

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

The Relic Theft of Saint Nicholas, from Myra to Bari: Religious Patronage as Civic Promotion

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

by

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March 2026

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mentor, Professor Blumenthal, for extensively guiding me throughout my thesis. I would not have been able to do this project without her constant support and encouragement. I would also like to thank my fellow classmates, Paola Mota and Evan Ho, for their essential edits and advice on my work.

I also want to extend my gratitude to my mother, father, and grandmother for providing me with invaluable encouragement and for instilling in me an interest in history and my Barese heritage, which inspired this thesis.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
Ch. 1: Saint Nicholas' Life Amidst a Shifting Mediterranean.....	11
Ch. 2: The Growth of Italian Cities: Trade Moves East.....	21
Ch. 3: Preexisting Devotion: St. Nicholas' Cult in the West.....	29
Ch. 4: Relic Theft Narratives.....	37
Ch. 5: The Basilica di San Nicola a Bari.....	62
Ch. 6: Nicholas' Incorporation into the Western Collection of Saints.....	69
Conclusion.....	73
References.....	76

FIGURES

Figure 0.1. “The bones of Saint Nicholas.”	5
Figure 1.1. Byzantine Seal of <i>Leo imperial protospatharios and logothetes of the stratotikon</i>	18
Figure 4.1. The Bari Episcopal Throne	58
Figure 5.1 Byzantine Style Capital	63

Introduction

In May of 1087, a group of merchants from the port city of Bari, Italy, landed on the shores of the former Byzantine city—Myra—to steal the bones of Saint Nicholas. The Baresi merchants were returning from Antioch and arrived in Myra, which had recently been conquered by the Seljuk Turks. Forty-seven sailors successfully removed the remains, or relics, from its long-standing basilica protected by just four Greek Orthodox Christian guardian monks. To the lamentations of the Myrans, the Baresi triumphantly left the city with the silk-wrapped relics of the fourth-century saint. Just days later, they arrived in Bari and were celebrated by the townspeople for transporting the honorable relics.¹ This relocation of relics, or theft—particularly in Bari—offers a fascinating insight into the medieval practice known as *furta sacra*, or holy theft.

To this day, the relics of the 1087 expedition rest in the Basilica di San Nicola in Bari. A Romanesque structure, it stands out between the winding streets of the historic city center and overlooks the Adriatic coast. The basilica was built in 1087 to house Saint Nicholas' bones, which are found in a shrine behind the altar. This destination attracts thousands of pilgrims annually as Saint Nicholas is significant to both Catholic and Orthodox Christian populations. Icons and gold imagery in the basilica's crypt signal the saint's eastern origins, and the vaulted ceilings situate the visitor in the context of medieval Latin and Western Christendom. The large marble altar houses the worshipped relics, and each year, the precious oil that miraculously seeps out of the bones is collected. This oil, or manna, has historic significance going back to Saint Nicholas' burial. Since the time of the saint's death in the fourth-century, a sweet-smelling oil believed to have healing powers has been reported to exude from his bones.

¹ Charles W. Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 176-188.



Figure 0.1: The Bones of Saint Nicholas. Crypt in the Basilica of Saint Nicholas, Bari, Accademia Cittadella Nicolaiana. <https://accademiacittadellanicolaiana.it/es/2019/08/07/los-huesos-de-san-nicolas/>.

The veneration of Saint Nicholas by Catholic and Orthodox populations and the expansion of this cult around the world are rooted in the expansive, rich, and undeniably complicated history of the Mediterranean from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. During this period—from the fourth century to the twelfth century—St. Nicholas’ cult was embraced by populations in Byzantine lands and eventually adopted in Latin lands, ending in the translation—or relic relocation—episode of 1087. The evolution of the saint from a localized figure to a highly sought-after patron celebrated in Christian Orthodoxy and Catholicism provides a snapshot into the complicated world of the medieval Mediterranean.

This complex tale begs several questions: Why did the Baresi merchants want to steal relics or bones? Why would they specifically want Saint Nicholas’ relics? How was this theft justified, considering the Catholic Church supported and even celebrated it?

Drawing on the early Christian heritage and maritime associations of Saint Nicholas, Bari adopted the patronage of the saint in the late eleventh century. Using the justification of divine will, the Baresi stole the relics of Saint Nicholas. Bari embraced Nicholas as a symbol of

commercial success and triumphant Latin Christendom in the context of Latin Christianity and Greek Orthodoxy's shaky relationship, as well as rising tensions with Muslim Seljuk Turks. The city established itself as a cosmopolitan Mediterranean center and the Basilica of San Nicola di Bari commemorates this initiative as part of the city's cultural memory.

