

What Did the Beloved Disciple See? †

By Fr. Andrew Dalton, LC, STD

On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb, found the stone removed, and ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple — who, by long tradition, is identified with John the Apostle and Evangelist. The two men raced to the tomb. Peter entered first and saw the linen cloths (*othonia*) and the sudary (*soudarion*). Then John entered, and “he saw and believed” (John 20:8).

But what exactly did he see? What did he see that prompted him to believe?

Some speculate. Perhaps the risen Jesus folded the sudary in some signature way, signaling that he is alive and will soon appear. Or perhaps John saw an image of Jesus’s body impressed upon the cloth. Or perhaps the shroud still glowed with residual light from the Resurrection. The text, of course, does not hint at, much less require, any of these readings.

More careful commentators have grounded John's belief in elements from the text: the empty tomb (Ridderbos 1991; Whitacre 1999), the body’s absence (Carlton 2003), the linen cloths and sudary (Carson 1990; Morris 1995; Ramsey 2010), or some combination of these (Beasley-Murray 1999). These answers are not wrong, but they are incomplete. John's text does not merely report that something was there and something was missing; it specifies, with careful vocabulary, the precise condition of what remained. That precision is the key.

In what follows, I will argue that the specific condition of the burial cloths gave John reasons to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. The argument proceeds in two parts. The first is philological-exegetical. It traces the Greek vocabulary of burial across three Johannine passages — the burial of Jesus (John 19), the raising of Lazarus (John 11), and the empty tomb (John 20) — to establish what John encountered in the tomb and why it moved him to believe. The second is sindonological: the Shroud of Turin, examined independently, displays physical characteristics that converge remarkably with the picture the exegesis yields. Neither part depends on the other; together they point to the same extraordinary picture: a body that departed without disturbing the envelope that contained it.

Part One: The Witness of Scripture

Four textile terms govern the burial vocabulary: the linen cloths (*othonia*), the large shroud (*sindōn*), the binding strips (*keiriai*), and the face cloth or sudary (*soudarion*). Their precise meanings, and the distinctions among them, are the key to reading John 20. (An appendix

† An earlier version of this argument was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Amsterdam, July 2024, in the session on Johannine Literature. The present article is a revised and expanded version of that paper.

offers a synoptic chart. But analysis before synthesis.) Attentive to these categories, let us visit three key scenes in John's Gospel, one by one.

I. The Burial of Jesus: John 19:38–42

After the death of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body and “bound (*edēsan*) it in linen cloths (*othonia*) with the spices, as is the burial custom (*ethos*) of the Jews” (John 19:40).

One notes immediately the *othonia*. This vocabulary resurfaces on Sunday in the empty tomb. Why use a plural noun? Could a long linen shroud be contemplated here? We shall return to this question.

Two observations are indispensable. First, the verb *deō* means to bind, to tie. It implies not mere draping but active constraint. One might imagine the body to be secured with strips of some kind. We may not know their size and shape, but we are told what they bound. Interestingly, they bound not only the body but also the spices. Nicodemus had brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing one hundred Roman pounds (John 19:39) — an extraordinary quantity, befitting a king. No text affirms the body was anointed with these spices; rather, they were constrained inside the *othonia*. The task of anointing would remain for after the Sabbath rest (cf. Mark 16:1). The nature of the binding will come into focus when we turn to Lazarus.

A second detail: Jesus's burial follows Jewish custom (*ethos*). The details John provides — a sudary on the head, a stone at the entrance, aromatics bound within the cloths — point unmistakably toward the burial of Lazarus, which that same evangelist has already narrated in detail. John 11, it turns out, is the key to John 20.

II. The Unbinding of Lazarus: John 11

John 11 narrates the death, burial, and raising of Lazarus of Bethany. Its vocabulary creates a deliberate textual bridge to the burial and resurrection of Jesus, and its theological function is not merely illustrative but logically prior: without John 11, the significance of what John found in the tomb on Easter morning cannot be fully understood.

