Sailing with Santa
The patronage of St. Nicholas through post-Byzantine icons

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In the course of our studies on a private collection of post-Byzantine icons in Barcelona, Spain, we knew about this meeting: Sailing with the Gods: religion and maritime mobility in the ancient world. We were precisely preparing a communication about "journeys" in post-Byzantine iconography when the image of St. Nicholas tempering the storm during a pilgrimage trip came vividly to our mind while thinking about navigation hazards and marine environment. So, this is the topic we would like to develop.

It deals with the miracle - here the link between a miracle / supernatural phenomenon and marine environment appears - worked by St. Nicholas in the context of a legend that explains how pilgrims, subjected to a hard test by the devil, receive the help of the patron saint and they can, happily, realize their dreams by defeating the forces of evil.

As stated, we would like to approach this legendary account from its iconographic evocation in an unpublished eighteenth-century Corfiot icon in the private collection mentioned above. It is no accidental that we refer to Corfu. Its insular physical nature together with its insular spiritual nature unquestionably link it to navigation in the very same central place of the Mediterranean. By the way, an interesting analogy with the role played by Malta.

We will also proceed comparing it with other post-Byzantine iconographic sources of the Balkans that illustrate this same subject and cover painted icons over the last five centuries.

We aim to discuss the various aspects that make up the core of this wonderful legend:
- the meaning of pilgrimage (by the way, of relics).
- the role of the woman in such a story.
- the perception of marine environment, and by extension of nature (!), in the recalled historical moment.
  And later on.
- faith strengthening experiences associated with the previous point.

None of the above makes sense if we do not consider it in the context of the real life of St. Nicholas, one of the most venerated saints by Christians around the world. He was an early Christian bishop of the ancient city of Myra in Asia Minor (modern-day Demre, Turkey) during the time of the Roman Empire. Because of the many miracles attributed to his intercession, he is also known as Nicholas the Wonderworker. Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves,
prostitutes, children, brewers, pawnbrokers, and students in various cities and countries around Europe. His legendary habit of secret gift-giving gave rise to the traditional model of Santa Claus.

Regarding the appeal to the gods on seafaring vessels we would like to produce an approach about the interesting topic of "nominations". That is, on the fact – in this case - based on the Christian tradition of providing individual identity and protection to people and things by imposing a certain name on them. In the case at hand, nomination of people to end up naming ships. Putting Saint Nicholas Wonderworker on target. That one who, over the years, will end up sailing through the air flow of the skies in his sleigh pulled by reindeer to spread joy and enthusiasm throughout the world.