Historiography

In the broader framework of the history of Saint Nicholas' relic theft, it is vital to provide context on *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, Patrick Geary's foundational work on the practice of relic theft. The name of this book, *furta sacra*, is a key term that will be referenced throughout this study. The value of *translationes*, or medieval textual accounts of the relocation of holy relics from one shrine to another are highlighted by Geary as they provide written, elaborate narratives of relic thefts. *Translationes* justify thefts and present them as divinely inspired missions—or thefts approved by God.² It is this very practice that occurred on the Myran shores in 1087, and I will evaluate this particular and momentous *furta sacra* as a pivotal moment for the city of Bari and its citizenry in establishing their identity and strengthening their relationship with the papacy.

There have been a number of studies exploring how the cult of St. Nicholas took root in Bari. Paul Oldfield's 2014 book, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage in Medieval Southern Italy 1000-1200*, highlights the particular cultural conditions in which cities like Bari in Southern Italy saw the need to adopt a patron,³ emphasizing how Southern Italy was a multiethnic society consisting of Greek, Latin, and Muslim communities.⁴ For Oldfield, the story of Saint Nicholas' translation to

² Patrick Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*. Revised ed. (Princeton University Press, 1990), ix.

³ Paul Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage in Medieval Southern Italy, 1000-1200* (Cambridge University Press 2015), 1.

⁴ Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage*, 2.

Bari needs to be considered in the context of the early years of Norman rule. I will build upon the ideas put forward by this study, highlighting reasons as to why St. Nicholas' cult in particular—based on his history and associated symbols—was embraced by the city of Bari.

Charles W. Jones' *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend*, in turn, provides a comprehensive study of Saint Nicholas' life and associated legends, dating back to Late Antiquity. He draws on the earliest evidence of the life of the saint and signs of veneration in various populations. I particularly found Jones' evaluation of Saint Nicholas adaptation to various cultures inspiring, and my research was influenced by this framework.

This recent publication, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy: Mediterranean Art and Architecture in the Diocese of Bari and Canosa*, by Clare Vernon, places art history into conversation with the cult of Saint Nicholas. This is the first major work done on the Basilica di San Nicola a Bari in relation to its artistic and cultural blendings, referencing the city's diversity amidst shifts in Southern Italian ruling powers. Material evidence from this book will be key to my thesis, as they present Byzantine and Norman aspects of the Basilica di San Nicola a Bari which I will evaluate in a reflection of the city's multicultural nature.

Sources and Methods

In conversation with secondary sources will be medieval primary sources, like *chronicles* or *Annales*, *translations*, and physical evidence from the Basilica di San Nicola a Bari.

Chronicles and *Annales* provide information about day-to-day events in a specific medieval city. By consulting the *Annales* from Bari covering the tenth through twelfth centuries, I will evaluate the social conditions from an unbiased perspective. They provide information surrounding the multicultural nature of the city, displaying tensions between different communities. I will use

these sources to expand on the cultural heritage of Bari and its place in the Mediterranean trade network. *Traslaciones*, as previously mentioned, record relic relocation from one shrine to another. Three different traslaciones: one from Bari, from a Byzantine monk about the Bari translation, and from a Venetian monk about the city's own translation of Saint Nicholas' remaining relics after the 1087 Baresi theft, are especially relevant to this study as they provide justifications for the contradictory Christian-backed action of theft. By assessing these narratives, it is clear how different populations justified thefts, and why they adopted their respective reasons. As for material sources, I will conduct a close analysis of physical evidence from the Basilica di San Nicola a Bari as part of the "material turn" historical trend and draw upon the work of Clare Vernon, as she focused on several architectural aspects of the basilica. I aim to continue the conversation about Bari as a culturally diverse, cosmopolitan Mediterranean city, at the border of both East and West, in a time which saw doctrinal conflict between the Catholic and Orthodox churches and tensions with Islamic powers encroaching on Byzantine territory.

Topics Addressed

I will begin with an exploration of the origins of the saint's veneration in the Eastern Roman Empire by recounting the earliest legends concerning his life and involvement in early Christian affairs, as the significant foundational Christian council, the Council of Nicaea, reportedly had Nicholas in attendance. His presence here solidified his reputation as a saint representative of an early Christian legacy. His early life stories and connections to early Christian rulers were celebrated not only in texts but likewise in material evidence, illuminating how his cult attracted followers from amongst various sectors of Late Antique Byzantine society.