The theological message derives from the language of binding. The verbal root *deo* appears twice in relation to the customary burial. A sudary is “bound around” (*periededeto*) the face of Lazarus (John 11:44). And his hands and feet are bound (*dedemenos*) with linen strips (*keiriai*). The parallels are too detailed to be accidental; John has constructed this narrative so that readers compare and contrast Lazarus and Jesus.

It is reasonable to infer that Jesus was also bound with linen strips (*keiriai*). First, Jesus is buried according to the Jewish custom, and this custom is seen in the burial of Lazarus, who was bound with linen strips. Second, Jesus is bound in linen cloths (*othonia*) — a plural which makes sense if it refers to a shroud plus strips, but is less easily accounted for if Jesus was bound in a shroud alone. Third, Luke uses *sindōn* on Friday and *othonia* on Sunday (Luke 23:53; 24:12) without explanation. The most natural reading is that *othonia* subsumes

sindōn while adding something further. That something, supplied by the Lazarus parallel, is the *keiriai*. *Sindōn* + *keiriai* = *othonia*.

Beyond the matter of reconstructing the precise scene, there is a theological message to unpack here. For all the similarities between Lazarus and Jesus, the contrast is even more arresting. When Jesus commands that the stone be removed from Lazarus's tomb, it is men who move it. When Lazarus emerges from the tomb, he is still bound in his grave cloths. Jesus commands the bystanders: "Unbind him, and let him go" (John 11:44). Human power brings the stone away; human hands loosen the linen strips.

Lazarus is resuscitated — returned to mortal life, with death still ahead of him. He comes out of the tomb by a power entirely extrinsic to himself.

When Jesus rises, however, no one is commissioned to roll away the stone, untie the sudary, or loosen linen strips at his hands and feet. The motif of binding and loosing — which runs across the canon as an image of captivity and liberation — reaches its ultimate expression here. The words of John's Apocalypse come to mind, as the risen Christ declares, "I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1:18). He who holds the keys is the one who can open what no one else can open, and loose what no one else can loose. The burial cloths found in John 20 are the wordless declaration that he has done precisely that, not by being freed from death by another, but by passing through death and unto glory by a divine power at work within himself.

The contrast is especially vivid in light of the *soudarion*. Lazarus emerges with his sudary still bound around his face. What, then, of Jesus's? That question brings us to John 20.

III. The Condition of the Tomb: John 20:1–10

We are now equipped to read John 20 with the precision it demands. John entered the tomb and saw (1) the linen cloths lying — that is, the shroud and binding strips, sunken down and emptied out, and (2) the sudary not collapsed, but distinctly coiled and in its original place — that is, within the fold of the shroud. Let us consider the evidence for this reading.

The Linen Cloths Were Lying Settled ...

Only one word describes the *othonia*. Appearing three times in the passage, its recurrence is surely not accidental. That word is the participle *keimena*. It means *lying*, in the sense of something that has collapsed or settled into place. Many translations go beyond what is required and render it "lying there," as if the evangelist's point were about the location of the linens within the tomb. Some go even further and say "lying on the ground" — a detail the Greek text does not supply. These renderings obscure what *keimena* conveys here: not position, but condition. The cloths are not simply located somewhere — they are lying as something lies when it has been emptied of what once gave it form, fallen in upon itself. Think of a balloon that, though still knotted at the neck, has lost its air.

Keimai in Greek describes not merely the position of an object but its resultant condition — the state of something that has settled, collapsed, or come to rest after losing its inner form

or animating force. The word is used of prostrate bodies,² of garments that lie in folds after being removed, of objects laid down and inert.³ Applied to the burial cloths in John 20, *keimena* describes cloths that have collapsed — that have settled flat, sunken inward, emptied of the body that once gave them their form. The image is precise: a linen shroud laid above and below a body, with binding strips knotted around the outside, retains the shape of what it contains so long as the body is present. Remove the body in the ordinary way, and the cloths fall into disarray, disordered by the handling. But if the body were to depart without any physical disturbance of the wrappings, the shroud would simply subside: still in place, still knotted, but flat, deflated. This is precisely what *keimena* describes. The reading was established with philological rigor by André Feuillet⁴ and has been independently supported by Lavergne⁵ and Babinet.⁶

... Whereas the Sudary Was Coiled Up in Its Place

Most translations render John 20:7 as saying the sudary was "folded up in a place by itself" — spatially separate from the linen cloths, lying somewhere else in the tomb. This reading rests on five Greek words: *chōris entetyligmenon eis hena topon*.

