

## ST. APPOLONIA'S CULT IN ISTRIA

### ŠTOVANJE KULTA SV. APOLONIJE U ISTRI

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#### SUMMARY

**Aim.** To investigate the history and current practice of worshipping St. Apollonia (the patron saint of dentistry) in Istria using hagiographic methods.

**Methods.** Review of hagiographic literature and sacral iconography, including visits to sacral buildings and ethnographic museums and interviews with local priests and people acquainted with folk tradition.

**Results.** A remarkably rich Istrian sacral heritage includes 13 localities with 14 churches worshipping St. Apollonia, of which one is dedicated to the saint. There are four frescoes, six paintings, and five statues featuring the saint and originating from between the 15th and 19th century.

**Conclusion.** The review has shown that the cult of St. Apollonia as patron saint of teeth and guardian from tooth diseases is still alive in Istria, and it speaks of the importance of hagiotherapy and local ethnodentistry. The article also refers to St. Apollonia's revival among dentists of the east Istrian and Kvarnerian seaboard who have been meeting on 9 February every year since 1991 to celebrate a mass dedicated to St. Apollonia. No wonder then that since 1995 St. Apollonia has been the official patron saint of the Croatian Dental Society, and has been featuring the emblem of this association.

**Key words:** Croatia, Istria, ethnodentistry, history of medicine, medicine in art, St. Apollonia, religion

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## INTRODUCTION

There are surprisingly many saints with patronage against predicaments and diseases who have traditionally been worshipped by Christians over the centuries and whose significance has not diminished at all for the development of medical science. Most of the patron saints have their own profile of worshippers, according to the place, church, profession, age or other shared attributes. Among them, about 150 have additionally been “specialised” in about eighty popularly known diseases and symptoms, including 15 organs and related diseases [1,2].

This paper is dedicated to an early Christian martyr St. Apollonia, who has universally been accepted as the patron saint of teeth, tooth diseases and dentists. It considers the distribution and preservation of the cult in Istria, Croatia and its significance in local ethnodontistry.

The research methods used for this review have already been used in earlier papers of similar content [3-5] and include hagiographic data collected from general/encyclopaedic sources and from specialised bibliographies of patron saints, including St. Lucy of Syracuse [8-12]. Other data had been collected over years within a research project on national sacral and medical tradition, 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 objects, some of which have been included in this review.

### ST. APOLLONIA'S BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Like with many other early Christian martyrs, the hagiography of St. Apollonia largely relies on the legend and only in small part on few reliable facts. The earliest reliable record of the saint-to-be is that of the Christian philosopher, bishop and historian Eusebius of Caesarea (267-340). In his work *Historia Ecclesiae* (*Church History*) (VI,41,7), he refers to a letter from Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch. This letter describes savage persecutions of Christians during the rule of Emperor Philip the Arab from 244 to 249 AD when most Christians fled Alexandria, save for a few, including the local deaconess Apollonia who preached and converted many to Christianity[12,13]. According to one legend which draws from this story, the Romans first threatened to burn the girl alive, unless she bowed to heathen idols. As she refused, she was tormented, her face and jaw received heavy blows, and her teeth were pulled out with pincers. According to another legend, all her teeth were broken by fist blows and sharp stones,



Figure 1 The traditional illustration of St Apollonia the martyr with her typical symbols

*Slika 1. Tradicionalni prikaz sv. Apolonije s njezinim atributima mučeništva*



Figure 2 Vincent of Kastav: St. Apollonia (pincers and the tooth), St. Leonard (in chains) and St. Barbara (on a three-windowed tower) in the Church of St. Mary of Škriline near Beram.

*Slika 2. Vincent iz Kastva: Sv. Apolonija (klijesta i zub), sv. Leonard (s uzničkim lancima) i sv. Barbara (kula s tri prozora), u crkvi Sv. Marije na Škrilinah u Bermu.*

whereas yet another account refers to decapitation in punishment for having distributed all her family wealth to the poor. Later accounts refer to an infuriated brother who punished her sister for breaking a forced betrothal agreement [8]. The word of her resolution and courage in sticking to her faith in the face of torture swiftly spread throughout the Christian lands, first in the East and then in the West. How important was Apollonia's cult to these people can be seen from the number of places that were named after her in Illyria, Thrace, Chalkida, Troas, and other ancient provinces [14]. In the Mediaeval Europe, Apollonia's cult was first worshipped in Flanders and England, then in Spain, Portugal, Italy and other countries [11]. She was canonized by Pope John XXI (1215-1277) [12].

