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Saints as providers of a peaceful death in Istria – a reflection of the medieval understanding of dignified dying

Sveci – zaštitnici spokojne smrti u Istri – odraz srednjovjekovnoga poimanja dostojanstvenoga umiranja

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Summary

After recalling the role of patron saints in the Christian tradition, seven saints – Acacius, Andrea Avellino, Cyriacus, Gertrude, Julian the Hospitaller, Rita, and Stephen the Martyr – traditionally venerated as protectors and providers of a peaceful death, have been selected. The following topics were researched: the presence and roots of these patron saints, and the ethnomedicinal reflections of their cult in the example of the Istrian peninsula in western Croatia. Particular attention has been given to the most represented among them – St. Stephen the Protomartyr. A hagiographic and topographic analysis of the distribution of the places or religious buildings bearing his name leads to two different conclusions. On the one hand, since kidney and gallstone problems occur relatively frequently in the agricultural part of Istria, St. Stephen is primarily venerated there as a protector against lithiasis, and only indirectly as a provider of a peaceful death. On the other hand, it is also possible that a peaceful death was an ideal precisely in the agricultural parts of the region, which were less aggressive than the centres of cattle breeding and trade, or urban areas. Since the poorer rural areas and villages, which are typical of the central part of Istria, did not have a developed institution of hospice care, and to conclude the tradition of worshipping St. Stephen and the other saints mentioned, providers of a peaceful death, is now explained as a specific reflection of the popular medieval understanding of dignified dying.

Key words: history of medicine, religion in medicine, Middle Ages, patron saints, Istria, Croatia

Sažetak

Nakon podsjećanja na ulogu svetaca zaštitnika u kršćanskoj tradiciji izdvojeno je sedam svetaca (Akacije, Andrea Avelino, Cirijak, Gertruda, Julijan Bolničar, Rita i Stjepan Prvomučeničnik) koji se tradicionalno štiju kao zaštitnici i priskrbitelji spokojne smrti. Istraženo je njihovo prisustvo, korijeni i etnomedicinske refleksije njihovog kulta na primjeru Istre. Posebna pozornost posvećena je najzastupljenijem među njima – Stjepanu Prvomučeničniku. Hagiotopografskom analizom rasprostranjenosti njegovih titulara dolazi se do dvojakoga zaključka. Budući da je u agrarnom dijelu Istre pojava bubrežnih i žučnih kamenaca razmjerno česta, sv. Stjepan je primarno štovan kao zaštitnik od litijaze, a tek posredno i kao priskrbitelj spokojne smrti. S druge strane, isto tako je moguće da je spokojna smrt bila idealom baš u poljoprivrednim krajevima, manje agresivnim od stočarskih, urbanih i trgovačkih sredina. Budući da u siromašnim, ruralnim sredinama i malim gradovima karakterističnima za središnju Istru nije bila razvijena institucionalizirana hospicijska skrb, u zaključku se tradicija štovanja sv. Stjepana i spomenutih svetaca zaštitnika spokojne smrti objašnjava kao osebujan refleks srednjovjekovnoga pučkog shvaćanja dostojanstvenoga umiranja.

Ključne riječi: povijest medicine, religija i medicina, srednji vijek, sveci-zaštitnici, Istra, Hrvatska

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Introduction

Patron saints in the Christian tradition

There are surprisingly many patron saints believed to protect against predicaments and diseases – saints who have traditionally been venerated by Christians throughout the centuries. Their significance has not diminished at all in spite of the development of medical science. Most of these patron saints have their own profile of adherents, depending on location, church, profession, age or other shared attributes. Approximately 150 of them have additionally been "specialised" around ca. eighty popularly known diseases and symptoms, including 15 organs and related diseases. In addition to that, Christian tradition also venerates the patron saints of some particular groups of people according to their nationality, profession, or age, as well as people involved in various situations – from birth to death.^{1,2}

For this occasion, we have chosen the six saints that Christians traditionally venerate the most, either as patron saints or as providers of a peaceful death. These are: Acacius, Andrea Avellino, Cyriacus, Gertrude, Julian the Hospitaller, Rita and Stephen the Martyr.

Aim and methods of the research

The aim of this work is to research the presence, the roots and the ethnomedicinal reflections of the cult of the mentioned saints on the Istrian peninsula in western Croatia, with particular attention given to St. Stephen the Protomartyr as provider of a peaceful death.

