

## Maritime material culture and its connection to Eastern Orthodox Christian saints: a preliminary study

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**Abstract:** Christianity has long been associated with water: it acts as a natural barrier in Moses' story, it is a means of spiritual cleansing used by John the Baptist and it is connected to parables and miracles attributed to Jesus and various saints. Water and water-related activities such as fishing and seafaring have been purposefully adopted into faith, spiritual practices and remembrance. Moreover, marine vessels, which have been an important means of transport for Mediterranean civilisations since prehistory, were included in Christian practices in a variety of ways, not just as symbols of saints but also as part of rituals.

This chapter presents a preliminary study of the connection between Christian saints and maritime material culture. The focus is examples from early Christianity, especially Greek Orthodox Christianity, as developed in the eastern Mediterranean during the Mediaeval period and thereafter. The first part of the study assesses written sources associated with saints of the sea such as Nicholas of Myra and Phocas the Gardener. The second section discusses how art and material culture—mainly icons and frescoes, religious works of art—relate to narratives of the saints' lives, associated miracles, local beliefs and spiritual practices. Icons are devotional paintings of Christ or other holy figures typically executed on wood and used ceremonially in the Byzantine and other Eastern Churches, while frescoes are religious murals painted on walls.

Thus, the main purpose of this chapter is to present matters of faith and materiality in maritime context, as expressed through textual evidence and material artefacts from Eastern and Greek Orthodox Christianity. It is hoped this preliminary study will reveal new insights into and connections between maritime material culture, the sea itself and the artefacts, symbols, monumental art, votives and rituals which have been used by Christian maritime communities for over two millennia.

### Introduction

Water has been associated with faith and the divine since prehistoric times (Rappenglück 2014). In Europe as early as the Neolithic, it was conceived as the personification and extension of deities (Tvedt and Oestigaard 2006; Oestigaard 2011). This conceptualization inspired cults, beliefs, rituals and practices in many communities. Some of the earliest material evidence for processes linking divinity with water comes from the Mediterranean region and dates to the first millennium BC. Poseidon, the ancient Greek god of the sea, was its embodiment, personification and sole ruler. Temples to Poseidon were built near ports and maritime routes to influence maritime activities and movements and gain the god's patronage and protection (Mylonopoulos 2013). Deities such as Poseidon and mythological events taking place in water were the frequent subjects of sculptures, paintings and other types of artefacts from the period, while rituals and festivals celebrated water-related events such as the 'Navigium Isidis' ['The Voyage of Isis'] of Roman-era Alexandria, the annual reopening of the sailing season (Hanrahan 1962) which memorialised

the links between divinities, aquatic environments and the communities using them.

This deep entanglement between water, religion, material culture and rituals continued into the first millennium AD. In its first five centuries, Christianity, which was then just emerging from and still firmly connected to the Judaic tradition, was closely associated with water and maritime material culture (Goodenough 1943: 408–410; Siegal and Yovel 2023). Water—including sea water—was viewed as means of purification, as well as a symbol for spreading the message of the new religion (see Réau 1955–1959 and Jensen 2000 for a discussion of baptism and iconography in early Christian art). Some of the apostles were fishermen (Matthew 4:18–22), or they spread their message through maritime journeys across the Mediterranean, or they were baptised with water (Acts 2:38). Christian maritime communities built churches and chapels to host and honour icons and relics of saints and gain the saints' patronage and protection (Morgan 2010: 23–24; for a general introduction to early saints and their connections to pre-Christian traditions, see Réau 1955–

1959 and Mathews 1993). Connections between churches dedicated to patron saints of seafaring and cities with harbours and seafaring activities are readily apparent in the archaeological and textual records of the Mediaeval and post-Mediaeval periods.

The connection between water and Christian societies has long been a subject of study and analysis (e.g., Flatman 2011: 313–315). Perhaps the most prominent of these efforts is the nine-volume series *A history of water* (edited by Tvedt and Oestigaard), which includes contributions from more than 230 scholars and took a decade to publish (2006–2016). Another major study of maritime material culture, maritime archaeology, theology and Christian saints is Gambin's 2014 book *Ships, saints and sealore: Cultural heritage and ethnography of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea*, which provides important interdisciplinary research results.

Despite these extensive studies, a new research question emerged during an assessment of the contemporary literature, one which concerned maritime material culture in the context of Christianity during the Mediaeval and post-Mediaeval periods. In archaeology, the analytical approach to the production of material culture includes artistic expression. Nonetheless, few analyses have focussed on the interconnections between maritime communities, their material culture and the maritime landscape. In other words, artefacts are typically analysed as individual pieces of material culture, but few scholarly studies have connected them to other aspects of the local communities which produced them (Hatch 2011: 217–218, 231). This chapter aims to fill the gap by providing a holistic overview of the entanglements between maritime environments, social aspects of Christian communities and the representation of those aspects in the associated material culture, particularly forms of religious art.

### Research aims and methodology

By combining theological, textual, archaeological and art historical research data, derived mainly from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this preliminary study provides insight into the maritime interconnections between religion, the environment and local communities. Saints such as Nicholas of Myra and Phocas the Gardener, their honouring and veneration by local communities, the symbols used to depict them and the related artefacts produced in southeastern Europe during the Mediaeval and post-Mediaeval periods are discussed, with a particular focus on Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. The data and details discussed here were collected through a desktop study and analysis of published scholarship, along with Christian texts (e.g. the Bible, missals and liturgical books).

