection dating from 179-192 clearly shows Abgar wearing a tiara with a cross[8]. In the Historical Museum in Şanlıurfa, a statue outside in the garden is noticeable because it so obviously has a Christian cross on it (Figure 1-4). The museum provides no information about the statue, although it was presumably found in Edessa. The use of the cross is therefore evident on both coins and at least one surviving decorative fountain from Edessa, showing the establishment of the religion in the area. In conclusion, it seems very clear that Christianity was established in the city some time during the second century, if not earlier, and the linking of the Image (wherever it came from) to the city is proof of the status the new religion had in Edessa.

The city of Edessa was also involved in the debate over the nature of Christ. Edessa lay in one of the Miaphysite areas (together with Egypt, Syria, Armenia and Ethiopia). Miaphysites were sometimes confused (especially by their opponents) with Monophysites, although the difference is significant; the Miaphysites emphasised that Christ was both human and divine in one nature rather than two, whereas the more extreme

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[5] Cf. Tixeront, *Les Origines*, 11: "quoi qu'il en soit, Bardesane était certainement chrétien vers la fin du II[e] siécle".

[6] Tixeront, *Les Origines*, 15.

[7] Despite Steven K. Ross's mistaken statement in *Roman Edessa: Politics and Culture on the Eastern Fringes of the Roman Empire, 114-242 CE* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 134: "... no Christian symbols appear on the coins of Abgar VIII or any Edessan ruler". Arguing for the presence of the cross, which seems very clear, cf. John J. Gunther, "The Meaning and origin of the name Judas Thomas", *Le Museon* 93 (1980), 129, note 86, based on T. S. Bayer, *Historia Osrhoene et Edessena ex nummis illustrata*, vol. iii (St Petersburg: 1734), 173: "For a period Abgar's tiara on coins actually seems to feature the Christian cross".

[8] The coin is shown and described in the on-line catalogue at http://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/6491. A further example can be seen in Wayne G. Sales, *Ancient Coin Collecting IV: Roman Provincial Coins* (Iola: Krause Publications, 1998), 61. Neither publication discusses the cross on the tiara.

Monophysite view held that Christ had only one divine nature, which virtually absorbed his humanity. This was the view held by the priest Eutyches (ca.380-ca.456) and the minority that followed him. The orthodox position adopted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 stated that Christ had two natures, human and divine. This would appear to contradict what Cyril of Alexandria had stated on the matter: μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη (the one nature of the Word of God made flesh); the Miaphysite belief preserved what Cyril had said. On the other hand, it could also be argued that Cyril also spoke of the two natures of Christ, e.g. Epistles 17:36: οὐ γὰρ ἑνοῖ τὰς φύσεις ἡ ἰσοτιμία (equality of honour does not unite the natures) and that this particular sentence (concerning the one nature) was written in response to the denial of Christ's divinity (i.e. a specific occasion) and should not be taken as an overall truth[9]. We should not forget that the Church itself was at this time still feeling its way towards a definition of the nature of Christ; writers often highlighted one aspect over another depending on the circumstances or the argument to be made, without thinking that hundreds of years later scholars would be identifying their internal discrepancies and contradictions.

The Image of Edessa became involved in the debate, as an image of the human face of Christ imprinted by Christ himself was more than sufficient proof of his human nature (whether separate or enmeshed in the divine nature). Nobody who denied the humanity of Christ could accept that the Image of Edessa was a depiction of Christ made by Christ himself while on earth. The argument could be taken further, stating that the face of Christ actually represents his whole person, and hence his human *and* divine nature (based on the fact that the Greek word for face, πρόσωπον, can also mean "person"), although in my opinion, this would be attributing a meaning to the Image of Edessa that was surely not present in its use to show and prove the humanity of Christ. If the Miaphysites had not accepted the humanity of Christ, the Image would surely not have been held in such high esteem in Edessa.

In the midst of this situation the Image of Edessa comes to the fore. No definite or convincing theory as to the Image's origins has been postulated

[9] The dangers of quoting isolated sentences are expressed by Hans von Loon, *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 2, in particular reference to this sentence: "First of all, although Cyril of Alexandria's christology has been the subject of various studies over the past one hundred years, this has by no means led to a broad consensus on the meaning of the key terms and expression in his christology. This is partly due to the fact that his christological writings have not been studied systematically. Instead, isolated passages and phrases are usually adduced as evidence for particular interpretations".

to date. Scholars who have attempted to provide an answer regarding the Image's origins have come up with different sources, dates and reasons, none of which have offered more convincing arguments than any other. For this reason it is imperative that we re-examine the sources and analyse what authors both ancient and modern have to say about it[10].