The research methods used for this review have already been used in earlier papers covering similar topics³⁻⁵ and include hagiographic data collected from general (encyclopaedic) sources⁶ and from specialised bibliographies of patron saints.⁷ Besides these, works covering various local topics were also used, which provide some data relating to this subject.^{8,9}

Other data had been collected over several years within a research project on national religious and medical traditions, which included visits to churches, monasteries, and museums all over Istria, as well as interviews with a number of people and photographs of interesting buildings and artefacts, some of which have been included in this review.

Results

The data, which were collected either by processing literary sources, or by means of fieldwork,

will be systematised in two parts for practical reasons. Since this research mostly refers to St. Stephen the Protomartyr, in the second part of the results we shall describe his occurrence in Istria in terms of space and time.

A brief hagiographic survey of patron saints – providers of a peaceful death

After examining reliable hagiographic sources^{6,7,10} for the chosen saints, we selected some basic biographical data and explanations about the origins of the belief in their specific protective powers in terms of providing either help in the most difficult moments in life, or peaceful death. Here is a summary of these data.

Acacius, military officer at the time of the Emperor Hadrian (76-138 AD). After refusing to renounce Christianity, which he accepted with numerous of his co-fighters, he was brutally murdered. By courageously enduring the torture, he showed other martyrs how a Christian should behave in the most difficult moments. For this reason, he was later included in the group of the Fourteen Holy Helpers and is invoked in moments of anxiety or serious illness, especially in the case of mortal fear or existential doubts.

Andrea Avellino (1520-1606), monk in the San Paolo Maggiore monastery in Naples. He became a patron saint associated with peaceful death because of the way he died: at the age of 86, he got a sudden stroke at the end of a mass, after which he died quietly, without suffering.

Cyriacus, Deacon of Pope Marcellus at the time of the Emperor Diocletian. He was tortured and killed in 309 for helping Christians. As one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, in the ethnomedical tradition he is invoked at the moment of dying.

Gertrude (626-659), abbess of the monastery at Nivelles, became famous during her lifetime for her unusually calm reactions in every situation, including even the most trying. After her death, she became patron saint of the many faithful who invoke her name pleading for such a peaceful death.

Julian the Hospitaller was, according to legend, a 10th-century nobleman who killed his parents by accident, after which he and his wife made a pilgrimage as an act of penance. When they had reached a deep river, Julian built a hut on its bank where he could take care of sick pilgrims, before ferrying them to the other side. His name passed into legend as he became the patron saint of poor and dying patients, and, later, of hospices.

Rita (1381-1447), Italian nun. After several personal tragedies, she was pricked by a thorn and developed an unusual, aching and long-lasting wound on her forehead, from which she eventually died. Since she never lost her faith, but endured her troubles bravely, she later became the patron saint of difficult, painful and seemingly hopeless situations.

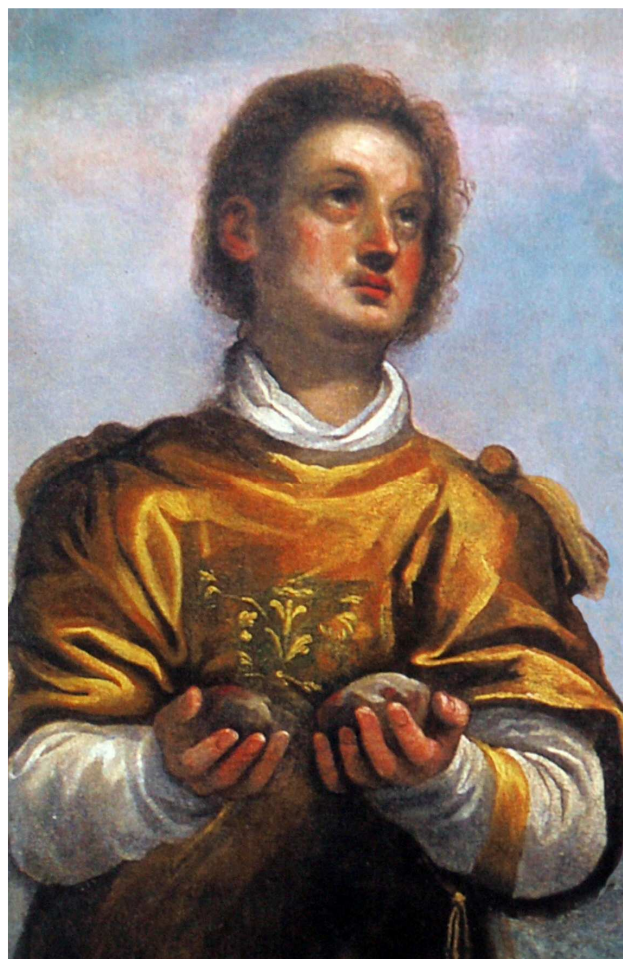
Stephen the Martyr, the first Christian deacon and protomartyr from Jerusalem, lived at the beginning of the 1st century AD. As a giver of charity and a beloved Christian preacher, he was accused of blasphemy by the Roman authorities, and then stoned to death. He was so consistent in his faith that he not only bravely endured torture, but also forgave his killers. Because of the way he was killed, he became associated with stones, and the way he died gave him the attribute of provider of a peaceful death.

