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Myra in Lycia:

In honour of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker

In the Life and Miracles of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker we read that

“The precious body of the saint was laid with honour in the cathedral church of the diocese of Myra on the sixth day of the month of December.”¹

Every year on both 6th December and on 9th May the Church commemorates the life of our Father among the Saints, Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia. Today the precious relics of Saint Nicholas are interred in Bari, a city in the south of Italy where, even now, the relics exude fragrant and healing oil (“manna of Saint Nicholas”) with which the sick are anointed and receive healing. Every year many thousands of pilgrims visit Bari to pray at the tomb of Saint Nicholas and to receive anointing with the precious, sweet-smelling oil.

The Orthodox pilgrim may also choose to venerate Saint Nicholas in the very place where the Saint was Archbishop and lived for most of his wonderworking life, Myra in Lycia on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey. Indeed, increasing numbers of Russian tourists take time from their seaside holidays in the tourist resorts of Anatolia to visit the Basilica of Saint Nicholas, to be found in the modern-day town of Demre. Now a quiet, dusty provincial town with 15,000

¹ *Service, Akathist, Life and Miracles of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker*, p.83: the year of his repose is not known for certain; it may have occurred as early as AD 341 or as late as AD 352.

inhabitants, Demre is some 90 kilometres from the modern city of Antalya, the regional capital city with more than 1 million people. The road from Antalya to Demre runs along a spectacular coastline. To the south is the sparkling blue Mediterranean, with precipitous cliffs and breathtaking hairpin bends which connect remote fishing villages and sandy coves. To the north, beyond the pine forests, in the distance can be glimpsed the peaks of the magnificent mountains of the Toros Range. The public bus, departing from Antalya city every hour, takes some three and half hours to reach Demre (Myra). However, most Russian tourists visit Demre as but one stop during a day of sightseeing which includes swimming and picnic stops.

Myra, an important city dating back to the 5th century BC, derives its name from the myrrh tree (*commiphora myrrha*) which exudes a reddish-brown resin that becomes precious myrrh which in ancient times was a valuable trading commodity. Many of the hymns for Saint Nicholas highlight the fact that Saint Nicholas was Archbishop in a place named after myrrh and that his relics exude oil which smells of myrrh.

“...dwelling in Myra thou hast diffused the fragrance of myrrh, and thou pourest out the ever-flowing myrrh of the grace of God.....”²

Demre has a number of ancient sites of interest. About 1.5 kilometres from Demre are the ruins of the ancient city of Myra, including the sea necropolis, as well as a Roman amphitheatre. The sea necropolis contains a remarkable collection of rock tombs with richly decorated facades, carved into the cliff face.

² Prayer to Saint Nicholas, *ibid.* p.62

The tombs were built as copies of dwellings of the earliest inhabitants of Myra. The amphitheatre, Lycia's largest and best preserved theatre, is in brilliant condition. Its 35 rows of open-air seating could hold ten thousand people! However, for the Orthodox pilgrim the highlight of Demre is the cathedral of Saint Nicholas, some 150 metres from the main square.

Dating from the late fourth century, the church was enlarged by the Emperor, Saint Justinian the Great [483–565]. "The church seen today was built in the eighth century using materials of earlier date."³ Demre is now inland but in the first millennium it was on the coast and so easily subject to attack from Muslim Saracens. In 808 the Saracens attacked what they thought was the tomb of Saint Nicholas but in fact destroyed another tomb. Then Saracen raiders almost completely destroyed the church in 1034, but it was subsequently restored and enlarged in 1043 by Emperor Constantine IX [c.1000 – 1055] and the Empress Zoe the Macedonian [978 – 1050]. However, Myra passed into the hands of the Saracens soon afterwards. In 1087, following a miraculous dream in which Saint Nicholas revealed to a "Christ-loving and righteous priest"⁴ in Bari, Italy, that the Saint desired to have his relics removed, Italian merchants took the "myrrh-gushing" relics of Saint Nicholas ("which worked wondrous and most glorious miracles"⁵) by ship from Lycia to Bari in the south of Italy⁶, where the precious relics remain to this day. In 1097 Lycia was recaptured by the Byzantines and

³ Dörtlük, p.55

⁴ *Translation of the Precious Relics*, p.6

⁵ *ibid.* p.5

⁶ In those days south east Italy had large Greek colonies

the Orthodox population returned to Myra. Sadly, from the 13th century onwards the Christian buildings of Myra were allowed to decay and in due course were covered up by the shifting sands of the river Myros. Eventually a small chapel was erected over the ruins of Constantine's church. Following some restoration in the 19th century, it was only during the 1920s that the church was finally abandoned by the Orthodox.

Russia's interest in the church at Myra appears to have arisen during the Crimean War [1853]. The church and its environs were bought by the Russian government on behalf of the Countess Anna Galicia. However, some years later the Ottoman rulers declared the sale to be null and void, interpreting the acquisition as a means of furthering the political aims of Russia. In the 1860s there was a large pilgrimage hostelry close to the church "in which a lot of Russian families were sheltering"⁷ and a priest who lived at the church, but he had to migrate to a high plateau in the middle of May because of the extreme heat and flies.⁸

The 19th century restoration of the church of Saint Nicholas in Myra, financed and directed by Russians in the 1850s and 1860s, was implemented primarily by Auguste Salzmann [1824 -1872]. Modern writers generally agree that the "original form of the church was spoiled gradually during the restoration in

⁷ Özgür, p.20

⁸ *ibid.* p.20

1862.”⁹ Salzman added a bell tower and replaced the original dome with “a cross-vault totally unsuited to the architectural character of the edifice.”¹⁰

There is some evidence that as late as 1906 a small Greek community was living in Demre. The monastery buildings surrounding the church were still remaining and “a priest sheltering in a ruined cottage was the only ruler of the church.”¹¹ A German traveller (H. Rott) tried to measure the site but the water was coming up to his knees and, in some places, even up to his chest, and this prevented him from doing so. The church on the north side of the monastery was buried beneath a great mound of river mud. At that time the church was entered through a window of the gallery of the upper floor! Then in 1962 the Turkish authorities had the thick alluvial mud removed from the whole site and the Basilica of Saint Nicholas emerged from its shroud. Since 1989 there have been ongoing excavations and restorations. That is why today the entire church is under a cover supported by scaffolding.