The *Narratio de imagine Edessena*[11] dates the origins of the Image of Edessa to the time of Christ himself, shortly before his passion, as do the vast majority of other sources. It should be pointed out that the *Narratio de imagine Edessena* itself gives two possible versions for the origins of the Image, one the regular Abgar story (i.e. the king sends a messenger to paint a picture but Jesus miraculously imprints his facial features onto a cloth and sends it back to Abgar), while the second version stages the imprint story in the garden of Gethsemane; when Christ was sweating blood (Luke 22:43-44)[12], he was handed a cloth to wipe his face on and the image of his face was miraculously transferred onto the cloth.

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[10] Cf. Ilaria Ramelli, "Dal mandilion di Edessa a la sindone", *Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* (1999): 185: "Molto più problematico appare invece stabilire quando, in che circonstanze e da dove la sacra Immagine sia pervenuta a Edessa, poiché le fonti si fanno qui più scarse e più leggendarie". All the sources hold that the Image did in fact *come* to Edessa from elsewhere; there is no textual evidence for the production of the Image *in* Edessa.

[11] The *editio princeps* of this text was published by Ernst von Dobschütz in 1899 (*Christusbilder*, vol. 2, 39-85). This is now complemented by my own edition published in 2009 (Guscin, *The Image*, 8-69, including facing-page translation into English), based on a number of additional MSS unknown to the eminent German scholar, including the early and excellent witness MS Athos *Stavronikita* 18, and introducing corrections to the *editio princeps*. Further witnesses were added to the edition in my PhD thesis, which can be seen at (https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/24278014/MARK_GUSCIN_PhD_THESIS_05.03.15.pdf) and which this book is based upon.

[12] The textual evidence for the sweating of blood in the original gospel attributed to Luke is meagre, although the verse and the tradition are evidently old. Cf. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971), 177: "The absence of these verses in such ancient and widely diversified witnesses as $\mathbf{p}^{(69vid),\,75}$ ℵ A B T W syr^{s} $cop^{sa\ bo}$ arm^{mss} geo Marcion Clement Origen *al,* as well as their being marked with asterisks or obeli (signifying spuriousness) in other witnesses (Δ^{c} Π^{c} $892^{c\ mg}$ 1079 1195 1216 $cop^{bo\ mss}$) and their transferral to Matthew's gospel (after 26.39) by family 13 and several lectionaries (the latter also transfer ver. 45a) strongly suggests that they are no part of the original text of Luke. Their presence in many manuscripts, some ancient, as well as their citation by Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Eusebius and many other Fathers, is proof of the antiquity of the account".

There was without doubt a king reigning over Edessa when Christ was alive, and he was called Abgar (there was a long line of kings with this name and the monarch contemporary with Christ is usually numbered as Abgar V). This Abgar most probably reigned from AD 13 to 50. He is mentioned by Tacitus in a rather unfavourable light[13]:

> Igitur excitis quorum de sententia petitus rex, positisque castris apud Zeugma, unde maxime pervius amnis, postquam inlustres Parthi rexque Arabum Acbarus advenerat, monet Meherdaten barbarorum impetus acris cunctatione languescere aut in perfidiam mutari: ita urgeret coepta. Quod spretum fraude Acbari, qui iuvenem ignarum et summam fortunam in luxu ratum multos per dies attinuit apud oppidum Edessam.
>
> He then called for those at whose suggestion a king had been requested from Rome, encamped at Zeugma where the river was most easily fordable, and awaited the arrival of the leading men of Parthia and of Abgar, king of the Arabs, and reminded Meherdates that the impulsive enthusiasm of barbarians soon fades in the face of delay, or even turns into treachery. He should therefore move his plans on quickly. The advice was ignored through the perfidy of Abgar, as he delayed the foolish young prince for several days in the city of Edessa. The prince thought that the highest position just meant self-indulgence[14].

The existence of an Abgar ruling at Edessa and contemporary of Jesus does very little, however, to establish a first-century origin for the cloth. Mirković states the case quite succintly: "In conclusion we must say that the portrait of Jesus began to play a role in the reception process of the Abgar legend only after the middle of the sixth century. It seems very unlikely that Eusebius purposefully excluded the reference to the portrait"[15].