Entetyligmenon is the perfect passive participle of *entylissō*, a verb denoting wrapping, coiling, or winding into a rounded form. The perfect tense describes a state resulting from prior action: the sudary is in a coiled, wound condition, as it was when it encircled the head on Friday evening. It has not been unrolled and refolded by human hands. It retains the shape it had.

The adverb *chōris* — rendered "separately" or "apart" in most translations — is the hinge on which the standard reading turns, and Feuillet addresses it with admirable honesty. He notes that *chōris* appears here without a governing genitive, which means it functions as a pure adverb modifying *entetyligmenon*, describing the manner of the coiling, not the location of the sudary. He tested several renderings: Lavergne had proposed "above all," which Feuillet found contextually unsuitable; he himself tried "on the contrary" and then "separately," but neither satisfied him. He settled on the modal sense: *chōris* = "distinctly," meaning the

²Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 24.580, where grave cloths are described with *keimai* in their settled, post-use condition. See also Sophocles, *Antigone* 29, where *keimai* of a corpse describes its prostrate, inert condition rather than its mere location.

³LSJ s.v. *keimai*: "to lie, of things, to be laid, placed"; of garments, to lie in folds, to be deposited. The word denotes the resultant state of an object that has settled, not merely its location. Cf. John 11:38 (the stone *ekeito* upon the tomb — it lies upon, pressed down in place); John 21:9 (fish and bread *keimena* — lying ready, settled on the coals).

⁴André Feuillet, "The Identification and the Disposition of the Funerary Linens of Jesus' Burial According to the Data of the Fourth Gospel," in *La Sindone e la Scienza*, ed. Pietro Coero-Borga (Edizioni Paoline, 1979). Originally presented at the II International Congress of Sindonology, Turin, 1978. English translation available at shroud.com.

⁵Ceslas Lavergne, OP, "Le Sudarium et la Position des Linges après la Résurrection," *Quaderni di Sindon* 3 (1961). Feuillet built directly on Lavergne's conclusions, with modifications.

⁶Robert Babinet, "Le Sindon et la Découverte du Tombeau Vide en Jean 20:3–10," *Esprit et Vie* 98 (June 1988); developed at length in *Le Témoin Secret de la Résurrection* (Jean-Cyrille Godefroy, 2001).

sudary, unlike the *othonia*, had not sunk down flat. In his 1978 Congress translation he rendered the phrase *enroulé distinctement*, "distinctly coiled." This reading is confirmed by the rhetorical structure of the verse itself. John has already described the *othonia* with the participle *keimena* — collapsed, settled. The *chōris entetyligmenon* is the deliberate antithesis: not collapsed, but distinctly coiled. The contrast is between two conditions, not two locations. A merely spatial *chōris* — "in a separate place" — would contribute nothing to that antithesis. The modal reading, by contrast, makes the sentence do exactly what John needs it to do: the *othonia* tell one story, the sudary tells another, and *chōris* marks the turn.

That the sudary remained in its original location is established not by *chōris* but by *eis hena topon*, and the distinction matters.

On the standard reading — *chōris* meaning "separately," *eis hena topon* meaning "in a place by itself" — the two expressions are effectively redundant: the sudary is separate, and it is in a place. But as Feuillet observes, to say that the sudary occupied some place is a distressing banality; it obviously had to be somewhere. The phrase contributes nothing if it means only that. The redundancy is itself an argument against the standard reading.

On the modal reading, by contrast, the two expressions do distinct work: *chōris* tells us the sudary's condition — distinctly coiled, unlike the collapsed *othonia* — and *eis hena topon* tells us its location: not just somewhere, but in its original place, between the two layers of the shroud where Jesus's head had rested. Babinet argues persuasively for exactly this reading, noting that *heis* never means "other" and that the phrase is best rendered "in the same place." The sudary was not in a corner of the tomb. It was inside the fold of the shroud — still coiled, still retaining its rounded shape — while the shroud itself had gone flat around it.

