



St Nicholas News

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February, 15th 2011

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CENTRO STUDI NICOLAIANI

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THEFT AND VIOLENCE IN HISTORY

The expression “to steal” when referred to Saints’ bodies is somewhat unfitting, because the reader unwillingly thinks to an owner who was deprived of some property. This was not the case with the St Nicholas’ “theft”.

The entire **History is a history of thefts and violence**. Just to limit ourselves to **the land of St Nicholas** we find that the Assyrian merchant colonies were defeated by the Hittites (1600 bC), these by the Phrygians (1000 bC) and, while the Lydians started subduing them (690 bC), both were to suffer Cimmerians invasions. Between 547 and 333 the land was under Persian rule, while after Alexander’s conquest all the south (with Lycia and Myra) fell under the Seleucids, who with Antiochus III the Great were defeated by the Romans at Magnesia (190 bC). Under Roman rule **at the time of St Nicholas Lycia was still in a Greek culture milieu**. In the following centuries was under Byzantine rule, but especially Lycia and Myra were open to Persian and Muslim plunders. One of the Muslim commanders (Chumid) failed in a year close to 802 in the attempt to destroy St Nicholas’ tomb. **In the year 1071** the Normans in April conquered Bari expelling the Byzantines, the Turks coming from central Asia (pushed by the Mongols) in August defeated the Byzantines at Manzikert, and a Turkish adventurer conquered Jerusalem expelling

the Arabs. After the battle of Manzikert the Turks stroke terror into the people of Anatolia. Especially overtaken by terror were the coastal cities of Southern Anatolia from the beginning of the year 1085, when the Armenian governor of Antioch let the Turks have that great city. It is enough to read Runciman’s *History of the Crusades* to see what a huge mess of wars were going on in those years.

The **fall of Antioch into Muslim power** was a great loss for western cities. For the Barians was a real tragedy, because Antioch was by far the main commercial partner, and from now on trade relations did not stop, but certainly were destined to become very dangerous.

In this **highly dramatic situation** many people were concerned with the sanctuaries of that deeply Christian land (now plundered by the Turks) and consequently with the relics of the Saints. When the Turks claim that the Barians stole St Nicholas’ body from them, they are not completely liars. In fact the Barians stole from them the body of St Nicholas.

Falsehood lies in the fact that they consider themselves as the true owners. The contrary is true. The Barians stole the relics from them exactly in the time when they were stealing Asia Minor to the Byzantine Empire. In other words, the Barians stole St Nicholas body to the thieves who were stealing that country.

THE SACRED THEFT

It is true. The Barians got possession of something that previously did not belong to them. Even the Barian Chronicler John the Archdeacon wrote (*Translatio*, chap. II) that the sailors were discussing how “to steal” such a precious treasure (“*de tanto rapiendo thesauro*”), and spoke of a “**praiseworthy theft**” **carried out with the help of the Angels** (“*furtum laudabile, non sine Angelico comitatu*”, chap. VIII). Theft, for sure. But who was damaged ? The answer of Nicephorus is clear: “[Damaged were the Turks] who plundered that region and slaughtered the population” (*qui illam invaserant regionem crudeliter depulantes*).

What had to do courageous Christians in such a tremendous situation ? Let the Turks get possession of the most beloved sanctuaries with the almost certain destruction of Christian relics and memories ? It was unthinkable. Therefore, cities like **Venice, Genova, Amalfi, Pisa, Bari** and so on, organized **commando raids to save whatever possible**.

A **contemporary Russian writer from Kiev or Černigov around 1093** vividly describes the situation as follows:

In the time of the Russian Princes, the loved by Christ Vsevolod in Kiev and his noble son Vladimir in Černigov, the Ismaelites, having already invaded for divine decree and design of the most High the Greek land on the other side of the sea, starting from Cherson unto Antioch and Jerusalem, killed every man they would find through all those cities and villages; women and children they took into slavery and burned their houses. They put to sack churches and monasteries, taking the cities under their power. Then they wasted Lycia too, where the body of St Nicholas was resting ...

Our Lord Jesus Christ however could not stand that his faithful Servant rest with his mortal remains in a desolate place, where he could not be glorified by anyone... . In those days in the city of Bari, in the Norman territory, lived a devoted priest, loving Christ and righteous. To

him appeared St Nicholas, saying: “Get up and tell these men and all the gathered clergy to go and bring me from the city of Myra and let me rest here.

That we like or not, Nicholas is a universal Saint, the Saint of everybody. And **the Barians have full right to guard his relics** for the simple reason that, without their courageous raid in a country ravaged by the Turks, today wouldn't be even the memory of St Nicholas relics.



Plunders and massacres of Christians in Lycia according to the Kievian *Slovo* on the Translation of St Nicholas' relics to Bari (about 1093). A miniature from the monumental *Life of St Nicholas* (about 1560) (Moscow, National Library, fond 37, collection Bolšakov, n. 15).

♦ Слово о перенесении Св. Мощей Свт. Николая, епископа Мирьска, в Барградъ

Account of the Translation of the Relics
of St Nicholas, bishop of Myra, to the city of Bari.

Greetings from BariFr Gerardo.