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Miraculous Treatment of Plague in The Island of Corfu from Saint Spyridon: Contribution to The History of Medicine

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1. Abstract

One of the most important Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church is Saint Spyridon, Bishop of Tremithus of Cyprus, patron saint of Corfu.

In the context of the present study, the two miraculous interventions of the Saint are examined, with which he saved Corfu from the plague, in the years 1629 AD and 1673 AD, respectively.

In these two cases, the residents of the island, watching the plague devour the local population, pleaded with the Saint to save them from the disease, that had caused many deaths, and could not be dealt with by the medical means of that era. Thus, they run to the holy Relic of the Saint, which is kept after the Fall of Constantinople to the church carrying his name in the old city of Corfu and the Saint listened to their pleading, vanishing the disease from the island. This is reported by the historians of that era, such as Andreas Marmoras, who describes in detail the first epidemic of plague in Corfu on December, 1629 AD and the case of Sarantaris. There are testimonies that report that the guards of the Fort of Corfu, during the whole period when the Saint fought the plague, saw an inextinguishable lamp in the Saint's Bell Tower.

In memory of these events, two litanies of the saint's relic have been established, one on the first Sunday of November (Litany of Protokyriako) and one on the Palm Sunday (Palm-bearing Litany), which take place still now a days, in order for the Corfiots to honour their Patron Saint.

2. Introduction

While studying the life and miracles of the saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church, one can discover many cases pertaining to the research interest of the History of Medicine. Saints, Martyrs, Hierarchs, have bestowed many charities and miracles, have treated illnesses and diseases which the human medical means could not treat. Thus, there are many Saints who are considered to be patron saints of certain medical specialisations, and we could say that they are "specialised" in the treatment of certain diseases. Typical examples of such saints are the following: the Holy Unmercenary Cosmas and Damian, considered to be the patron saints of Medicine in general and of doctors; Saint Paraskevi, patron saint of Ophthalmology; Saint Stylianos, patron saint of Pediatrics and many other examples of saints of the Orthodox Church, the specialisation of whom depends on either the martyrdoms they suffered (e.g. Saint Antipas who is the patron saint of Dentistry) or the miracles they performed (e.g. Saint Artemius, patron saint of Urology) [1].

Another case of miraculous intervention, which pertains to the research interest of the History of Medicine and has been reported by many historians of that era, is the case of two miraculous interventions of Saint Spyridon patron saint of Corfu against plague, that had spread to the island during the 17th century AD. During the 17th century AD, as well as earlier, Corfu had many times contracted plague because of the fact that its port was a regular station

of the convoys of the Venetian commercial and military fleet, that brought many times incidences of plague, from the ports to which it parked [2].

3. Short Life and miracles of Saint Spyridon

As reported in a rare manuscript of the 18th century AD, written in byzantine lower case writing, including the service, life and miracles of the saint, Saint Spyridon was born in Cyprus and lived in the years of Constantine the Great and his successors. He was, as mentioned by the writer of his legendary, *“simple in his manners, humble in the heart and became from the beginning Shepherd of lambs”*, following to the model of Christ, who is characterised by the Christian Theology as the “Good Shepherd”. The miracles he performed were so many, and he was so beloved by the people, that he very soon rose on the higher religious echelons as Bishop of Tremithus, Cyprus. His miracles include treatments of blind people, resurrections of dead people, of his daughter Irene and of the son of the grieving widow, etc. The most important and most known miracle of his, which has also affected how he is illustrated in the icons, is the Miracle during the First Ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325 AD, in which he participated defeating Arius and his monophysite opinions [3, 4].

This is the well-known miracle with the clay tile, which he used to prove the consubstantiality and indivisibility of the Holy Trinity, comparing it with the clay tile and its components. Holding the clay tile in his hand, he transformed it in its three components, the fire, the water and the soil, defeating the heretic opinions of Arius, asseverating the ternary nature of God, *“and stunned those who were high-minded in words in the Council of Nicaea with the power of the Holy Spirit”* [5].

The writer of his legendary says the following for the miracle of the Council of Nicaea: *“the saint after taking a clay tile in his left hand, held it tight and miraculously fire sprang from it rising in the air, water flowed pouring to the ground, while the clay remained in his hands and the others, watching this, were stupefied”*; afterwards, Arius apologised from the saint for his heretic opinions; *“the orthodoxes won, while the Arius's supporters were defeated and almost everyone returned to the orthodox faith”* [6].