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe in detail the architecture of the church of Saint Nicholas at Myra. The diligent reader will find that the church has a place in many books about Byzantine art history, since it is an important example of middle Byzantine church architecture and art. In summary, today the complex comprises: the dome church with an apse, a bema, the ‘dome –room,’ two aisles, one corner room in the northeast, and the other one in the south west

⁹ *ibid.* p.21

¹⁰ Dörtlük, p.57

¹¹ Özgür, p.22

and an exonarthex (the latter described in one book as ‘the room for the infidel.’¹²). For the Orthodox pilgrim, of chief interest will be the sarcophagus lid which at one time covered the “myrrh-gushing” bones of the Saint. We know that this sarcophagus lid once covered the relics of the Saint because, on the upper side of the lid, absorption (from oil) can be recognised. On the opposite side of the absorption the sarcophagus floor shows a hole which enabled pilgrims to collect the “myrrh” of Saint Nicholas. “One can conclude that the fragments of the lid belong to the original sarcophagus of Saint Nicholas.”¹³

Today, Orthodox pilgrims, mostly Russian, queue quietly to take their turn in reverencing the original resting place of the bones of Saint Nicholas, to light a candle (actually forbidden by the Turks) and to touch the holy stones which are mostly behind a glass panel.

Scattered around the walls of the Basilica are remarkable fragments of frescoes. Subjects of these paintings include the Saviour, the Mystical Supper, the Most Holy Mother of God, archangels, warrior saints, a stylite, and various other saints including Saint Paul the Apostle, Saint Dioskourides and the Prophet Habakkuk. Additionally, there are a number of other frescoes which depict bishops meeting with the Emperor in Holy Synod, perhaps the First Holy and Œcumenical Synod of Nicaea [AD 325] which was attended by Saint Nicholas.

¹²*ibid.* p.24

¹³*ibid.* p.39

Inside the apse of the southern chapel there is a sarcophagus lid which holds a Russian inscription, donated by Tsar Nicholas I of Russia [1796-1855] who financed the first Russian restorations. The Turkish stone carver evidently was unfamiliar with Cyrillic and the inscription is full of spelling mistakes and mis-formed letters. The inscription in fact is the Troparion (fourth tone) to Saint Nicholas:

The truth of things revealed thee to thy flock as a rule of faith, an icon of meekness and a teacher of temperance; therefore, thou hast achieved the heights by humility, riches by poverty. O Father and Hierarch Nicholas, intercede with Christ God that our souls be saved.¹⁴

On the left of the entrance to the church of Saint Nicholas is a small garden containing a revolving bronze statue of Santa Claus carrying a sack of presents and surrounded by children. It is reported that the statue was donated in 2002 by the Russian Orthodox Church¹⁵.

Sadly the church has long been treated principally as an historical site rather than as a place of worship. From 1982 until about the year 2000 an annual festival and symposium dedicated to the Saint was held in December at Demre; in recent years the Turkish authorities have refused permission to hold these events. According to one website

“The Church of St. Nicholas is only used for religious services one day each year: the Feast of St. Nicholas on December 6¹⁶. The... celebrations begin with a Greek Orthodox Divine Liturgy celebrated by the Metropolitan of Myra¹⁷, who lives in Istanbul.”¹⁸

¹⁴ *Service, Akathist, Life and Miracles of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker*, p.6

¹⁵ *Shales*, p.87

¹⁶ Presumably according to the civil calendar

¹⁷ Currently, Archbishop Chrysostom of Myra

The streets surrounding the Basilica are full of shops devoted to selling icons and other holy artefacts. All the shop signs are in Russian and the local Turkish traders speak Russian!

Finally, it should be noted that the spacious, purpose-built and award-winning Antalya Museum, one of Turkey's leading museums, located in the city of Antalya, holds some interest for the Orthodox pilgrim. The main focus of the museum is its world-class collection of classical sculpture and artefacts. However, in its newly refurbished galleries there is a small collection of sympathetically displayed icons, including some magnificent icons of Saint Nicholas and of Saint Paul. Myra, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, is one of many ancient coastal cities that Saint Paul visited, along with Saint Luke and Saint Aristarcos (Acts 27:5-6). In Myra the Saints swapped boats on their way to Rome, helped by Roman centurion Julius, who found them a ship from Alexandria heading to Rome by the way of Cnidos. Of greatest interest is a Greek Orthodox reliquary containing a few precious relics of the Saint. These fragments were collected initially by Venetian merchants who, in 1099, attempted to discover if anything had been left behind by the merchants from Bari. Today those relics can be seen (but not touched) in the Antalya Museum.

“O Father Nicholas, though the land of Myra be silent, yet the whole world which is enlightened by thee through the fragrance of myrrh and a multitude of wonders, shouteth hymns of praise; and with the condemned ones saved through thee, with those in Myra we also, chanting, crying aloud: pray that our souls be saved!” (*Litua: Great Vespers [tone 2]*)¹⁹

¹⁸ <http://www.stnicholas.ru>

¹⁹ 6th December and 9th May

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