Analysis of the collected data, as presented here, seeks to bridge the gap identified in the literature by providing critical interpretations of Christian beliefs, material culture and rituals within the context of the maritime cultural

landscape of the eastern Mediterranean region (Westerdahl 1992). Specifically, within the research framework formulated by Hatch (2011), this study focuses on the ways religious artefacts, symbols and rituals are created and used by fishermen and maritime communities. These elements connect maritime material culture to specific maritime communities, showing how artefacts become core parts of cultural identities. Through specific case studies, this chapter also examines how these elements become part of broader networks of beliefs, rituals and traditions.

For the purposes of this analysis, specific case studies of saints and relevant artefacts were selected. Admittedly, the case studies presented here are a subset of the available data intended to represent the larger range. They are also part of a broader field of study with significant potential to reveal the interrelations between the identities of maritime communities and their Eastern Orthodox beliefs, practices and artefacts.

### The Christian faith and water

The roots of Christianity are deeply embedded in the spiritual and philosophical life of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures, which had various connections to water through cultural beliefs and practices and pre-Christian religions. Christianity often adopted these earlier associations of water with divinity (Flatman 2011: 313–315, fig.17.2). Water is often mentioned in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God is referred to as 'the spring of living water' (Jeremiah 2:13, 17:13). In the New Testament, Jesus is mentioned as 'the water of life' (John 4:10–26, 6:22–59). In the Gospels of the New Testament, John the Baptist baptised people in water in the name of God. In Orthodox Christian liturgies, water is used in baptisms, and holy water is used to cleanse and bless believers. Blessings over waters underline the power of water to cleanse, a belief belonging to ancient traditions in the Mediterranean region (Armstrong and Armstrong 2006: 367–375; N. Papadopoulos 2012: 390–391, 432–433, 456, 510; Papastavrou 2012). There are many blessings for cleansing seafarers, their activities and the tools and products of their craft. In Eastern Orthodox maritime communities, there are also blessings for the construction of sea vessels, the fishermen who sail them and their fishing nets (N. Papadopoulos 2012: 390–391).

In the *vitas* (biographies) of saints, water—and especially the sea—often take the role of an adversary. In the stories of Moses and Elijah, it is a natural barrier, and in accounts of Saint Brendan and Saint Nicholas of Myra, it is a liquid desert full of arduous trials. Water is ultimately conquered by the prayers of the prophets and saints through divine intervention (Töyräänvuori 2022), a topic discussed in greater detail in later sections. Water is also a means of travelling and an environment for work, shared experience which connected saints to local maritime communities. For example, Saints Peter and Andrew were particularly venerated by maritime communities because they were

fishermen both before and while they conducted their apostolic work (Pontifical Council 2023).

### Patron saints and sacred material culture

In early Christianity, saints were regular people who were baptised and enlightened by the teachings of Jesus which had spread through his apostles and followers. Many saints from the first several centuries of the new millennium were fishermen and seafaring merchants (Luke 5: 1–11). They spread the new religion by leveraging the advantages of their maritime mobility (Acts 27: 1–2). Many died due to, within or through instruments used on or in water. Some also possessed honorary titles because they either worked at sea or conducted or experienced miracles related to the sea. Saints such as Nicholas of Myra and Mary, the mother of Jesus, are often adopted as patrons and protectors of maritime communities. These religious beliefs and associated stories have also been expressed in Christian material culture, through forms such as the icons used to decorate the walls of churches. The tradition of icons emerged in the early days of Christianity, and it continued throughout the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine eras (Kenna 1985: 364–368).

Cultural forms like icons often possess additional meaning, especially when they are incorporated into rituals and spiritual practices. Such uses make this type of artefact an important part of religious, cultural and social identity, thus aligning Orthodox Christianity with the anthropological concept of ‘lived religion’. Religions are understood as ‘ways of fabricating networks of relations among human beings, on the one hand, and relations with gods, angels, saints, the afterlife, spirits or ancestors, nationhood, destiny, or providence, on the other’; in ‘lived religion’, images and artefacts ‘work as ways of engaging the human body in the configuration of the sacred’ (Morgan 2010: 16; also see Kenna 1985: 367–368). An icon becomes more than a depiction of a saint, as it becomes associated with cultural beliefs, social interactions, ritual behaviours and places for practicing those behaviours.

### Saints’ icons and symbols in Holy Scripture, art and material culture

Material culture<sup>1</sup> and artistic products<sup>2</sup> related to the lives of saints almost invariably depict the various events and divine interventions which brought them into the Christian faith. Icons typically depict events described in scripture and other Christian texts. Often regulated by theologians and Church leaders, these artworks are known to impact the communities using them quite deeply. For example,

<sup>1</sup> These artefacts can be directly connected to the life of a saint, including his or her physical remains, personal belongings, housing, means of travel, tools of work, etc. They can also be objects related to miracles and/or teachings of a saint while he or she was alive. Other objects include instruments related to the death of the saint, the location of his or her death or martyrdom, and relics and materials connected to miracles after his or her death.