One final detail merits attention. John 20 neither affirms nor denies the presence of the spices bound inside the linen cloths on Friday (John 19:40). If they remained — and the text gives no reason to think otherwise — then John would have seen their shape still pressing against the cloth from within, adding one more element that prompted him to believe.

He Saw and Believed

This picture makes sense of John's lapidary line, "he saw and believed." He found the *othonia keimena* — the shroud and binding strips lying settled, still knotted, emptied of the body that had given them their form — and the *soudarion entetyligmenon*, distinctly coiled in its original place between the two layers of the shroud, retaining the shape it had held since Friday evening. Theft was ruled out: tomb raiders would take the body in its wrappings, or strip the costly linens and spices. They would not trouble themselves to extract a body from its linen envelope and leave the sudary precisely in place. Resuscitation was ruled out: a revived body, like Lazarus, would have required human hands to loosen the strips and unwrap the head cloth. No such assistance had been rendered. The cloths bore silent witness to something unprecedented: a body had mysteriously departed without disturbing its linen envelope.

Part Two: The Witness of the Shroud

The exegetical argument above stands on its own terms and requires nothing beyond the text. What follows is something different: physical evidence, drawn from a linen cloth preserved in Turin, examined by scientists who knew nothing of Feuillet and cared nothing for *keimena*. The two lines of inquiry were developed independently, by different methods, toward different ends. That they arrive at the same picture — the same burial configuration, the same extraordinary departure — is not a circular argument. It is the argument.

I. The Facial Image and the Position of the Sudary

The Shroud of Turin bears not only bloodstains but also a mysterious frontal and dorsal image of a man's naked body. The facial image is surely the most showcased and scrutinized region of the cloth, and its presence has a direct bearing on the position of the sudary relative to the body.

Evidently, the sudary did not cover the face — at least not during the moment of image formation.⁷ Otherwise, one would expect the facial image to appear on the sudary rather than the shroud. The color density on the imaged fibers is inversely proportionate to body-cloth distance: coloration results from proximity with the body, but not from direct contact. Had a sudary-covered face been tucked inside a shroud, the facial image on the shroud would presumably be absent or significantly diminished — the intervening cloth would have broken the proximity on which image formation depends.

This datum constrains the options for the sudary's placement. According to John 20:7, the sudary was "on his head" (*epi tēs kephalēs autou*). The reading most directly supported by the text is precisely the one the Turin Shroud's facial image favors: the sudary sat atop the head, not over the face. And the shroud enveloped a sudary-topped head, such that the face lay in direct contact with the shroud.

A question arises here. If the sudary rests on the crown of the head, might it also extend down the sides and even under the chin while leaving the face uncovered? Insofar as a sudary that encircles the head also tops it, there is no *a priori* reason to reject this reading. Indeed, since Lazarus's head is encircled (*perideō*, John 11:44), and since Jesus was buried according to the same custom, it is reasonable to infer that Jesus's head was similarly encircled. In either case — topped only, or topped and encircled — the essential point is that the crown is covered. A covered crown corresponds to yet another sindonological datum: an important gap between the two body images.

II. The Gap Between the Frontal and Dorsal Images

⁷ The Sudarium of Oviedo presents no difficulty here. Its bloodstain pattern — marks consistent with the cloth having been folded and pressed against the nose and mouth — suggests it covered the face of a corpse, most plausibly immediately after the deposition from the cross. John 20:7 describes the sudary's position at burial, not at every moment between Calvary and the tomb. The two data points belong to different stages of the same sequence.

The frontal and dorsal images of the Shroud do not meet at the top of the cloth. Several centimeters of unimaged linen separate the crown of the head in the frontal image from the crown of the head in the dorsal image.

If the shroud had lain directly over the top of the head, one would expect the crown to be imaged and the frontal and dorsal images to meet. The gap comports with the idea that something intervened between the cloth and the crown, preventing direct contact and leaving that region unimaged.

The natural candidate is the sudary described in John 20:7 as resting on his head (*epi tēs kephalēs autou*). A sudary placed atop the crown, between the two layers of the shroud, would do exactly this: it would create a zone of separation, yielding precisely those several centimeters of unimaged linen between the frontal and dorsal images. The gap is thus physically consistent with the explicit Johannine statement.