Two of the earliest texts concerning the apocryphal correspondence between Jesus and Abgar make no mention of the image that eventually became much more significant than the letters[16]. The earliest surviving

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[13] *Annalium ab Excessu Divi Augusti Libri* XII:12, ed. C. D. Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906), 238.

[14] All translations in this study are my own unless otherwise stated.

[15] Mirković, *Prelude*, 114.

[16] For a convincing explanation of why the letters cannot be accepted as genuine, cf. Tixeront, *Les Origines*, 138-140. In direct response to Tixeront, J.P.P. Martin, on the other hand, argues that while the actual text of the letters might not be genuine, it is not unlikely that Abgar and Jesus were actually in contact, *Les Origines*, 107: "Il nous paraît impossible également d'admettre que la correspondance de Jésus et d'Abgare ne repose pas sur quelques relations entre

written account of the Abgar legend dates from the beginning of the fourth century, in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*[17], although this version of the legend is not exactly the same as the later ones. The historian dates the events to the year 340 of the Seleucid era, which coincides with AD 30[18], i.e. just before the crucifixion.

Eusebius does not name the person that Jesus will send to Abgar, at least not when the letter is quoted. He says elsewhere that it was Thaddaeus[19], one of the seventy-two, who was sent by Thomas. Neither does Eusebius make any mention of Jesus' promise (at the end of the letter sent in reply to the king) to keep the city of Edessa safe from any enemy attack. The promise was most probably added shortly after the middle of the fourth century, when Edessa became a Roman outpost on the borders of Persian territory. The main point, however, is that Eusebius does not refer to any image or portrait. The historian claims that his account is based on documents kept in the city of Edessa and that he translated the letters directly from the Syriac, a claim that can never be established with

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Jésus-Christ et le Toparque de l'Osrhoène". Martin's affirmation seems most unlikely and is purely conjectural.

[17] For critical editions cf. *Histoire Ecclésiastique*, ed. Gustave Bardy (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952) and *Eusebius Werke*, ed. Ivar A. Heikel (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1902). The earliest MSS both date from the eleventh century (MSS *Vaticanus* 149 and *Mosquensis* 50), which is two hundred years after the restoration of icons, although it is most unlikely that the text is an iconophile interpolation as Eusebius does not mention the Image of Edessa, just the letters. Neither would the narrative gain anything from such an interpolation.

[18] Desreumaux, *Histoire*, 13, suggests A.D. 28-29.

[19] Thaddaeus must logically be equated with Addai, but was he one of the twelve apostles, or in accordance with other versions one of the seventy-two? Segal, *Edessa*, 65, would keep the two separate. He states that Addai could very well have been a historical personage, who brought Christianity to nearby Adiabene and possibly even to Edessa at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second. Addai was unknown to the Greek Church and simply identified with Thaddaeus. Thaddaeus is not mentioned in Egeria's version of the story; Thomas is named, but not directly as the apostle who was sent to Edessa. An inscription discovered near Edessa and published in 1914 (Max von Oppenheim and Hiller von Gaertringen, "Höleninschrift von Edessa mit dem Briefe Jesu an Abgar", *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* [1914]: 817-828), identifies Thaddaeus and Thomas as one and the same person, as do the independently preserved versions of the Abgar correspondence in three Athos MSS (*Protaton* 83, *Vatopedi* 928 and *Docheiariou* 235).

any certainty[20]. If it is true, then we must assume that the records he consulted did not contain any reference to the Image either.

The second earliest text concerns Egeria, a nun who went on a pilgrimage to visit the holy places towards the end of the fourth century[21]. Her origins seem to lie in the north-west of Spain[22]. She kept a record of her visits and experiences, which has unfortunately not come down to us complete, although the account of her visit to Edessa has survived[23].

Egeria records the story of Abgar as related to her by the local bishop. The letters to and from Jesus are mentioned but not quoted. The bishop read them to her and gave her copies; the text seems to suggest that he gave her the originals in his keeping (*epistolas ipsas sive Aggari ad Dominum sive Domini ad Aggarum*), although it would be more prudent to assume that she meant original copies. Egeria puts on record that she already had copies of the letters in her homeland, but that the ones she saw and heard in Edessa were longer (*nam vere amplius est quod hic accepi*). The letters are not reproduced in Egeria's account of her visit to Edessa and we do not know the text of the copies she had back home, so neither can we know for sure what additions the Edessa letters had. It could very well be that the longer text consisted of the promise of invincibility for the

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[20] E. Schwartz, "Zu Eusebius Kirchengeschichte", *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 4 (1903), 65, claims that Eusebius deliberately invented the "translation" to claim independence for the church in Edessa.