<sup>2</sup> The most common artistic products are representations of saints and their symbols in portable icons, wall paintings (frescos) or mosaics.

an icon of Saint Nicholas showed him miraculously saving a ship’s crew from certain destruction; sailors and fishermen felt directly connected to the subject of the icon and prayed to receive his protection when at sea (Morgan 2010: 20–21).

Some of the most important symbols of Christianity are also connected to the sea. The anchor, a symbol of hope (Hebrews 6:19), is often placed on tombstones. Similarly, the fish (ΙΧΘΥΣ in Greek, an abbreviation of Ιησούς Χριστός Θεού Υιός Σωτήρ, which translates as ‘Jesus Christ, son of God and saviour’) was used by Christians in the era of Roman persecution to mark them as having been ‘fished out’ of the sea of humanity and saved by the apostles (Luke 5:11; Mark 1:17; Lamberton 1911; Delvoy 1988: 23). In early Christian art, fish represent the souls of the deceased that the Divine Fisherman catches in his net. This assimilation became commonplace in relation to the vocation of the apostles, as the first four were recruited from among fishermen from the lake Genesaret and were later transformed as fishermen of souls (Reau 2000: 102). The fish also takes the form of the dolphin, thought to be the saviour of castaways who swims by the vessel/ship of the church, sometime even carrying the church on its back as a symbol of Christ holding his church (Reau 2000: 102).

Fish and their connection to water are also found in the *Physiologus*, a collection of moralized beast tales with several references to fish and their connection to Christian faith (Sbordone 1936). The compendium is thought to have been written around the third or fourth century AD, although it was initially believed to have been written as early as the second century AD. The *Physiologus* also contains a reference to the *aspidochele*, a sea monster which tricks sailors into thinking they have found land before sinking their ships; this beast is considered a representation of Satan (Konstantakos 2020: 281).

In the Old Testament, Noah’s ark and his God-given mission to save humanity from the flood are symbolically paralleled in the New Testament, where the Church is the ark and assumes its mission to save the human species. Finally, the ship on stormy waters symbolises the Church as it sails towards heaven while facing worldly dangers; Jesus is the captain of the metaphorical vessel, and his lieutenants are the Church leaders and the saints (Lekkos 2015: 8–22). John Chrysostom, an early Church leader who also served as the archbishop of Constantinople and was later canonised as a saint, described the Church as a ship in stormy seas saved from destruction through divine intervention:

... δέχεται τραύματα, καὶ οὐ καταπίπτει ὑπὸ τῶν ἑλκῶν κλυδωνίζεται, ἀλλ’ οὐ καταποντίζεται· χειμάζεται, ἀλλὰ ναύγιον οὐχ ὑπομένει...

... she is wounded yet sinks not under her wounds; tossed by waves yet not submerged; vexed by storms yet suffers no shipwreck ... (Papadimitrakopoulou 2009: 153).

Even today, a building built as a church is compared to a ship: the main architectural component is referred to as the *nave*, a term related to the Latin *navis*, meaning ‘ship’ (Rabiega and Kobylinski 2018: 207). These examples show water and ships as deeply connected to the Christian faith and its symbolic tradition.

Churches and relics of saints were often destinations of choice for pilgrimages made by local and distant believers alike. These faith-inspired journeys created networks and means of communication that spanned and connected communities, societies and regions (Morgan 2010: 27–28). Pilgrimages were important contributors to and influences on the socio-economic growth of cities, especially those containing sites with religious significance such as Rome and Jerusalem (Bell and Dale 2011: 601–603). In many locations, icons, frescos and other types of artefacts were dedicated to specific saints due to the miracles associated with them. These depictions often contained inscriptions which briefly narrated the story depicted. Such artefacts are found throughout the Mediterranean region (Drewer 1996: 7–9; Gambin 2014: 10–11).

### Patron saints of the sea: icons and the maritime element

The following sections review five maritime saints whose patronage is directly associated with scripture and/or can be verified with archaeological data. Particular focus is given to two saints: Nicholas of Myra and Phocas the Gardener.

#### *The Virgin Mary*

While Mary’s life is not described in any detail in the New Testament or the Apocrypha, a large cult formed around her after the First Council of Constantinople in the fourth century AD. This circumstance motivated the theologians of the era to examine her biblical importance and refer to her as the Virgin Mary in the Nicene Creed. In Greece, starting in early Christianity and continuing in the Eastern Orthodox faith, the Virgin Mary (Παναγία or Panagia in Greek, meaning ‘all holy’ or ‘most holy’) was given over 2,500 epithets and 70,000 honorary adjectives which varied by location and time period (Maas 1914; MKPK 2007). Some of her titles, given to her by local communities as a form of endearment and veneration, are directly associated with water. Contemporary examples include Παναγία Γοργόνα (Panagia the Gorgon/Mermaid) and ‘Παναγία Θαλασσινή’ (Panagia of the Sea).

