

## Discovering St. Blaise of Sebastia & Patron Saint of Dubrovnik!

By Ruth Bedevian

Like Armenia, Croatia declared its independence from communism (Yugoslavia) in 1991. My husband and I were curious to visit this historic land which, unlike Armenia, shares an extensive and beautiful coastline with the Adriatic Sea. So we embarked upon a Smithsonian cruise of the Dalmatian coast recently and as chance would have it, we discovered Armenian roots. It has been stated that the first history of Armenians in the West was written by a Croatian. It also has been reported that Marco Polo cited that St. Blaise (pronounced like the word “blaze”) was martyred in Sebastia.

Thus, the question arose. How did an Armenian bishop become the patron saint of Dubrovnik when he never set foot upon Croatian soil? The answer is found in various Croatian lore and ancient documents



Exterior View from the Main Street

which are considered by scholars to be most equivocal. What do we know about Blaise? His name derives from Greek – Blasios. Armenians, following the Byzantine Greeks, pronounce it as Vlas. In Croatian, he is Vlaho. His profile comes to us from legendary biographical data and is open to more than one interpretation and is ambiguous at best. Early accounts can neither be rejected nor accepted, but the legend is compelling that Blaise was Armenian from Sebastia, an area that was rich in Armenian Christian population due to the evangelical movement that took root when the Apostles Thaddeus and

Bartholomew brought the Good News to northern lands following Christ’s resurrection.

We set port in Dubrovnik, the capitol, an ancient city rich in architectural history. Strolling the main thoroughfare we came upon the Collegiate Church of St. Blaise. Overflowing with locals and tourists, the church steps were being utilized by the traditional Clappa singers –a remarkable harmony of human voices. The present church was built in the Baroque style (1707 – 1715) on the foundation of the original 14th century Romanesque church.[1] It survived the Great Earthquake of 1667, but was destroyed by fire in 1706. The only object to survive the fire was a statue of St. Blaise holding a model of medieval Dubrovnik in his hand. It occupies the main altar of the church. We were told that the rich Baroque interior décor lends itself to a royal wedding and that it is one of the favorite churches for young couples to pledge their vows. All over the city of Dubrovnik, one can see hundreds of statues and sculptures of St. Blaise and also throughout the world as his followers have multiplied. An inspiration to sculptors and painters, St. Blaise can be singled out as the most popular artistic motif in Dubrovnik.

We first heard of St. Blaise two days earlier on the island of Korcula and his story was retold again in Dubrovnik. The traditional belief is that St. Blaise appeared in a vision. According to our guide, the story



Main Altar - Note statute of St. Blaise in top center is the only remains from the 1706 fire.

Photo Credit: Robert Clopp

begins in the year 971, on the night of February 2. Venetian ships were anchored near Dubrovnik under pretense of resupplying provisions before proceeding further. A cleric named Stojko discovered that the doors to St. Steven Church were left wide open. Entering, he stumbled upon a bearded man wearing a bishop's mitre and bearing a staff. He was surrounded by angels. The man told Stojko to warn the City council that the Venetians planned to conquer the city. When Stojko asked him who he was, he replied that he was Blaise. Stojko quickly alarmed the authorities; the doors to the city were shut and the walls manned. The Venetians fearing serious resistance picked up their anchors and abandoned their plans to raid the city. Since that day Blaise became the patron saint of Dubrovnik.

Ever since 972 St. Blaise is commemorated. The tradition continues – so much so, that on February 3, 2009, Bishop Nareg Alemezian, Ecumenical Officer of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, was invited to participate in the celebration of the 1038th Day of St. Blaise when UNESCO declared the Saint's Day on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.[2] Thousands of visitors to Dubrovnik paid homage to the patron saint whose relics are stored nearby in the Franciscan Monastery and are carried by the clergy during the procession.

Although not absolutely substantiated, the oral tradition is most compelling that Blaise was born in Sebastia. Today Sebastia is known as Sivas which is located in the Anatolian Highlands of present-day Central Turkey with a population topping 400,000. It is believed, that Blaise came from an educated family around 280 A.D during King Trdat's reign in Armenia (287-337 A.D.). Trdat ruled Greater Armenia which was an ally of Rome and did not include Sebastia. With the conversion of Trdat in 301 A.D, Greater Armenia adopted Christianity as its state religion. Ancient historians knew the area of Sebastia with neighboring Cappadocia, as Armenia Minor, a distinct country ruled by a local royal dynasty, but by the first century A.D., Rome had already put an end to the ruling dynasty and turned it into a Roman province. Armenians since very ancient times lived in the region of Sebastia and the political changes did not affect their ethnicity.