Saint Apollonia's statues and paintings usually depict her holding a tooth with pincers in one hand, which reminds of the toothache and of the dentists who later accepted the saint as their patron, and a palm branch in the other, denoting martyrdom and victory.

#### ST. APOLLONIA AMONG THE ISTRINIANS

Unlike the legends on early Christian saints such as St. Lucy, St. Blaise, and St. George, taking root among Croats as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the cult of St. Apollonia came to these parts from Germany and Bohemia a little later, quite likely in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Her oldest representations from that period are found in Istria from where the cult spread to Dalmatia (Dubrovnik, Korčula, Hvar, Trogir, Šibenik and Zadar) and the rest of Croatia. Most representations of the saint date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. [9,10].

Relying on trustworthy literature [15-17] and field work, 13 localities with 14 churches worshipping St. Apollonia have been found in Istria, of which one is dedicated to the saint. There are four frescoes, six paintings, and five statues of hers originating from between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Follows a brief review of localities preserving the cult arranged in alphabetical order for practical reasons:

**Beram** (*Parish of St. Martin, Deanery of Pazin*) – The Church of St. Mary-on-the-Stone-Slobs. Frescoes painted by Vincent of Kastav around 1474 include several cycles depicting the lives of the Mother of God and Jesus Christ, Adam and Eve, Wheel of Fortune, Dance of Death [17, 19, 20] and saints. There on the north-eastern wall, there stands St. Apollonia in the company of St. Leonard and St. Barbara. The three saints are easily recognised by their typical and unique attributes. Apollonia holds

pincers with a stylised tooth in her left hand. St. Leonard holds fetters in his left hand in which he was chained and therefore proclaimed patron of all prisoners, whereas St. Barbara is featured by a three-windowed tower in which she was held captive for her unfaltering Christian faith.

**Buzet** (*Parish of St. Mary's Ascension, Deanery of Buzet*) – On the main altar of St. George's Church built in 1611, beside a big painting of St. Mary of the Holly Rosary, there is a smaller painting of St. Apollonia's attributed to the school of Tiepolo (18<sup>th</sup> century) [16].

**Draguč** (*Parish of the Holy Cross, Deanery of Buzet*) – The Church of St. Roch of 1529 (according to a Glagolitic inscription) is situated at the old entrance to the town. In there, among a series of frescoes of 32 saints, Apollonia appears beside St. Peter [17,21]

**Gračišće** (*Parish of St. Vitus, Deanery of Pićan*) – In Katun, a nearby hamlet, there is a small church built in 1649 that was dedicated to St. Apollonia in 1656. There remains a wooden statue of unknown author and date of origin representing the saint with her attributes, the pincers and the palm branch. According to the parish priest, there was also a canvass which was removed due to wear and tear. Every 9 February, a holy mass is celebrated in the memory of the saint [15]. This is one of the four churches in Croatia which bear the name of St. Apollonia. The other three are in the village of Vrisnika on the island of Hvar, in Dubrovnik, and in Brinje in the county of Lika [10].

**Hrastovlje** (*Deanery of Dekani, The Diocese of Koper*). The Romanic Church of St. Trinity from 1490 treasures one of the richest Istrian late Gothic galleries created by Ivan of Kastav and his fellow artists. To the left from the window and the famous Dance of Death, on the south wall there are three saints with their standard attributes: Apollonia with the pincers and an enormous tooth, Agatha with the open chest wound where her breasts have been severed, and Lucy with her eyes on a dish. [21, 22].

**Kanfanar** (*Parish of St. Silvester, Deanery of Rovinj and Kanfanar*) – In Maružine there is the Church of The Blessed Virgin Mary of the Snow with an altarpiece (*pala*) of anonymous author showing St. Apollonia in the company of The Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Valentine [ 15].

**Krnica - Mutvoran** (*Parish of St. Mary Magdalene, Deanery of Vodnjan*) – In 1859 in the Parish Church of St. Roch, Trevisan painted St. Apollonia in her usual company of St. Agatha and St. Lucy and the standard set of attributes [15].