An early title, Ζωοδόχος Πηγή (‘the spring of life’), relates to Mary’s role as the mother of Jesus. This title is attested by the sacred spring and the Church of St Mary of the Spring in Istanbul, Türkiye, which dates to the fifth or sixth century AD (Saint-1475 2023). The veneration of Mary as a patron of maritime communities is reflected in *votive icons* (these are paintings given to a church in honour of prayers answered), which usually depict her accordingly to

the content of one of her titles or by referencing a miracle attributed to her intercession. An example is shown in Figure 7.1 (BXM-02267 2023); it is a wooden votive icon dedicated to Mary held in the collection of the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens. Mary is depicted on the top half of the icon holding Jesus in the stance of the Οδηγήτρια (‘guide’). The bottom half depicts a shipwreck, with men swimming towards the shore and safety. The inscription names Κούρτζουλα (Kureczula) as the site of the wreck, and Ioannis Ardavanis, a sailor from the island of Kefalonia in the Ionian Sea, as the person dedicating the icon to Mary in gratitude for his surviving the shipwreck due to her intercession.

#### *Saint Nicholas*

Saint Nicholas (Άγιος Νικόλαος, in Greek) of Myra is one of the most venerated saints in the Christian world (Delehay et al. 1940: 568; Zias 1969: 275–277). He was born in the third century AD in the Patara of Lycia on the Mediterranean coast of Türkiye. He lived during a particularly troubled period for the new religion: the Roman Emperors Diocletian and Maximian had launched the Great Persecution in 303 AD, severely punishing Nicholas and thousands of other Christians for their faith. Nicholas was imprisoned during the persecutions, and he was known as an educated man and a paragon of justice, philanthropy and kindness (Mpakopoulos 2002: 215–216).

While no contemporary documents mention Nicholas, he is referenced in texts dated to about two centuries after his death. One was written by Theodorus Lector between 515 and 520 AD. In the text, Nicholas is described as one of the individuals attending the Council of Nicaea of 325 AD. By the time the *Life of Saint Nicholas of Sion* was written sometime during the second half of the sixth century, there was a martyrium (a church built over the tomb of a martyr) for Saint Nicholas of Myra (Sweetman 2017: 31–32). Given this, it seems likely his cult had already been established by the time the texts were written (Blacker et al. 2013: 250).

A later vita of Saint Nicholas is the *Vita Compilata*, an anonymous manuscript from the ninth or tenth century AD. This account is interesting because it combines two vitas: one concerns Nicholas of Myra, the other Nicholas of Sion (Strati 2015: 586). Other early compositions of Nicholas’ vita are based on a tenth-century series of books, the *menologion* (a collection of saints’ lives) of Saint Symeon the Translator. Symeon’s work was translated and included in later vitas such as the scripts of Saint Nicodemus the Hagiorite (Mpakopoulos 2002: 207, 210).

Saint Nicholas would ultimately absorb many of the characteristics and traditions associated with Neptune, the pre-Christian god of the sea (Réau 1955–1959: 361–365). Although it had emerged from the aniconic Judaic tradition, early Christianity embraced the use of icons and imagery as a way of transmitting its most important





Figure 7.1. Portable icon (BXM-02267) depicting Mary holding Jesus (top) and a shipwreck (bottom); it measures 45.0 × 33.0 cm and has been dated to the second half of the seventeenth century. The icon reflects the refined post-Byzantine techniques of the Ionian islands, combining realistic elements from Italian Renaissance art with the late Byzantine techniques used in workshops in Crete and western Greece. The icon is composed of vibrant colours—mainly gold, black, dark green and blue—and is of excellent craftsmanship. Copyright Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports—Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development, Byzantine and Christian Museum, and used with permission.



dogmas to recent converts. Paraphrasing earlier Christian scholars in the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great defended the use of religious images as fulfilling ‘a useful and important function: the pictures are made for the instruction of the illiterate’ (Barasch 2013: 64). Many artists engaged to make the images were trained in the classical Greco-Roman tradition, and thus they applied well-known, pre-existing models to biblical stories. In this way, the Christian God acquired the attributes of Apollo or Sol Invictus as the new religion spread in Europe. After the Roman Empire made Christianity its official religion, God acquired the image of Jupiter, the main deity. As biblical stories and associated artistic images became codified, artists retained some discretion in how they represented stories associated with saints. As Réau notes, many of the early saints took over the cults of heroes (warriors, protectors, or healers) and minor gods, assimilating not only their physical characteristics and powers but also their attributes. Thus, Saint Nicholas took over Neptune’s role.

Saint Nicholas’ position as a patron of the sea and sailors is connected to miraculous events from his life and after his death, especially ones described after the tenth-century vita compilations. According to these narratives, when Nicholas decided to sail to Jerusalem, he had a vision of the devil cutting the ropes of his ship; this foretold an upcoming storm, which the saint calmed with a prayer. During the storm, a sailor accidentally fell from the sails to his death. The saint prayed over the body, and the sailor was brought back to life. When the crew of the ship decided to head for their homeland instead of Patara, their original destination, the rudder of the ship broke. The saint prayed once more so they could safely reach Patara (Mpakopoulos 2002: 213–214). In another miracle, the saint appeared on the helm (steering wheel) of a ship and safely guided its crew to his city of Myra (Mpakopoulos 2002: 224–225). Miracles attributed to Saint Nicholas after his death include his delivering the crew of a ship from malicious demons. He also saved a man drowning in a storm; he miraculously brought the man back to his house, wet from the stormy waters but otherwise unscathed (Mpakopoulos 2002: 226–228).

