

# Depiction of Facial Nerve Paresis in the Gallery of Portraits Carved in Stone by George Matthew the Dalmatian on the Šibenik Cathedral Dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century

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## ABSTRACT

*The introductory segment of this paper briefly describes George Matthew the Dalmatian, the architect who, between 1441 and 1473, oversaw the construction of the Cathedral of St. James in Šibenik, a city on the Croatian side of the Adriatic coast. Of the most impressive details included in this monumental construction and sculptural flamboyant gothic production infused with distinctive Dalmatian spirit is a frieze of 71 stone and three lion portraits encircling the outer apse wall. From the intriguing amalgamation of portraits of anonymous people this master came across in his surrounding, the fiftieth head in the row has been selected for this occasion. On the face of a younger man the authors have recognized and described pathognomonic right-sided facial nerve paresis. The question posed here is whether this is coincidental or it represents the master's courage, given that instead of famous people in the cathedral he situated not only ordinary people but also those »labelled« and traditionally marginalized, thus, in the most beautiful manner, foreshadowing the forthcoming spirit of Humanism and Renaissance in Croatian and European art.*

**Key words:** facial nerve paresis, medicine and art, 15<sup>th</sup> century, George Matthew the Dalmatian, Šibenik, Croatia

## George Matthew the Dalmatian and the Šibenik Cathedral

The most arresting figure of the several craftsmen who worked on the cathedral of St. James in Šibenik, a town on the Croatian side of the Adriatic, from 9<sup>th</sup> of April 1431 when the cornerstone was laid until its consecration in 1555, is definitely George Matthew the Dalmatian (*in Croatian – Juraj Matej Dalmatinac iz Zadra, Lat. Georgius Mathei Dalmaticus, Ital. Giorgio di (del fu) Matteo da Zara*) (Zadar, at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (1410?) – Šibenik, 1475). In the period between 1441 and 1473 (1475?) when he actively worked in Šibenik and virtually till the end of his life, he first entirely changed the earlier construction plan, and then designed and mostly finished the construction of this monumental sanctuary in flamboyant gothic style, thereby leaving the trademark of his own powerful Dalmatian temperament. Specifically, he felt the gothic had passed its peak, and could portend the spirit of Renaissance. He was brave

enough to bring new elements into his architecture, hence inadvertently becoming the precursor of a new art period, in east coast (Split, Dubrovnik, Pag), and west Adriatic coast (Ancona, Venice, Rimini, Urbino, Citta Nuova), where some fifty apprentices continue his work in his school of stonemasonry.

Once completed, the cathedral took the form of a Latin cross, 38 meters long and 14 meters wide, with 19-metre high central nave and 31-metre high dome. The façade is adorned with a classic gothic portal depicting the figure of Jesus Christ and the 12 apostles. The north and south wall have luxurious ornate windows prefiguring the Renaissance style. What follows is a miraculous amalgamation of biblical motives accompanied by floral and geometric ornaments. The original roof with the dome tells its own special tale; whether observed from



Fig. 1. Twelve characteristic phenotypes and moods that George Matthew the Dalmatian depicted in the succession of 71 stone portraits on the Šibenik cathedral from 1441 to 1473.

the outside or the inside it leaves an unprecedented impression. The cathedral's interior is also practically unsurpassed at the time<sup>1-4</sup>. The same applies to certain parts of the cathedral, and especially intriguing among those is the frieze of 71 stone and three lion portraits encircling the lower end of the outer apse wall<sup>5-7</sup>.

### Stone Portraits on the Cathedral

In most of earlier and later open-air galleries we predominantly come across famous figures, both real and mythical. However, aside from several authors who among these portraits recognized some of contemporary European monarchs, commanders-in-chief and ecclesiastical dignitaries<sup>5,6</sup>, according to most researchers these are completely anonymous people and they can find no reasons or criteria according to which the author made his choice<sup>2,3,7</sup>.

However, regardless of such potential dilemmas, an undisputed fact remains: at just a glance the spectator is bewildered by the diversity of the characters that gaze at us eager to communicate or to give us some important or casual message that only they themselves can understand. The physiognomy is marvellous – from antique

hero stereotypes and ancient savants to contemporary noblemen, city dwellers, and commoners from this world<sup>2</sup> etc. Not to mention the lavish details of the physiognomy – the shapes and expression of faces, corpulence, emaciation, forehead wrinkles, winks of an eye etc., from thick hair and creatively trimmed beard to playful locks of hair and baldness. The assortment of head coverings is particularly interesting – scarves, caps, turbans and discreet decorations. Various characters and moods are represented in surprising numbers. Their looks and facial expressions show cheerful, sad, unhappy, naive, wicked, passionate and shy men and women of all ages, occupations and even races, who have clearly been swarming into the expanding cities, as Šibenik apparently was at the turn of the Middle Ages and the Modern Era. As a subtle bystander and a poet of stone, master George had noticed this fact and immortalized it in his own original manner<sup>7</sup>.