**Martinski - Sv. Martin** (*Parish of St. Martin, Deanery of Labin*) – The Church of St. Martin, rebuilt in 1907, keeps a statue of St. Apollonia (Tyrolean workshop) on the main altar [15].

**Motovun** (*Parish of St. Stephen, Deanery of Pazin*) – There are two churches to celebrate St. Apollonia; the Church of St. Cyprian keeps a wooden statue and the Church of St. John the Baptist and The Blessed Virgin Mary della Porta keeps a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting by Cornero. [15].

**Oprtalj** (*Parish of St. George, Deanery of Umag and Oprtalj*) – In the Church of St. Lucy from 1605, there is an altarpiece of later date by an anonymous author showing blind St. Lucy giving a blessing. To her right is St. Agatha (with her breasts on a dish) and on her right St. Apollonia (holding the pincers).

**Roč** (*Parish of St. Bartholomew, Deanery of Buzet*) – the Parish Church of St. Bartholomew, first mentioned in 1492, keeps a stone statue of St. Apollonia on one of the side altars with the altarpiece entitled Calvary.

**Selina**, a hamlet near Sveti Lovreč Pazenatički (*Parish of St. Martin, Deanery of Poreč*) – In the Church of St. Lucy of 1568 (according to a Glagolitic inscription), there is an altarpiece of unknown author and date representing The Blessed Virgin Mary with the Child and to her right Apollonia with all her attributes [14].

**Vranja** (*Parish of St. Peter and Paul, Deanery of Buzet*) – The parish church, whose records go back to the early 12th century, treasures two representations of St. Apollonia. She appears on the remaining fragments of a fresco attributed to the late Gothic Istrian master Vincent of Kastav (about 1470), holding an enormous tooth with the pincers [21] and as a plaster statuette on the marble altar of 1835 [15].

**Zamask** (*Parish of St. Michael the Archangel, Deanery of Pazin*) – In a painting of an unknown author and date, St. Apollonia appears beside the parish patron St. Michael. Records refer to the Church of St. Michael as far back as 1177., but the present church was built in 1900. [15].

## DISCUSSION

To shed some light on the cult of St. Apollonia as the patron saint of teeth and tooth diseases, we shall start with an insight into the dentistry of the Middle Ages, when the cult first appeared and spread over Europe. Official medicine was not yet science-based and was the prisoner of the



Figure 3 A marble statue of St. Apollonia in the Parish Church of St. Bartholomew in Roč.

*Slika 3. Mramorni kip sv. Apolonije u župnoj crkvi Sv. Bartola u Roču*

Arab-Galenic dogma. Popular medicine, in want of the basic healthcare skills, was even more confused. Some of the written records of the time, especially those of the southern Istria and Kvarner area, were held in high esteem; these were so called *ljekaruše* – *healing books* (pharmacopoeias of sort), that is, collections of medical records and recipes written in Croatian and most often in Glagolitic alphabet [24-26].

There is a number of recipes for tooth diseases which, varying ever so slightly, were known to the popular tradition all over Istria and neighbouring Croatian areas. The oldest known Croatian *healing book* related to dentistry dates back to the 15th century and its origins are in Novi Vinodolski (in the Kvarner area) [24, 27]. It contains two brief sections, one of which describes a rite and a prayer, whereas the other brings the recipe against toothache. The toothache rite uses a brand new horseshoe nail to write down the prayer which, surprisingly, is dedicated to St. Macarius [29]. The recipe is against inflammation of the tooth and pre-

scribes a warm compress with thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) as the universal herb traditionally attributed the power to cast away vipers, scorpions and other vermin including “worms” which cause the decay of the teeth.

Of particular interest to us is a genuine Istrian manuscript in Glagolitic letters, known as “Žgombić’s Miscellany” [30] whose likely origins are from Mošćenica on the eastern Istrian coast, dating back to the end 16th century. The manuscript closes with an annex of eleven brief recipes, four of which are against toothache (“To Aid the Teeth”). The first recipe recommends tooth ointments made of rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* L.) boiled in wine and of the spruce tree resin (*Picea abies* L.). The second recipe refers to sage (*Salvia officinalis* L.) boiled in white wine and used as a mouthwash to soothe inflammation of the gums. Even though both recipes belong to down-to-earth herbal medicine, both conclude by invoking God’s Will, reflecting the typical Mediaeval belief that medicine is the work of God. The third recipe has none of the empiricism of the first two recipes, and recommends that the patient holds a piece of iron while saying three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys in the honour of God, St. Mary and St. Apollonia (here referred to as Pollonia, according to the local dialect). According to S. Fatović-Ferenčić and M. A. Dürriegl, this is the oldest Glagolitic record in Croatian to directly associate St. Apollonia with tooth diseases [28].