[21] Segal, *Edessa*, 66, mistakenly places her pilgrimage in the "middle of the fifth century".

[22] Segal, *Edessa*, 183, prefers Southern Gaul, although her place of birth is confirmed in the seventh-century letter of Valerius to the monks of El Bierzo, edited by Agustín Arce, *Itinerario de la Virgen Egeria* (Madrid: BAC, 1980), 8-17 (with facing page translation into Spanish): "Quae extremo occidui maris Oceani litore exorta orienti est facta cognita". The standard work in English on Egeria, J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1999[3]), states concerning her origin, 3: "She may have been a Gaul from Aquitaine, or a Spaniard from Galicia". Three years later, in *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 2002), 1, the same author is less committal: "Egeria herself, who probably came from the Atlantic coast …".

[23] Critical edition by Agustín Arce, *Itinerario*. The text itself survives in just one MS, *Arezzo* VI.3, copied in the 11th century at Monte Cassino. It was still there in 1532, but does not figure in the inventory of 1650. It appeared at Arezzo in 1788, but was lost again when the monastery was dissolved by the Napoleonic troops and rediscovered in 1884 (cf. Arce, *Itinerario*, 35-36). Given that there is only one textual witness, and that the episode forms a logical and inherent part of the diary and is western, not from the Orthodox world, and does not even mention the actual Image, there is no reason to believe it might be an interpolation related to the restoration of images after the iconoclast crisis.

city. In fact, when the bishop tells Egeria the story of Abgar, he recounts the Persian attack and how Abgar prayed at the city gates: *Domine Iesu, tu promiseras nobis, ne aliquis hostium ingrederetur civitatem istam*, showing that the promise was at least known in the city at the time.

In the surviving account, Egeria does not mention Thaddaeus/Addai in connection with Abgar, but her account of the legend is hardly complete. No mention is made either of Abgar's illness or of Ananias in Jerusalem. What is even more significant is that Egeria writes nothing about an image or portrait of Christ. Andrew Palmer argues that this silence should not be understood as definitive:

> The argument from the silence of Egeria ... can hardly be conclusive; there are some very curious silences in travel literature. Herodotus does not mention the Sphinx in Egypt, though he describes the pyramids around it from his own observations. The Image may be a good deal older than Runciman (who is followed in this by Averil Cameron) thinks[24].

The promise that God would defend Edessa is mentioned in the Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite (although no mention is made of either the Abgar-Jesus correspondence or the Image). This text was written in Syriac in the very early sixth century[25]:

> … they could not gain the mastery of our city since the promise of Christ given to the believing king Abgar could not be annulled. He said, "Your city shall be blessed and no enemy shall ever have mastery over it"[26].

In conclusion, the fact that the Image is not mentioned in the written histories of Eusebius and Egeria is a very difficult hurdle to overcome, should one wish to argue in favour of an origin dating before they wrote (especially when both Eusebius and Egeria do mention the Abgar/Christ correspondence), although it should not be taken as definitive in itself. There is a possibility that the Image is obliquely referred to when Egeria reports the bishop's words about Abgar, "Ecce rex Aggarus, qui antequam videret Dominum credidit ei, quia esset vere filius Dei" (Behold King

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[24] Andrew Palmer, "The inauguration anthem of Hagia Sophia in Edessa: a new edition and translation with historical and architectural notes and a comparison with contemporary Constantinopolitan Kontakion", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 12 (1988), 129.

[25] Cf. Frank Trombley and John W. Watt, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), xxviii.

[26] Trombley and Watt, *The Chronicle*, 6. The divine promise to keep Edessa safe is also mentioned in sections 36, 58 and 60 of the Chronicle.

Abgar, who believed that the Lord was the true Son of God before he saw him). In none of the versions of the legend does Abgar actually lay eyes on Christ in person, so if the verse is understood literally it could mean that Abgar believed before he saw the Image of Christ. If the story as told in the *Narratio* is based on any kind of truth, the Image was hidden away when Eusebius and Egeria wrote, and so would have remained unknown to all. Furthermore, the dangers of the *argumentum ex silentio* are well known and rarely conclusive[27].