Based on his life, miracles and popularity among maritime communities throughout the Mediterranean, Saint Nicholas has been considered the patron saint of the sea and its workers since the Mediaeval era. His veneration flourished well before the Great Schism broke the communion between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches in 1054, and it continued afterwards in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Churches were built in his honour near the sea, and small wooden icons depicting him are used to this day on boats and ships to honour him and gain his protection (Blacker *et al.* 2013: 249–251).

In Greece, Saint Nicholas is considered the guardian of the Hellenic navy, and as such, he is honoured with celebrations on his feast day (December 6th) and by

the use of his name and image on sailing vessels. After the construction of every vessel is completed, blessings are read, and they invoke his name specifically (N. Papadopoulos 2012: 390–391; *Άγιοι Προστάτες των επαγγελματιών* 2016: 48–49).

In Eastern Orthodox iconography (the use of visual images and conventions to convey cultural ideas), Saint Nicholas is typically depicted as a bishop, and he is usually near ships. These visual choices refer to episodes from his life and associated miracles, and they signify his status as the protector of sailors. Interestingly, in his physical depiction, his physiognomy usually combines the features of two saints: Nicholas of Myra and Nicholas of Sion. This phenomenon becomes evident starting in the tenth century, and it originates in the aforementioned unification of the *vitas* for the two saints (Strati 2015: 586–589).

Beginning in the tenth century AD, the life episodes in the depictions of Saint Nicholas start to follow the details of his vita as found in the narrations of Saint Symeon the Translator. These episodes show themes not present in portable or monumental depictions before Symeon’s time (Skavara 2005: 81). The scenes in this depiction are complex, greatly varied, and derive from Nicholas’ life and miracles, a fact which endures even during the post-Byzantine era throughout the entirety of the Balkan region (Skavara 2005: 80–81). Despite the use of different artistic styles and the wide geographic range of manufacture and use, these depictions exhibit a thematic and chronological continuity which goes hand in hand with the post-ninth century scriptural references to the saint (Zias 1969b: 276–277).

In southern Albania (*e.g.* Gjirokastrë) and northwestern Greece, icons and frescoes combine simple linear designs with expressive eyes and lighted faces, characteristics also found in the fourteenth-century visual depictions of Saint Nicholas at the Church of St Nicholas of the Roof near Kakopetria, Cyprus (Skavara 2005: 91–93). Particularly in northwestern workshops, these characteristics reflect the combination of older and newer techniques and style, while also incorporating methods from the schools of artists in northwestern Greece and Crete. These phenomena show the endurance of artistic themes and techniques in Orthodox Christian hagiography, despite political and societal change, implying the formation and endurance of networks for communication and interaction between communities (Skavara 2005: 92–93).

Starting in the fifteenth century, the Greek northwestern region of Kastoria was home to Christian art workshops which became renowned throughout the region. An example of these workshops comes from the fourteenth-century icon of the life of Saint Nicholas at the Church of Saint Nicholas in Dragota, Kastoria in Greece. The icon includes the miracle of Saint Nicholas on a ship travelling towards Jerusalem, in which he calmed a storm (Strati 2015).

The miracles connected to Saint Nicholas continued to be depicted in post-Byzantine art, often ‘vita icons’, based on details from the combined vita. A ‘vita icon’ is the image of the life of a saint which typically consists of a large central portrait surrounded by episodes from the saint’s biography. For example, in the early seventeenth-century church of Saint Nikolaos at Sarakinishte of Lunxheri in southern Albania, we find scenes of Saint Nicholas’ life, including some of his miracles near the sea and on ships (Skavara 2005: 85, 86, 89, 92). In this church, the Artemis miracle, in which Saint Nicholas demolished through prayer a temple of Artemis, the chaste Greek goddess of the hunt, also appears in the early eighteenth-century church of Saint Nicholas in Petra on the island of Lesbos in Greece. This is directly related to the fourteenth-century Holy Church of Saint Nicholas Orphanos in Thessaloniki, Greece. Interestingly, this once again highlights the enduring artistic traditions regarding depictions of Saint Nicholas, as well as the networks of communication between distant Christian communities within which these traditions were transferred (Sakellariadi 2018: 266).

In the collection of the Athens Byzantine and Christian Museum, there is a portable wooden icon of Saint Nicholas (Figure 7.2; see BXM-13185 2023). Chronologically, it is placed at the end of the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth century. This vita icon was chosen for this study because its depiction follows the saint’s life as described in vitas written after the ninth century. The correspondence between visual depictions and textual descriptions confirms the continuity of the tradition across a span of many centuries.

The icon contains three rows of images. Each consists of three small scenes, for a total of nine images. Starting from the top left, the beginning of the saint’s pastoral work is depicted with his ordination. Next to it is an example of his charity: he gives a pouch filled with coins to the father of three poor sisters who lie in bed. The third image shows the saint’s religious zeal, which inspires him to destroy false idols.

The second, central, row contains the main image of Saint Nicholas in its middle position; he is depicted seated on his bishop’s throne, and he blesses the viewer. In this row are two miracles performed by the saint on the sea. To the left, he saves a sailor from drowning; to the right, he saves the crew of a ship from a storm caused by malevolent spirits. It is not a coincidence these miracles have been placed in the central row, as they refer directly to the saint’s association with the sea and his patronage of sailors.

