



St Nicholas News

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5

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CENTRO STUDI NICOLAIANI

Bari (Italy)

ST NICHOLAS

What we know and what we don't know about him

HIS HOMETLAND. Certainly **LICIA**, a southern province of Asia Minor (today Turkey). He was born probably in Patara (source: Michael the Archimandrite, who writes between VIII and IX century, that is 450 years after St Nicholas). **Year of birth: unknown.**

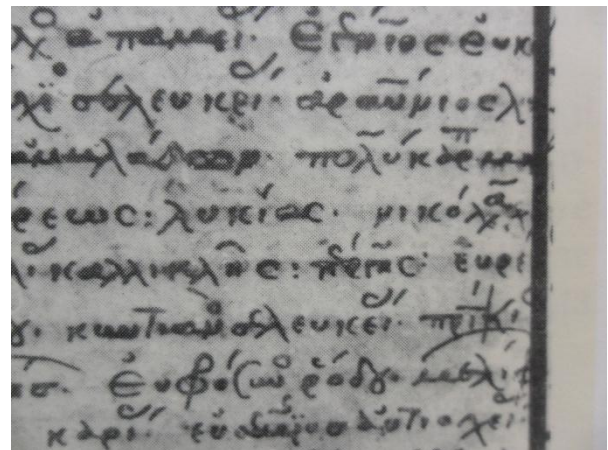
DOWRY TO POOR GIRLS. FIRST EPISODE WITH A POSSIBLE HISTORICAL CORE. The source is again Michael the Archimandrite. The details (his being an orphan or not, the number of girls) differ from a manuscript to the other.

BISHOP OF MYRA. Historically certain. Source: *Praxis de stratelatis* (IV century), Theodor the Lector (515 a.D.), Eustratius of Constantinople (583 a.D.). Very likely he was made bishop while being a layman (silence of Michael Archimandrite and sentence of Gratianus in his *Decretum*).

PERSECUTION IN 312. Historically certain. Source. A stone inscription of that year in Greek and Latin with the Emperor Maximinus who accept the plea of the pagans of Lycia to persecute the Christians.

COUNCIL OF NICAEEA (325). High probability. Source: list of the Fathers given by Theodor the Lector (about 515 a.D.) and recognized authentic (against Anrich and others) by the major scholar on this subject (Eduard Schwartz). Furthermore, Theodor had access to the richest of the

ancient archives (Saint Sophia in Constantinople). It is true that in 10 out of 18 lists of the Fathers the name of St Nicholas does not appear, but these lists contain only 200 names, while the contemporary writers agree on the fact that the participants were more than 300. However, all the episodes concerning St Nicholas at Nicaea are legendary, because they deal with the Trinity, while the problem at stake in Nicaea was the divine nature of Christ.

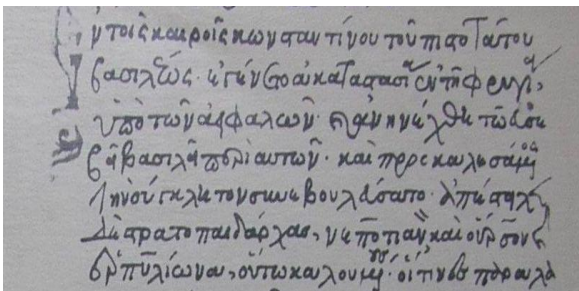


Inset of the page of the *Historia Tripartita* of Theodor the Lector (515 aD) testifying the presence of Nicholas at the Council of Nicaea (see the central line, the fourth: Λυκίας Νικολαος). Even serious writers have repeated the old mistake of considering his name as interpolated drawing it from the first writings speaking of his participation at Nicea. They ignore that there is another Greek list, besides the Theodore's (considered anyway authentic by a major scholar like Edward Schwartz), previous to the year 713, that equally mentions him (therefore 200 years before those first writings).

HE SAVES THREE INNOCENT MEN FROM BEHEADING. Historically certain. Source: *Praxis de stratelatis* (IV century). The *Praxis* contains

details that a writer of two centuries afterwards could in no way had known.