The image first appears in the Syriac work known as the *Doctrine of Addai*, which in its present form would appear to date from about AD 400[28]. In the Syriac tradition the text is simply known as Labubna, named after the scribe (real or imaginary) who copied the text and signed it at the end. Drijvers states that the text is "clearly meant to defend orthodox beliefs at Edessa against all kinds of heretics pretending that orthodoxy goes back to Edessa's first apostle sent by Jesus himself"[29]. According to Ilaria Ramelli[30], certain traditions in this text may go as far back as the first century AD.

In this version, which as Runciman states "seems to be an emended and enlarged edition of the documents that Eusebius saw at Edessa"[31], Abgar sent to Jesus a messenger named Hanan (apparently the same person as Ananias), who was an artist. In Eusebius' account, Ananias is a

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[27] Cf. Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 73-74: "Another difficulty with argument from silence is that historians cannot assume that an observer of a particular fact would have automatically recorded that fact. Authors observe all kinds of events but only record those that seem important to them".

[28] Mirković, *Prelude*, 8, dates it to ca.500. The text is edited in *The Teaching of Addai*, translated by George Howard (London: Trübner, 1876; repr. Michigan: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1981). Cf. also Daniel Deleanu, *The Doctrine of Addai the Apostle – The Syriac Version* (Toronto: lulu.com, 2012); idem, *The Doctrine of Addai the Apostle – The Armenian Version* (Toronto: lulu.com, 2012); translations with some explanatory notes but no introduction or analysis.

[29] H.J.W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 33.

[30] "Possible historical traces", 25, "In fact, it is even possible that Abgar the Great was a Christian himself".

[31] Steven Runciman, "Some Remarks on the Image of Edessa", *Cambridge Historical Journal* 3 (1931), 240. Mirković, *Prelude*, 31, calls it a "conglomerate of stories taken from a variety of sources". Cf. Aurelio Santos, *Los Evangelios Apócrifos* (Madrid: BAC, 1956), 663, who attributes the differences between Eusebius and the Doctrine of Addai to there being two ancient versions, different but parallel.

very minor character; he is hardly mentioned at all, and when he is, he is described as a ταχυδρόμος or messenger, whereas in the Doctrine of Addai he is a high official in Abgar's court, a scribe and an artist.

In the Doctrine, Hanan painted a portrait of Christ and took it back to Edessa. The Image therefore is certainly present in this version of the legend, although under a very different format from the later ἀχειροποίητος (not made by human hand) descriptions. The Syriac tradition of a painted portrait also survives in the "Chronicle of 1234"[32], in which it is said that Abgar ordered his messenger to bring back an icon of Christ on a "piece of wood", although in the end the image is actually transferred onto a cloth. Irma Karaulashvili's article[33] is misleading at this point. In her insistence on following Averil Cameron on all points[34], Karaulashvili omits to mention that the "Chronicle of 1234" goes on to narrate how the messenger found it impossible to paint the portrait, so Christ took a piece of linen cloth and applied it to his face, miraculously leaving an imprint thereon; the source Karaulashvili uses to try and show that the Image was a wooden board actually states it was a cloth.

Desreumaux suggests that the episode of the portrait in the Doctrine is "la réponse à la question des deux princes, réponse que la prédication de l'apôtre traduit toutefois en clair: Le corps est la pourpre pure de sa divinité illustre; c'est grâce à lui que nous pouvons voir sa divinité cachée"[35].

The promise to make the city invincible also appears in Jesus' reply to Abgar in the Doctrine – an early example of the lengthy process that led to the letter's use as a general talisman or good luck charm. The promise was also mentioned in a letter from Darius to Augustine in 429:

> Adfuit Deus regi, sanatus est, et amplificato petitionis munere, per epistolam non modo salutem ut supplici, sed etiam securitatem ut regi transmisit; iussit insuper eius urbem ab hostibus in perpetuum esse ac semper immune[36].
>
> And so God visited the king, and the king was cured. He received more than he had asked for, as not only did God give him health as to a

[32] Cf. Hans Drijvers, "The Image of Edessa in the Syriac tradition", in Kessler and Wolf, eds., *The Holy Face*, 13-31.
[33] Karaulashvili, "The Abgar Legend", 222.
[34] Cf. Averil Cameron, *Changing Cultures in Early Byzantium* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), 88: the Image of Edessa "never actually looked like a cloth at all".
[35] Desreumaux, *Histoire*, 31.
[36] PL 33, col. 1022.