Hagio-topography and hagio-chronology of the occurrences of the name of Stephen the Protomartyr in Istria.



Picture 1. Vincent of Kastav, around 1474.
St. Stephen the Martyr. Beram,
The Church of St. Mary-on- the-Stone-Slabs.

*Slika 1. Vincent iz Kastva, oko 1474.
Sv. Stjepan Prvomučenik. Beram.
Crkva sv. Marije na Škrilinah*



Picture 2. Alessandro Maganza (1548 - 1632).
St. Stephen the Martyr, one of the saints on oil on
canvas "Madonna del Rosario". The Church
Madonna dei Servi in Motovun.

*Slika 2. Alessandro Maganza (1548. – 1632.).
Sv. Stjepan Prvomučenik, jedan od svetaca na ulju
na platnu "BDM od sv krunice".
Motovun, Crkva BDM dei Servi.*

After researching the organisation and the distribution of churches and other sacred buildings in Istria,¹¹ and after completing field research in 2007 and 2008 on the Istrian peninsula (2,800 km²), we have determined 15 locations associated with the name of Saint Stephen, which are, in alphabetical order: Beram, Dolenja vas, Gračišće, Hrastovlje, Kloštar, Kostanjica, Krasica, Motovun, Petrovijan, Račice, Sovinjsko polje, Svetvinčenat, Žminj and Zrenj.

Statistically, there are three parishes and eleven churches dedicated to Saint Stephen, which contain seven paintings and five statues, as well as two individual frescoes and one series of frescoes depicting scenes from his life and the torture he was submitted to.

From the hagio-chronologic point of view, these buildings were raised in continuity between the 9th and 20th centuries, and most occurrences (eight altogether) date from the period between the 15th and 17th centuries. The oldest and probably most valuable example is a series of frescoes by an unknown Benedictine artist from the 9th century, depicting the Martyrdom of Saint Stephen in St. Michael's Church above Lim in Klostar. Also worth mentioning are the frescoes depicting saints in the churches in Beram and Hrastovlje, dating from the end of the 15th century.^{8,9}

Most of these are works by local artists, although some of them were created by artists from neighbouring Italy.

Discussion and conclusion

An analysis of part of the Istrian religious heritage included in this research indicates the presence of only one of the common patron saints and providers of a peaceful death, Saint Stephen the Protomartyr. The spatial distribution of the churches and depictions of this saint shows an interesting coincidence: the traces of the cult of Saint Stephen in Istria are grouped mainly in the areas along the Mirna and Raša rivers. In our opinion, this fact can be explained in two ways. First, Saint Stephen was undoubtedly venerated as a protector against calculi (lithiasis), which could have occurred more frequently in agricultural areas, where farmers would sweat more. But it is also possible that peaceful death was more of an ideal precisely in agricultural areas, which were less aggressive than the centres of cattle breeding or trade. It is also possible that people in the valleys had a higher standard of living, and were also located at a greater distance from the harbours, which were often the gateways to epidemics. This could be the reason why people living along the Mirna and Raša rivers sought a patron saint who could provide a peaceful death, rather than a protector from pestilential diseases. In any case, this modest contribution to the research into the elements of Istrian ethnomedicinal and sacred medicinal heritage once again showed that pathology, everyday life and economy are deeply and mutually interwoven.

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