The third (bottom) row is dedicated to the saint’s righteousness and his disdain of injustice. In the centre image, the saint intervenes in the wrongful accusation and attempted execution of three innocent men, generals of Emperor Constantine the Great. When the generals returned to the Emperor after successfully quelling a revolt, they were wrongfully accused of treason by an imperial

adviser. Remembering the saint’s righteousness, the three generals prayed to him for help. The saint answered their prayers by appearing in the dreams of the emperor and his adviser, threatening them with divine retribution if they wrongfully executed the generals. To the left, the saint warns to the emperor as he sleeps. To the right is the result: the emperor, after heeding the saint’s warning and admiring his righteousness, frees his generals and also orders the creation of a golden crosier and decorated gospel as gifts for Saint Nicholas. The freed generals depart for Myra to become monks in order to venerate their benefactor.

### *Saint Phocas the Gardener*

Saint Phocas (Άγιος Φωκάς, in Greek) the Gardener lived in the fourth century AD in Sinop, a city located in what is today northern Türkiye. His name possibly derives from the ancient Greek word φώκη, the aquatic mammal ‘seal’.

His identification is debated, since there was also a Saint Phocas who was the bishop in Sinop in the first or second century AD, and the written references to their lives overlap. The earliest account of the saint’s life is a homily (sermon) written by Saint Asterios of Amasea in the fourth-to-fifth centuries AD. In the homily, the saint’s life is described in detail. He is presented as a humble and charitable man known for helping lost sailors. During Trajan’s persecutions of Christians in the first-to-second centuries AD, the saint was marked for execution, so imperial soldiers sought him in Sinop. On finding Phocas, they asked him for directions and explained their mission, at which point he offered to host them in his house for the night and promised to assist them. The next morning, Phocas dug his own grave in his garden, and he surrendered himself to the shocked and now-reluctant soldiers. The saint, however, insisted they carry out their duty and requested they bury his body in his garden. The soldiers respected these wishes (Foskolou 2018: 319–320).

According to Saint Asterios, sailors venerated Saint Phocas and created songs based on the homily about his life. He was honoured by sailors in a region which spanned from the Black, Adriatic and Aegean Seas to the ocean to the west and the bays of the eastern lands (Foskolou 2018: 319–320). However, the cult around the saint declined around the ninth century, while the cult of Saint Nicholas of Myra gained in popularity. This circumstance perhaps occurred because Saint Nicholas’ feast day (December 6th) was connected to the turbulent weather of the winter season, something that made his protection quite valuable and directly connected to the needs of sailors (Olgun 2022: 75–76).

The designation of Phocas the Gardener as a patron saint of sailors is attested by a documented tradition in the eastern Mediterranean which emerged after the saint’s miraculous interventions in saving seafarers. Sailors, considering the saint to be a member of their crew, would split a share for him, bought every day by a different sailor. Once the ship reached port, they would donate the sum of money





Figure 7.2. Portable icon (BXM-13185) depicting Saint Nicholas and scenes of his life. It measures 74.2 × 50.0 cm and has been dated to the end of the seventeenth or the beginning of the eighteenth century. The icon shows the very fine post-Byzantine technique of the Cretan school of artists, incorporating older linear techniques and vibrant colours such as gold, white and red, with the long figure technique of the Italian Renaissance. It was produced by the Cretan artist Μόσκος Ιωάννης (Moskos Ioannis). Copyright Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports—Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development, Byzantine and Christian Museum, and used with permission.



collected for the saint's share to charity and ask for his patronage and protection (Saint-2483 2023).

The saint's patronage is attested by various forms of material culture associated with pilgrims in the eastern Mediterranean. For example, he is mentioned in graffiti dated to between the fifth and seventh centuries on the natural southern port of the island of Syros, in Cyclades, Greece. These inscriptions are devoted to Saint Phocas, and they include invocations to the saint's assistance, including a prayer to save a ship named *Maria*. The saint's patronage is also attested by a sixth-to-seventh century AD clay medallion which depicts Saint Phocas wearing a sailor's clothes, while standing on the deck of a boat in a praying stance. The clothes and the boat symbolise and highlight his patronage (Foskolou 2018: 319).

Within the context of pilgrimages made during the Mediaeval era, a type of artefact known as *ampullae* was widely circulated. These were flasks, often containing holy water or oil from different pilgrimage sites. A collection of these artefacts is currently held in the Art Museum of Princeton University. One such flask, dated to the sixth century AD, is dedicated to Saint Phocas, as it contains imagery of boats in hagiography connected to the saint; it is made of terracotta and originates from Asia Minor (Abramowitz 2022: 3, 6).

### Saints Spyridon and Theodora in Corfu

Saint Spyridon (Άγιος Σπυρίδων, in Greek) was a bishop from Cyprus in the third or fourth centuries AD. Accounts of his life describe him as an ethical person of deep faith who performed miracles. After his death, his body was transferred to Constantinople to save it from a raid on the island of Cyprus. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, his relics were moved to the island of Corfu in Greece, where they are still kept to this day. He is named as a protector of the island in liturgical texts dating to 1674. Miracles attributed to his intervention occurred on multiple occasions of disaster, especially in the Ionian Sea during the eighteenth century, and this established him as a patron saint of the island of Corfu (Mpitha 1995: 163–167; Saint-3247 2023).