> supplicant through the letter, but also safety as to a king; for he also decreed that his city would be safe forever from enemies.

Another significant difference between Eusebius' account and the Doctrine of Addai is that in the latter Jesus' reply to Abgar is an oral message (although the content is virtually the same, excepting the addition of the last sentence promising that the city will never fall into enemy hands), whereas Eusebius has Christ answer in writing.

It seems, therefore, that the early version of the legend in the Doctrine is proof of how the story developed and evolved over the years; the painted portrait of Christ (with no hint of a miraculous origin) and the lack of a written letter from Christ to Abgar were both features that were replaced in just about all later versions by the miraculous image and the written letter, which became a significant element in itself. The importance of the Doctrine lies in the very early mention of an image of Christ (AD 400) and the fact that it shows how the legend developed and was in a constant state of flux.

The Image is mentioned, albeit in a strangely obscure way, in a Syriac hymn which dates to the first half of the sixth century[37]. The original cathedral of Edessa had been destroyed by the floods of 525, and the hymn celebrates the opening of the new building eight years later. There is some doubt and debate about the exact meaning of the verses that mention an image not made by human hands. Drijvers translates the relevant verses as follows:

> Like an image not made by hands is the marble
> with which its walls are suitably overlaid.
> And from its brightness, polished and white,
> light gathers in it like the sun.

and concludes that "strophe nine of the Syriac hymn does not refer to the Holy Face, the *acheiropoietos* icon"[38]. Whitby is in agreement with this, stating that "its reference to a picture not made by human hands refers to natural patterns in the marble on the church walls"[39].

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[37] For the original text see *Codex Vaticanus Syriacus* 95, ff. 49-50. Cf. André Grabar, "Le témoignage d'une hymne syriaque sur l'architecture de la cathédrale d'Edesse au VI[e] siècle et sur la symbolique de l'édifice chrétien", *Cahiers archéologiques* 2 (1947), 41-68, and Palmer, "The inauguration anthem", 117-168.
[38] Drijvers, "*The Image*", 20.
[39] Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 325.

Palmer translates the strophe as follows[40]:

> Imprinted with a picture not made by hands, marble snugly clads its walls; the luminosity of its polished whiteness forms a kind of reservoir of sunlight

and in a later publication as follows[41]:

> The marble of it is imprinted with an image not made with hands / and its walls are fittingly clad. And it is polished and made white by its brightness, light brims within it like the sun.

The problem lies in the fact that in the original Syriac, the lack of the definite article before "image not made by hands" means that the marble could be like "an image not made by hands" or like "*the* image not made by hands". In the dedication hymn for Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, used by Palmer as a comparison for the Syriac verses, no mention is made of such an image. It could be argued that patterns in marble look nothing like an image of the face of Christ, and so the simile would make no sense, but the comparison is not necessarily one of the physical aspect of the two objects. It could just as well be a comparison of their non-human origin[42].

I would argue that it is reasonable to assume that any reference, either direct or indirect, to an (or the) image not made by human hands in sixth-century Edessa must be a reference to the face of Christ known as the Image of Edessa. At the very least, any reference to an image not made by human hands in the city of Edessa would immediately have brought to mind the image of Christ, and the author of the poem must have been aware of this. It would be misleading to describe an object in Edessa in this way and assume nobody would think of the facial image of Christ. Palmer admits a "possible indirect allusion" to the Image of Edessa[43], and in his edition of the Acts of Thaddaeus (in 2009) associates this "image" in

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[40] "The inauguration anthem", 117-168. The translation of the hymn is on pages 131-133 and the Syriac text on 156-157.
[41] Palmer, "The *Logos*", 131.
[42] For a similar miracle of an image (of the Virgin) appearing on marble at Lydda, cf. Eirene Harvalia-Crook, "A witness to the later tradition of the Florilegium in The Letter of the Three Patriarchs (BHG 1386): an anonymous collection of icon stories (Hierosolymitanus S. Sabas gr. 105)", in *Porphyrogenita: Essays on the History and Literature of Byzantium and the Latin East in Honour of Julian Chrysostomides*, ed. Charalambos Dendrinos et al. (Aldershot: Variorum, 2003), 353.
[43] Palmer, "The *Logos*", 129.