The fourth recipe recommends inhaling the smoke of rye (*Secale cereale*) which has been cast in live coal. This may have some pharmacological grounds (the effect of inhalation), but may also imply magic.

In the two centuries that followed, ethnodontistry did not make much progress. A witness to this is the 18th century Glagolitic manuscript of an Istrian friar Dominik Zec known as “An Adjunct to the Service” [25, 31]. It brings a uniquely high-pitched and archaic prayer against toothache which is directed to God himself.

Examples of the alike proceedings abound not only in Istria and other Croatian regions, but also in Italy, where ethnodontistry was none the better. We believe that, however fragmentary, our examples vividly illustrate the variety of empirical, magical, and heathen approaches mixed together, which will gradually give in to official medicine. Even though this area of research interest has sufficiently been covered, there remain many historical records in ethnodontistry which deserve further analysis and presentation [29].

## CONCLUSION

We hope that the examples of St. Apollonia's cult given in this review speak convincingly of the historical importance of hagiotherapy and local ethnodontistry in Istria.

This importance has been confirmed by the contemporary renewal of the cult of St. Apollonia as the patron saint of dentistry by dentists in Croatia and the world alike. The key event in this renewal in Croatia was a note published in *Stomatološki leksikon (Lexicon of Dental Medicine)* in Zagreb in 1990 [32]. Followed a Communion and a mass organised by a group of dentists of the Rijeka branch of the Croatian Dental Society and by the Healthcare Centre of Opatija, which included a lecture and a concert of spiritual music in the Church of St. Anne in Volosko [33]. The same programme continued for the next two years in the Cathedral of St. Vitus in Rijeka, and since 1994 it has returned to Volosko. With time the Croatian Dental Society got involved in organising the celebration of St. Apollonia, and in 1995 it adopted the stylized image of St. Apollonia with ornamented margin as the emblem and the saint as the official patron of the society.

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#### SAŽETAK

**Cilj:** Primjenom hagiotopografskih i hagiokronoloških metoda istražiti raširenost i očuvanost štovanja kulta sv. Apolonije, zaštitnice zuba i zubnih bolesti u Istri, te procijeniti njegovu današnju aktualnost.

**Izvori:** Obrada literature o hagiografijama svetaca i sakralnoj ikonografiji, uz istraživanje na terenu obilaskom sakralnih objekata i etnografskih muzeja te razgovorima s tamošnjim svećenicima i ljudima koji poznaju pučku tradiciju.

**Rezultati:** Iz veoma bogate sakralne baštine Istre izdvojeno je 13 lokaliteta na kojima se u 14 crkava štuje sv. Apolonija. Jedna je crkva posvećena svetici, a sačuvane su ukupno 4 freske, 6 slika i 5 kipova s njezinim likom, nastali u rasponu od 15. do 19. stoljeća.

**Zaključak:** Prikazani primjeri očuvanosti štovanja kulta sv. Apolonije kao zaštitnice zuba i zubnih bolesti, uz prikaz nekoliko primjera tradicionalnog liječenja zubnih bolesti u Istri, upućuje na značenje hagioterapije i tradicionalnih postupaka liječenja u lokalnoj etnostomatologiji. Na kraju se kao zanimljivu novost navodi svojevrsna revitalizacija štovanja kulta sv. Apolonije među stomatolozima na istočnoj obali Istre i kvarnerskom području, koji se od 1991. redovito sastaju na blagdan svete 9. veljače i prigodnim misnim slavljem odaju počast svojoj zaštitnici. Uz to od 1995. sv. Apolonija je i službeno proglašena zaštitnicom Hrvatske stomatološke komore pa je njezin lik postao službeni simbol odnosno zaštitni znak te strukovne organizacije.

**Ključne riječi:** etnostomatologija, Hrvatska, Istra, medicina u umjetnosti, povijest medicine, religija, sv. Apolonija