The legendary biographical data tells us that Blaise was blessed with a tender heart and studied medicine. In his time he was considered a physician, yet he went on in life to become a physician of souls. He was divinely inspired and retreated to a cave where he remained in prayer. Several accounts tell of his being found in the wilderness praying while wild animals surrounded him peacefully. Thus he gained a reputation as a compassionate healer of human beings as well as animals. Several miracles were associated with the healing that Blaise carried out among the people and his reputation became widespread. Agricola, the local Roman governor, imprisoned him and the story was told several times to us that on his way to prison Blaise

saw a mother with her son. The boy was choking on a fish bone. In response to the mother's pleas, he laid hands upon the boy's throat and prayed to God. He removed the bone from the boy's throat as he coughed it up. As a result, St. Blaise is also known to be the protector of throats. In the neighboring island of Korcula, a tradition has emerged whereby every year on St. Blaise's feast day the clergy prepare a wafer from bread and water. It is distributed to the faithful who believe eating it will ward off afflictions and diseases of the throat.

Agricola imprisoned Blaise, demanding that he renounce his faith. Blaise remained steadfast in his faith in Jesus Christ and Agricola, ignoring the Edict of Milan,[3] ordered his soldiers to scourge Blaise by scraping his flesh from his body with iron carding combs (tools used to prepare wool -thus carding combs are found in icons and sculpture of St. Blaise, also.) Finally, Agricola beheaded him in 316 A.D. Until 1915, the Christians of Sebastia (Sivas) venerated a site believed to be the grave of St. Blaise.[4] Over time, researchers have sought unsuccessfully to verify the identity of the sarcophagus which as late as 2003 was believed to be in the garden of Buruciye Madrasa.[5] It is not only the people of Dubrovnik that venerate St. Blaise— but large communities of faithful throughout Christendom. St. Blaise appears everywhere and is venerated in the far parts of the world, primarily in the Roman Catholic Church, yet he is sainted in the Armenian Apostolic Church, as well as the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches.

In the Armenian Church St. Vlas (Blaise) is both commemorated and remembered – that is, he is celebrated on his feast day during the liturgical year, the date changing in relation to the Easter cycle. By commemorating his name he is mentioned in the litanies; appropriate hymns are sung and he is asked prayerfully for intercession. In the Armenian Church saints are also commemorated with Liturgy celebrated at their grave, if there is one in existence. The Armenian Church remembers St. Blaise each year (on February 10 or 11 depending on two different editions of lives of saints collections) by reading his biography, a tradition that is now observed only in the cathedral of St. James in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem.

Hence – we return to the question– How did an Armenian bishop become the patron saint of Dubrovnik when he never set foot upon Croatian soil? The global adoration of St. Blaise is extraordinary. Of greater value, however, is the sweeping purity of the early Christians and their openness to the Good News of Jesus Christ that the Apostles revealed to them. The seeds of faith blossomed in pristine, fertile souls so that a believer such as Blaise was imbued with the mighty power of God to enrapture the trusting cleric, Stojko, in Dubrovnik centuries ago. From his homeland in Sebastia St. Blaise continues to stir believers in faraway lands for the greater glory of God.

So next time you are touring in Europe, the North, South and Central Americas, Africa, or Asia, or merely resting in the serenity of your home, look for St. Blaise in unexpected places.

End Notes:

[1] Remnants of an even older structure, the first church, survive beneath the west entrance to the city at the present location of the city walls. SAINT BLAISE: VENERATION WITHOUT BOUNDARIES page 102

[2] UNESCO established this list since 2008. Its precursor was the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity begun in 2001. UNESCO aims to safeguard and create awareness of intangible heritage, to preserve and promote global cultural diversity and creative expression. The Duduk

and its Music, Symbolism and Craftsmanship of Khachkars (Armenian cross stone art) and the performance of the epic “David of Sassoun” have been listed since 2008.

[3] In 313 A.D. Roman rulers, Constantine I and Licinius, announced toleration of Christianity in the Edict of Milan which officially ended the persecution of Christians. (Emperor Diocletian unleashed the last wholesale slaughter of Christians before he stepped down from the throne. He retired and lived for another decade in his palace on the island of Split, Croatia.)

[4] SAINT BLAISE: VENERATION WITHOUT BOUNDARIES page 28

[5] Built under the rule of the last of the Seljuk sultans, Kaykhusraw III, in 1271, Buruciye Madrasa is a theological school which was built by Hibetullah Burucerdioğlu Muzaffer. In 2005 the Turkish government turned it into a crafts center and workshop. It has a library and a tea garden in the open stone courtyard.

### **Acknowledgement:**

**Appreciation to Reverend Father Krikor Maksoudian of the Armenian Apostolic Church for his counsel and review.**

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