This point also corroborates Feuillet’s reading of *entetyligmenon eis hena topon*. If the sudary retained its coiled shape within the folds of the shroud, it would produce precisely the kind of raised, rounded mass between the two layers of linen that explains the gap. The Shroud’s geometry and the Greek text’s vocabulary describe the same object in the same position from two independent vantage points.

III. The Beard Compression and the Question of the Chin-Band

Though not universally accepted, some researchers note what appears to be a transverse compression in the beard region of the Shroud image, just below the chin, consistent with a band running beneath the jaw. A band would keep the mouth closed after rigor mortis relaxed.

This feature is suggestive rather than probative. It is consistent with a sudary that encircled the head — passing over the crown, down the sides, and under the chin — rather than merely resting atop it. Such a configuration would leave the face fully exposed and in direct contact with the shroud, explaining the facial image, while the peripheral encircling band would produce the compression visible in the beard. It is equally consistent with a separate chin-band distinct from the sudary.

IV. The Frontal-Dorsal Length Asymmetry

A further sindonological observation is worth noting, though it awaits fuller confirmation in the literature.⁸ There seems to be an unimaged area at the level of the shins on the frontal image. Furthermore, the frontal image of the Shroud is longer than the dorsal image. One proposed explanation is a fold or crease at shin level on the frontal side.

⁸The frontal image of the Shroud is measurably longer than the dorsal image. One proposed explanation is a fold or crease at shin level on the frontal side, which would “stretch” the effective imaging distance without affecting the dorsal surface. If the *keiriai* secured the legs such that the shroud was tented or creased at the shins, this asymmetry would follow. The claim awaits fuller sindonological confirmation.

If this explanation is correct, it is consistent with the *keiriai* described in John 11:44 and presupposed in John 19:40. Binding strips wound around the legs — securing the lower body within the shroud — could produce precisely such a fold at shin level on the upper surface of the cloth, while the dorsal surface, lying flat beneath the body, would show no corresponding crease. The length asymmetry, on this reading, carries the physical signature of the *keiriai*.

V. Undistorted Body Image and the Agamemnon Effect

The body image of the Shroud is largely undistorted — that is, the proportions of the imaged figure correspond to those of an actual human body without the stretching or warping that results when a flat medium is pressed conformally to a curved surface. This feature of the Shroud has a direct bearing on the burial configuration described in John 19.

When a flat cloth is pressed tightly against a rounded surface — a face, a shoulder, a side — the resulting impression suffers from geometric distortion: the lateral surfaces, where the cloth bends around the curve, stretch the image outward. Sindonologists sometimes call this the Agamemnon effect, after the famous Mycenaean gold death mask, whose pressed surface shows analogous warping of the facial features. Had the Shroud been pressed tightly to the sides of the body, the lateral imaging would likely show this distortion, and the overall image would be wider and more deformed than it is.

Two related features of the Shroud follow: there are no lateral images, and the body image that is present is largely undistorted. Both features are consistent with the same burial configuration: the shroud lay flat above and below the body, without conforming tightly to the sides, because the spices described in John 19:40 — myrrh and aloes, one hundred Roman pounds, bound within the linen — flanked the body, holding the cloth away from the lateral surfaces. The absence of lateral imaging and the undistorted proportions of the body image are not puzzles to be explained away; they comport exactly with what John 19 describes.

Conclusion

What did John see? The evidence — exegetical and sindonological, textual and physical — converges on a single picture.

He saw the *othonia keimena*: the shroud and binding strips collapsed flat, still knotted, emptied of the body that had given them their form. He saw the *soudarion entetyligmenon eis hena topon*: the sudary still coiled within the upper fold of the shroud, in the exact position it had occupied since Friday evening, retaining its shape while the body it had rested upon was gone.

What remained was unprecedented: a body that had, by all appearances, passed through the linen envelope without disturbing it — departing the way light departs through glass, leaving the medium behind, intact and in place.