Another less known miracle performed by the Saint, pertaining to the interest of the History of Medicine, is the miraculous therapy of the successor of Constantine the Great, emperor Constantius, the illness of whom has still not sufficiently been determined. *“And he has relieved king Constantius from the suffering that he experienced”*; this is reported by the writer of the Saint’s legendary, without providing more details regarding the disease from which the King suffered. However, during the study of another manuscript, written in byzantine lower case writing, printed in Venice as well, on the 18th century AD, a reference is made on a leprosy skin disease that the saint treated from a king, who was apparently Constantius: *“you shall be glad since you emitted the king’s lepro-*

sy skin disease” and “you shall be glad for being the saver from the leprotic amaurosis” [7].

We will deal in more detail with the treatment of King Constantius by Saint Spyridon in a future study; King Constantius, in order to thank the Saint for his treatment, has established the “nontaxable” of the church; *“has established the church taxes as unethical”* because he believed that it is absurd the earthly kings to get taxes from *“the servants of the king of the skies”*.

This incidence is mentioned in the first troparion sang in the Little Evensong and more precisely: *“you relieved Constantius, the King who was possessed by the disease and death and persuaded him with advice to offer well, always observing, to all the Priests in order to always worship God”* [8].

4. The Saint’s Relation with Corfu and The Story of the Transfer of His Relic in The Island

The saint’s holy relic has ended in Corfu in 1456 AD, three years after the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, where it was first kept. According to the dominant version, in 1453 AD, when the Fall of Constantinople took place, among the Greeks that escaped Constantinople was also Georgios Kaloheretis, who owned the Holy Relic of Saint Theodora, Empress and spouse of Theophilus the Iconoclast, as well as the Relic of Saint Spyridon [9].

And in order to save them, he had put them into sacks full with hay, explaining to everyone who asked about their content, that they carried food for the animals. He firstly settled in Paramythia opposite Corfu and later on the island, which was under Venetian and not Ottoman control. He married there and had three sons, as the historian of Corfu Andreas Marmoras says, Markos, Loukas and Filippos, who inherited, after his decease, the holy relics. The firstborn son inherited the relic of Saint Theodora the Queen and the two others the relic of Saint Spyridon. In a trial that took place when the two brothers tried to get the Saint’s relic outside Corfu, the judgement was that they have the absolute right of possession over the holy relic. However, a few year later, the Saint’s relic was taken into the ownership of the Corfiot Stamatellos Voulgaris, who was married to the daughter of Filippos Kaloheretis. Moreover, Voulgaris built the first church devoted to Saint Spyridon, where he placed the holy relic for pilgrimage. But after this church was destroyed of natural causes, a big church was built in the city devoted to the Saint; this church exists till nowadays [10,11].

However, according to another version, the dean Grigorios Poly-euk(t)os, was the one to save the holy relics of Saint Spyridon and Queen Theodora from the rage of the Turkish conquerors in 1453 AD, settled firstly in Paramythia in Epirus and then transferred them in Corfu in 1456 AD, when he placed them in the church of Saint Athanasios. Towards the end of his life, not having other trustworthy friend to pass them to, he bestowed them to Georgios Kaloheretis from Constantinople, who then passed them to his heirs, as mentioned above in the other version [12].

5. The Two Cases of Miraculous Salvation of Corfu from Plague, by Saint Spyridon

The holy relic of Saint Spyridon is firmly connected not only with the ecclesiastic history but also with the life and history of Corfu in general, focusing on his beautiful church, which is the mark and the centre of worship of the Saint in the old city of Corfu. In many cases, the living Saint of orthodoxy, as called by the writers of his legendary, has listened to the prayers and pleadings of the Corfiot people, saving them from any type of threats, either from hostile raids or from epidemics, as the two cases which we will study [13].

This is captured in the way the saint's relic is many times illustrated, in churches or portable icons kept in museums; in the sides of the icons, scenes from the miracles the Saint performed in Corfu can be found [14].