### Clinic Symptomatology on One of the Heads

While each of the stone portraits permanently forge some new associations and inspire conjecture from vari-

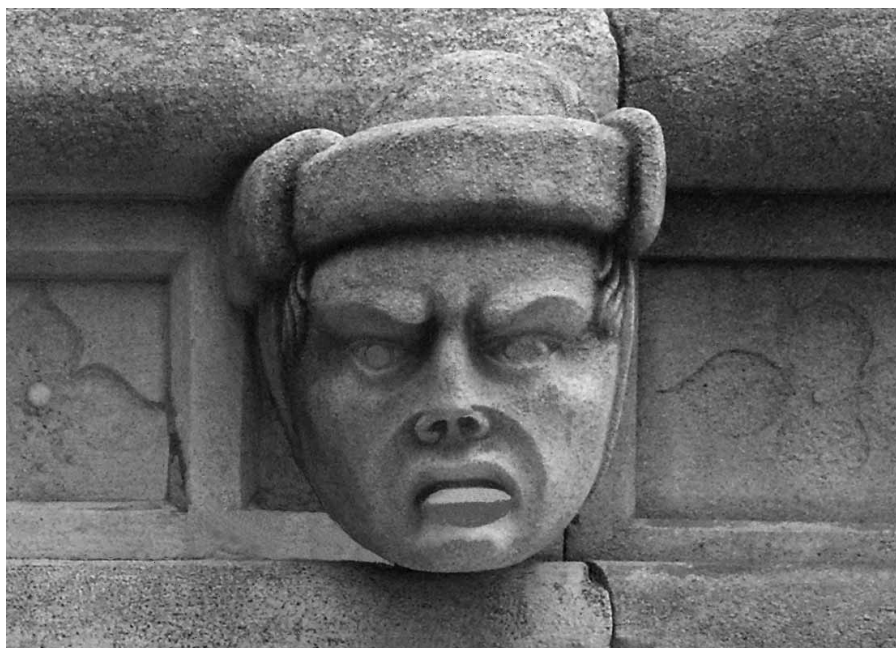


Fig. 2. The head of a younger man with evident symptoms of right-sided facial nerve paresis.

ous vantage points, for this particular occasion the explicitness of pathognomonic syndrome of the fiftieth head in a row, evident to every remotely experienced medical practitioner, intrigued the authors of this presentation.

To be more specific, the stone portrait of a younger man with a cap on his head is examined. Since a larger part of the forehead is revealed, it can be discerned that the face is asymmetric, having pronounced supraorbital arches and zygomatic bones. The forehead is smooth, with no wrinkles and the eyebrows are symmetric. In the central and lower part of the face one can detect pronounced right-sided asymmetry. Aside from exophthalmos indicated on both sides, the eyelid slit on the right is widened because of the atonic ectropy of the *m. orbicularis oculi* eyelid ptosis. The right nasolabial fold is shallower and shorter; the lips retract toward the healthy side where *philtrum* (vertical groove under the nose) is pointing at, as well making the right corner of the mouth shorter and narrower. The diagnosis is clear – the person serving as the model suffered from evident right-sided facial nerve paresis.

Our curiosity goes even further and it is rightfully directed at the possible identification of the person portrayed. This is even more so because similar attempts have been tracked in several papers as early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1,4,8,9</sup>, but without a more specific result. The figure is most often described as »sullen«, and there are no further attempts at interpretation. Some even believe that the current stone portrait is not an original piece by George the Dalmatian, but a replica made during conservation works in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>.

Numerous intriguing questions that cannot be answered singularly may arise if we further discuss the figure with facial nerve paresis. Thus, for example, assuming this is really an anonymous person, it would be fitting to ask if the master chose it by accident, unaware of the asymmetry and the deformity of the face, or was primarily drawn by the sad look and probable right-sided lameness, not uncommon for the right-sided paresis? Didn't the person, like all traditionally »labelled« people incite incredulity of the public, and the master wished to acknowledge him in his own way, liberated from the constraints of traditional life, by putting his face up on the cathedral's apse? This question is more appropriate still, if we know that there is a well-known custom originating in the pagan times when it was not uncommon to put up zoomorphic or anthropomorphic heads with deformed faces to serve as amulets at the entrance of the settlements or in certain places of worship.

## Conclusion

Rather than continuing this discussion further, the conclusion to be pondered upon is that this portrait is, as much as the rest of them, a fine example of how Šibenik people, invigorated with humanistic acknowledgment of this man, understood and accepted George's portraits as people they've seen in their surroundings – on the streets, in the stores, in the port, neighbouring islands or the rocky countryside. Prefiguring the liberal spirit of the Modern Age in the most favourable manner, master George thus became one of rare Humanism and Renaissance precursors, not only in the Croatian, but in the European art history as well.

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## PRIKAZ PAREZA LIČNOG ŽIVCA U GALERIJI KAMENIH PORTRETA JURJA DALMATINCA U ŠIBENSKOJ KATEDRALI IZ XV. STOLJEĆA

### SAŽETAK

U uvodnome dijelu članka ukratko je predstavljen majstor Juraj Matej Dalmatinac koji je u razdoblju 1441. do 1473. (1475?) vodio gradnju Katedrale sv. Jakova u Šibeniku, gradu na hrvatskoj obali Jadrana. U monumentalnom graditeljskom i kiparskom opusu u stilu cvjetne gotike oplemenjene osebnim dalmatinskim duhom jedan od najimpresivnijih detalja je vijenac od 71 kamenog i tri lavlja portreta koji opasuje vanjski zid apside. Iz intrigantnog spleta anonimnih portreta ljudi koje je majstor susretao u svojoj sredini za ovu priliku izdvojena je 50. glava u nizu. Na licu mlađeg muškarca autori prepoznaju i opisuju patognomonične znakove desnostrane pareze ličnoga živa. U nastavku se postavlja pitanje o slučajnosti izbora, ili hrabrosti majstora koji je umjesto poznatih likova u katedralu smjestio ne samo obične ljude već i one »označene« i tradicionalno marginalizirane osobe, nagovještavajući tako na najljepši način predstojeći duh humanizma i renesanse u hrvatskoj i europskoj umjetnosti.