His designation as the protector of the maritime community of the island of Corfu is attested in locally produced artefacts. Examples include two portable icons devoted to Saint Spyridon in the collection of the Christian and Byzantine Museum of Athens. The first icon (Figure 7.3; see BXM-02073 2023) is from the late seventeenth century. Its centre depicts a galley in stormy water; however, to the right at the top of the scene, Saint Spyridon is seen blessing the ship. According to the icon's inscription, it is a votive of a man named Avgoustinos (Αυγουστίνος, in



**Figure 7.3.** Portable icon (BXM-02073) depicting a miracle by Saint Spyridon. It measures 21.5 × 32.0 cm in size and is dominated by the colours red and light and dark blue. The icon's production in the Ionian islands (Greece) is attested by the use of western Greek techniques. Copyright Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports—Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development, Byzantine and Christian Museum, and used with permission.

Greek) from the island of Corfu, Greece, who was saved from a shipwreck and devoted the icon to Saint Spyridon for his miraculous intervention. This votive icon connects the saint to the sea and his patronage to the Ionian islands, especially Corfu.

The second icon (Figure 7.4; see BXM-10817 2023) further solidifies the saint's connection to the sea. The icon in its current, restored, form shows Saint Nicholas enthroned and dates to the seventeenth century. However, in the eighteenth century, a newer layer depicting Saint Spyridon was painted over this image; it has since been removed.

Why an image of Saint Spyridon was painted to cover one of Saint Nicholas has not been explained. However, we might speculate, based on the aforementioned information, that the islander community of Corfu considered Saint Spyridon their patron because he was believed to have performed miracles for Corfu and the Ionian Islands region. Based on this observation, this icon suggests the Christians of Corfu reprioritised the two saints in their patronage of maritime Christian communities in the Ionian Islands region.

Along with Saint Spyridon and Saint Nicholas, Saint Theodora is another patron of the maritime community of Corfu. She was Regent and Empress of the Eastern Roman Empire, and an important figure in the history of Christianity.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, politicians and religious leaders fought one another over the religious significance of iconography and the potential classification of icons as idols, whose use and veneration was specifically prohibited in the Christian faith. These arguments came close to civil war in the Eastern Roman Empire. Countless portable icons were shipped to remote locations for safekeeping; others were destroyed, and some were painted over. Many frescos did not survive. However, Theodora managed to restore the honouring of icons after summoning a council on 11 March 843. To this day, during Lent, the Sunday of Orthodoxy honours the re-establishment of icons in the liturgical life of the Church. For this reason, Saint Theodora is honoured in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Her relics are currently kept in Corfu (Saint-3639 2023).

In the icon shown in Figure 7.5 (BXM-01566 2023), Saint Theodora is depicted on a throne, in imperial attire, holding an icon of Mary and Jesus. This imagery references her role in re-establishing the honouring of icons. The icon has an interesting detail: under the saint's feet, there is a small crest depicting a ship, the emblem of Corfu (Mpitha 1995: 164). This symbolises her patronage of the island.

## Conclusions

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in Christian spirituality, faith is associated with material realities.

From water itself, blessings and rituals, to depictions of saints and their lives, the materiality entangled with the Eastern Orthodox Christianity is ever present and impactful. The material culture used for spiritual practices and veneration holds agency and deeply affects believers and their respective communities. These artefacts provide a narrative of their own, acting as agents of historical, religious and cultural continuity regardless of their origin or time of creation (Shanks 1998; Rountree *et al.* 2012: 8–12).

The longstanding traditions of venerating saints through their icons, rituals and activities as illustrated with the cases of Saints Nicholas and Phocas are indicative of the vastness and the persistence of the social, cultural and trading networks between different maritime communities across the eastern Mediterranean and beyond (Sweetman 2017: 6–8). The cult of Saint Nicholas was so popular, it eventually reached northeastern Europe. He became established there as the patron of the Hanseatic League, and cathedrals and churches in Lübeck, Stralsund and Wismar (Germany) were dedicated to him starting in the twelfth century (Mehler *et al.* 2016; Friedel 2017; Rösch 2021).

The topographical spread and continuity of religious material culture such as the *vitas* and blessings asking for the intercession of different maritime saints, the complex yet enduring iconography of Saint Nicholas, the votives to Virgin Mary, Saint Nicholas and Saint Spyridon and, finally, the traditions surrounding Saint Phocas show not only the agency of religious material culture, but also the connectivity and chronological continuity of the associated beliefs and traditions between different maritime communities. The connectivity between harbours and ports in combination with network theories, as used in Sweetman's research in the eastern Mediterranean, could be used in future studies to assess the extent of the cults of the saints of the sea in southern and northern European societies (Noble and Smith 2008: 581–605; Leidwanger and Knappett 2018: 1–21).

Tracing the cults of maritime saints in scriptural, textual, archaeological and artistic data shows promise for future interdisciplinary research. This introductory study is a small but hopefully positive contribution in our understanding of how past maritime communities perceived the divine, how it affected their material culture and how it can define and shape their maritime cultural identity to a significant extent. Future research should include a robust methodology for the study of iconography (*e.g.* Walker Vadillo and Walker Vadillo 2022) and apply it to a robust sample of iconographic material from Greek and Eastern Orthodox practices. This could also be expanded to Catholic practices, either through comparative analysis or independent study, for example, highlighting the use of votive offerings in the churches of fisherfolk communities (see the study by Armendariz 2009 for an example).