The Shroud of Turin, examined independently, presents a physical cloth whose geometry is consistent with this picture at every relevant point: the facial image on the shroud rather than the sudary, the gap between the frontal and dorsal images, the beard compression consistent with a chin-band, the possible signatures of the binding strips, and — sealing the convergence — the undistorted body image and the absence of lateral imaging. Two lines of inquiry — exegesis of the Gospel of John and examination of the Shroud of Turin — converge on the same burial configuration and the same extraordinary departure.

Such a conclusion brings us to the second half of John's lapidary phrase: he saw and believed. But what exactly did he believe? Did he simply trust the women's report, as some have suggested? Or did he believe that Jesus was risen from the dead? I will take up these questions in a companion article: *What Did the Beloved Disciple Believe?*

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Further Reading

Babinet, Robert. "Le Sindon et la Découverte du Tombeau Vide en Jean 20:3–10." *Esprit et Vie* 98 (June 1988). A careful semantic study confirming the Lavergne–Feuillet reading, with particular attention to *eis hena topon*, which Babinet argues means "in the same place" rather than "in a place apart." Developed further in *Le Témoin Secret de la Résurrection* (Jean-Cyrille Godefroy, 2001).

Feuillet, André. "The Identification and the Disposition of the Funerary Linens of Jesus' Burial According to the Data of the Fourth Gospel." In *La Sindone e la Scienza*, ed. Pietro Coero-Borga. Edizioni Paoline, 1979. The most rigorous philological study of the burial cloth vocabulary in the Fourth Gospel. Essential reading for serious engagement with John 20:3–8. English translation available at shroud.com.

Lavergne, Ceslas, OP. "Le Sudarium et la Position des Linges après la Résurrection." *Quaderni di Sindon* 3 (1961). The pioneering study in this tradition, arguing that the *soudarion* remained enclosed within the folds of the shroud after the Resurrection. Feuillet built directly on Lavergne's conclusions.

Appendix: Vocabulary of Jewish Burial in the Fourth Gospel

The following charts provide a synoptic reference for the four key terms governing the burial narratives in John 11, 19, and 20, and for the Greek expressions describing the disposition of the cloths in the empty tomb. The article’s exegetical argument in Part One draws on these distinctions throughout.

Table A: Key Burial Cloth Terms

Greek	English	Reference	Scope
<i>othonia</i> ὀθόνια	linen cloths plural — at least two items	John 19:40; 20:5–7 burial & empty tomb	collective term <i>sindōn</i> + <i>keiriai</i>
<i>sindōn</i> σινδών	shroud singular linen cloth	Luke 23:53 burial of Jesus	part of <i>othonia</i> laid above & below body
<i>keiriai</i> κεῖρια	binding strips linen bands	John 11:44; 19:40 Lazarus & burial of Jesus	part of <i>othonia</i> secure body & spices
<i>soudarion</i> σουδάριον	sudary / napkin placed over head	John 11:44; 20:7 Lazarus & empty tomb	separate item NOT part of <i>othonia</i>

Table B: Key Expressions Describing the Disposition of the Cloths

Greek	English	Reference	Note
<i>edēsan auto othoniois meta tōn arōmatōn</i>	They bound [the body] in the linen cloths with the spices	John 19:40 burial of Jesus	Both body and spices are bound in the <i>othonia</i>
<i>keimena</i>	lying / settled / collapsed NOT “lying there” NOT “lying on the ground”	John 20:5–7 empty tomb	describes <i>othonia</i> , opposite <i>entetyligmenon</i> ; denotes condition, NOT location
<i>ho ēn epi tēs kephalēs autou</i>	which was on [Jesus’s] head like Lazarus (11:44)	John 20:7 empty tomb	describes <i>soudarion</i>
<i>chōris</i>	distinctly adverb	John 20:7 empty tomb	modifies <i>entetyligmenon</i> modal, NOT local
<i>entetyligmenon</i>	coiled / rolled up perfect passive participle	John 20:7 empty tomb	describes <i>soudarion</i> unlike <i>othonia</i>
<i>eis hena topon</i>	in the same place lit., “in one place”	John 20:7 empty tomb	NOT “in another place” NOT “in a place by itself”