In memory of those beneficences of the Saint to the faithful Corfiot people, a litany takes place four times a year in the city of Corfu; two of those litanies, i.e. the one taking place the first Sunday of November and the one taking place on Palm Sunday, are due to the salvation of the island by the saint from an epidemic of plague [15]

As reported by the Corfiot historian Andreas Marmoras, the testimony of whom is very important as he is contemporaneous to the era we describe, the night of Christmas of 1629 AD, four instances of plague took place in the city of Corfu. Right away, the health authorities of the island started investigations to discover the source of the illness; the fear of the disease was so big, that it was described as "thanatiko" (something that causes death). Marmoras calls it "deadly plague and taint" saying that the disaster caused to the island was so big; he markedly said "it caused irreversible desolation and disaster". The investigations showed that the source of the illness was the following: one of the servants of a Corfiot peer, notable resident and prominent lawyer of the island, Odigitrianos Sarantaris, who was also one of the health providers of the island, bought from a Turkish ship anchored in the port of the city two ornate Turkish wool handkerchiefs; "the said handkerchiefs were artfully embroidered", which he gifted to his mistress. Sarantaris' spouse then gave them to her daughter to keep them in a chest, when she suddenly felt malaise and immediately died. The relatives and friends of the noble Sarantaris, especially the women, who visited his home in order to stand by him in his grief, became the first carriers of the disease, that they quickly transmitted to the whole island. The people then, with prayers and pleading in the Saint's church, asked for his help in order to survive the lethal disease, the victims of which were already sixty. The miraculous Saint Spyridon listened to the residents' prayers, the incidences started to retrogress and they totally disappeared on Palm Sunday of 1630 AD. According to many testimonies, during the whole period when the saint tried to defeat the plague spread in the city of Corfu, the people saw a light of unidentified origin, that was on all night long in the bell tower of the church and it was visible by the

guards of the castle; "in his church, a vigil light in the form of a lamp was continuously shining; a light which was observed during all the night by the guards of the forts". Thus, it was decided via a decree of the local authority of June 21, 1630 AD, i.e. a decree by the Assignees, to realise, every year on the Palm Sunday, a litany of the Saint's relic, the so called Palm-bearing Litany, while a fundraising collected a hundred and five thousand ducats for the beautification of the Saint's church [16-18].

The second case the Saint saved Corfu from an epidemic of plague was in 1673 AD; this is the reason of the litany of the Saint's relic on the first Sunday of November, which is the fourth and last litany of the saint, known as litany of "Protokyriako". This litany was established, like the aforementioned, by decision of the Venetian Command on October 29, 1673 AD. As mentioned in the legends of the Saint, in 1673 AD, Corfu suffered again from severe plague, "the infectious disease has again raid over fields, city and towns, thus.... death threatened to vanish the whole island" and there was serious danger that all the population of the island died. But once more, Saint Spyridon saved his island; the testimonies of that era mention that "the miraculous Spyridon treated the disease and made at once all the people suffering from it recover and heal", with the disease suddenly vanishing in the end of October, thanks to the Saint's intervention [19, 20].

The popular imagination, fed by a zealous faith, reports that the residents of Corfu watched the Saint holding the Cross and repelling the plague away from his city [21] (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Icon from the "Ourania" of Saint Spyridon, by Panagiotis Doxaras: the saint hunts with the Cross the plague, illustrated as a demon flying above the city of Corfu, spreading death to the entire city.

This scene is illustrated in one of the seventeen parts of the well known "ourania", illustrated by Panagiotis Doxaras, as people call the dome of the church of Saint Spyridon in the city of Corfu. Panagiotis Doxaras was one of the most important representatives of the Eptanesian architecture, was born in Koutifari in Mani in 1662

AD., illustrated the “ourania” (the ceiling is called thus) of Saint Spyridon in Corfu in 1727 AD. This includes seventeen parts, with thirteen scenes from the Saint’s life and miracles, and in its four angles the Evangelists are depicted [22,23].

While studying the Life and Miracles of Saint Spyridon, one can find out the timeless offer and intervention of the saint to the residents of the island, a fact that explains the timeless relation of worship and faith of the residents to their patron saint. This special relation is ascertained while studying the texts and testimonies of the historians of Corfu, and is mainly ascertained even nowadays, with one visit to the island, where one can be witness of the manifestation of love and worship to the Saint’s relic, which is kept in the church carrying his name in the centre of the old city.

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