**Figure 7.4.** Portable icon depicting an enthroned Saint Nicholas (BXM-10817). It had been painted over with a depiction of Saint Spyridon; the newer image has since been removed. The icon measures 123.0 × 78.0 cm in size. It is predominantly gold, white and red in colour, and western Greek workshop techniques are well incorporated with the Italian style. Its place of origin is Messina, Sicily. Copyright Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports—Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development, Byzantine and Christian Museum, and used with permission.





Figure 7.5. Portable icon (BXM-01566) depicting Saint Theodora. The detail under her feet shows a crest with a ship. The icon measures 40.5 × 29.0 cm, and its colours are mainly shades of red and gold, the colours of royalty. Its construction displays the notable skill and technique of the Cretan artist Εμμανουήλ Τζάνε (Emmanuel Jane). It is dated to 1671. Copyright Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports—Hellenic Organization of Cultural Resources Development, Byzantine and Christian Museum, and used with permission.



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## Ancient sculptures lost at sea: stories of loss and discovery

Katerina Velentza

**Abstract:** This chapter explores stories of loss and discovery of ancient sculptures in the Mediterranean Sea from the period of Classical Antiquity until today. Through the study of archaeological evidence, literary sources, historical records, contemporary art and popular culture, this research demonstrates the continuity in the reception of sculptures from the waters of the Mediterranean Sea over the centuries. From the period of Classical Antiquity to Mediaeval times and from the shipwrecks of the ‘Grand Tour’ period to the most recent archaeological discoveries, incidents of underwater deposition, discovery or recovery of sculptures have instigated strong feelings of catastrophe, mystery and wonder in both pre-modern and modern narratives. These emotional and conceptual associations have shaped long-term attitudes towards sculptures from under water in the stories and traditions of multiple eras. Through the study of sculptures from under water, this chapter addresses issues of public perception and portrayal of underwater archaeology. The overarching aims of this research are to comprehend more fully human interconnections with the underwater environment and to advocate for greater care in conducting and presenting underwater archaeological research to the public today and in the future.

### Introduction

Humanity has always had a special bond and dependence on the sea (Horden and Purcell 2000; Omstedt 2020). Since prehistoric times, the sea has been a space of communication and connection, as well as a divider. It has been a source of both livelihood and disaster. It has had a deep emotional and societal meaning for people, while its mysterious waters have inspired, over the centuries, wondrous adventures and innovations, as well as stories and feelings of catastrophe and chaos (Strang 2004: 50–51; Phelan 2007; Lampinen and Mataix Ferrándiz 2022: 1–8).

Similarly, most cultures have conceived the underwater world as a place of wonder, adventure and risk. This perception of the underwater environment as something extraordinary created thrilling tales of domination during Classical Antiquity. An example is the fascinating story of Alexander the Great going under water in the Mediterranean in a glass bathyscaph to prove his supremacy (see [Pseudo-]Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* 2.38); this tale parallels underwater exploration and treasure-seeking narratives of the modern era, especially from the middle of the twentieth century (Bass 1966: 22; Muckelroy 1978: vii; Earle 1986: 68–72; Green 1990: 2–3; Burrows 2010).<sup>1</sup> Despite the efforts of many scholars to define clearly the academic and theoretical

background of the discipline of maritime and underwater archaeology in ways which disassociate it from the earlier adventure-seeking and treasure-hunting connections, the thrill which the underwater world incites continues to foster misrepresentations of underwater archaeological discoveries as treasure salvage even today (Du Plat Taylor 1965; Bass 1966; Muckelroy 1978; Adams and Rönby 2013; Maarleveld *et al.* 2013; Gately and Benjamin 2018).

As George Bass, the pioneer of maritime archaeology, once stated, ‘everything made by man was carried at one time or another in a ship or was simply lost at sea somehow, fell accidentally or were placed purposefully in the water’ (Bass 1966: 17). Ancient Greek and Roman sculptures have been such objects, lost at sea and recovered from its depths throughout the centuries. From the sixteenth century until today, hundreds of ancient sculptures of various dates, types, sizes and materials have been retrieved from the Mediterranean seabed by early underwater explorers and archaeologists or simply by fishermen, sponge divers and recreational scuba divers (Velentza 2022). Given the special artistic value of these artefacts, sculptures from under water have been seen by scholars and the general public alike as exceptional objects evoking mystery, adventure and lost treasure. The fascinating idea of discovering and recovering ancient sculptural works of art from the water has also stimulated local enthusiasm and pride (*e.g.* Rackl 1978; Stenuit 2002; Petriaggi 2005; Queyrel 2012; Bellingham 2014; Koutsouflakis and Simosi 2015). More recently, the romanticism accompanying underwater

<sup>1</sup> The wider exploration of the underwater world started with the invention of the diving equipment known by its acronym, SCUBA (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus), and more specifically, with the type known as ‘aqualung’ invented by Emile Gagnan and Jacques-Yves Cousteau in 1942. This safer and lighter apparatus made it possible

for divers to spend more time under water and avoid the life-threatening dangers of helmet diving.