HE SAVES THREE CONSTANTINE'S ARMY COMMANDERS FROM DEATH SENTENCE. Historically certain. Source: *Praxis de stratelatis*. No later writer could have known about an unbelievable detail such as the riot of Goths-Taiphales in Frigia, or about the conspiracy of Nepotianus and so on. Almost all the historians ignored to this day such details, that are however sure and documented by minor historians like Jordanes and Zosimos, and today confirmed by the major scholar on the Goths, Herwig Wolfram.



The *Praxis de stratelatis* is by far the most important among the texts related to St Nicholas. The inner structure shows his being contemporary to the events narrated (contrary to what claims Anrich, followed by the Bollandists). The rebellion of the Goth-Taiphales (a small tribe far away from the country of settlement) in Phrighia could not absolutely be known by an hagiographer of the 6th century.

HIS HELP TO POPULATION IN TIME OF FAMINE. Tradition. Source: Michael the Archimandrite, who lived 450 years later. However, not impossible.

DESTRUCTION OF ARTEMIS' TEMPLE. Tradition, although within the bond of credibility. Source: Michael the Archimandrite, who knew that Artemis' temple was the most magnificent in Myra.

HE SAVES SAILORS WHO GOT CAUGHT IN THE STORM. Tradition. Source: Michael the Archimandrite (who sticks to generalities).

HE DIED A 6th OF DECEMBER. Historically certain. Source: Ancient calendars (*Palestino-Georgian* and *Passionarium Romanum*) agree on this. On the contrary no agreement exists about the year of his death. Generally the proposed dates vary from 312 to 352. According to me the closest to the truth is the 336.

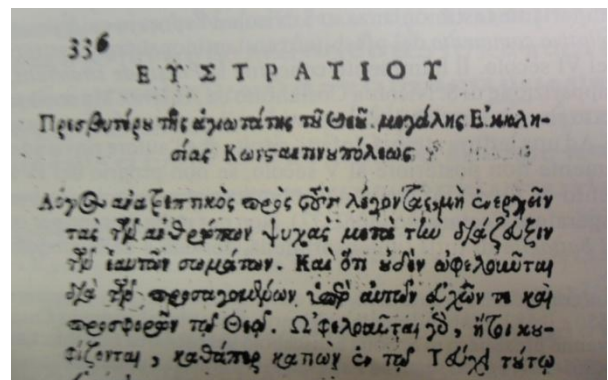
THE PASTORAL IMPACT ON THE POPULATION. Historically certain. Sources: The *Life of Nicholas of Sion* (about 570 a.D.) and the *Encomium* of Andrew of Crete (710 ca a.D.) speak of feasts and provincial councils in his honor.

EVERYTHING ELSE BELONGS TO THE FIELD of apocryphal episodes (from the *Life of Nicholas of Sion*), hagiographical **miracles** (The Icon in Africa, Basil-Adeodatus, Peter the Athonite), literary and iconographical **misunderstandings** (Three children killed by the innkeeper), if are not a figment of pure **phantasy**.

CAUTION. It is important in the historical criticism to avoid trying to defend the traditions linked to the *Life of Nicholas of Sion* or to the writings composed after the 6th century (Methodius, John the Deacon, Simeon Metaphrastes, and so on), as if they were comparable to the **Praxis**. If we want to avoid confusion and to establish a solid ground to the history of St Nicholas we have to take into account only four writings: The *Praxis de stratelatis*; 2) the *Historia Tripartita* by Theodor the Lector, 3) the *Life of Nicholas of Sion* (chapters 8, 57, 76) 4) the *Refutation* of Eustratius of Constantinople.

Everything dating from after the 6th century is harmful and may only lead us astray. With regard to Michael the Archimandrite, having lived 450 years after St Nicholas, he cannot be used in questions of historical criticism, but only to help shaping the image of the Saint from a traditional and devotional point of view.

I



The *Confutation* by Eustratios of Constantinople (*Λογος ανατρεπτικός*) (583 aD). The mistake of Anrich (followed by many writers) in dating the *Praxis* at the 6th century was the neglecting of the **context of the Sources**. For example, never Eustratios would have come out with the *Praxis* to argue in favor of his thesis (*on the consciousness of the souls after death*), if this same *Praxis* did not have the force deriving from its antiquity. All of his arguments are drawn in fact or from antiquity or from great authority, from writers like Basil or Gregory of Nazianzus. This latter was not the case, therefore it was from antiquity.