In the second section of the thesis, our focus shifts from the Eastern to the Central Mediterranean, at a time when we see the city of Bari engaged in extensive Eastern Mediterranean trade. This inevitably contributed to competition between Italian cities and a search for elevated commercial and civic identities, as well as the traveling cult of St. Nicholas. Together with Italian trade expanding east, and increased cult appearances in Southern Italy, I will connect the allure of St. Nicholas to these Italian communities and expand upon the conditions present in Southern Italy that allowed for the saint's adoption in the third section.

The fourth section of the thesis turns to the analysis of narratives describing the theft of the relics of St. Nicholas by two successive bands of raiders. Hailing first from Bari and then from its rival Venice, these narratives demonstrate the westward expansion of the Nicolaian cult. Translation narratives provide the most information on relic thefts—although written for propagandistic purposes—and by analyzing the motives behind the writers and their texts, justifications of theft are made clear. In a time characterized by on-and-off relationships between Latin Christians and Greek Orthodox, as well as rising tensions with Muslims and the outbreak of the Crusades, the authors of the respective translations attempt to secure their right above all to the relics of Saint Nicholas. While Bari's focus was on its city and promotion of citizenry—backed by the papacy—Venice's focus was on its crusading might.

The fifth section of the thesis then turns to consider the construction of the Basilica di San Nicola itself. Addressing the physicality of St. Nicholas' cult, this section characterized Bari as a cosmopolitan center, including Norman, Byzantine, and local representations in the architecture of the basilica. It is at this point that the complex eleventh century takes physical form in the basilica itself. Building on recent literature on the art history of the Basilica di San Nicola in Bari and its representation of a shift in rule from Byzantine to Norman rule after the

1071 Norman Conquest, I will evaluate the basilica as a culmination of the various cults of St. Nicholas. Architectural and archaeological elements demonstrate this, and the nature of the basilica itself, featuring promotion by Pope Urban II, displays the significance of this construction to Western and Eastern Christian religious relations.

The final question I will be addressing is how the cult of Saint Nicholas was presented in the Western collection of saints in the years following the translation and construction of the basilica. I will evaluate a thirteenth century telling of Saint Nicholas' miracles popularized in the Middle Ages.

In this study of the cult of Saint Nicholas and the Basilica di San Nicola in Bari, the saint's multidimensional character will be examined, as varying adoptions of the saint by Mediterranean populations revealed their concerns and objectives in this culturally intertwined world. A deep dive into the life and subsequent adoptions of Saint Nicholas provides a fascinating insight into Bari's involvement in trade, religious conflict, and the reinvention of civic identity in a time of political, cultural, and religious transition for the city.

Chapter One

Saint Nicholas' Life Amidst a Shifting Mediterranean

The Life of Nicholas of Myra

Saint Nicholas of Myra was one of the most widely revered saints throughout the Middle Ages, with his cult spreading westward to the European continent from the Byzantine Empire by the 900s.⁵ His life was marked by various miracles, most notably acting on behalf of the poor and the innocent and even advising the Byzantine emperor. He was born in the Eastern Roman province of Lycia in modern-day Turkey in 270 CE and instantly began performing miracles. In fact, two remarkable events occurred immediately following his birth. It was said that he stood up on his feet for two hours during his first bath, and that he fasted from his mother's milk in respect for canonical fast days.⁶ The sixth-century *Praxis de Stratelatis* recorded his earliest acts and became the foundation for the iconography of the saint. His Constantinople cult had been established by the eighth century, as he is mentioned visiting a deacon in his dream in a section of the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787. In the following decades, the *Chronicle of Theophanes* from the ninth-century recorded an Arab attack in Myra in 807 and 808, in which Nicholas summoned a strong storm that wrecked the Arab vessels. This is the first known record of the saint's deeds. His legend was believed to be established throughout the ninth century in the Byzantine Empire.⁷

⁵ Marie Dawn Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas of Myra in Norman Bari, c. 1071–c. 1111," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 67, no. 3 (2016): 494, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022046915003371>.

⁶ Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Bottega D'Erasmus, 1983), page 67.

⁷ Љубомир Милановић, "Illegal Traffic: The Case of the Translatio of St. Nicholas in Bari," *NOMOΦΥΛΑΞ Зборник радова у част Срђана Шаркића / NOMOPHYLAX Collection of papers in honor of Srđan Šarkić* (2020): 398-99, https://hdl.handle.net/21.15107/rcub_dais_10057.

During adulthood, he became the bishop of the city of Myra,⁸ a port significant to Mediterranean trade and the most prominent in the Roman province of Lycia. One of his most well-known miracles that took place during his lifetime was that of The Three Maidens, which began with a poor man in Myra who did not have enough wealth to provide his three daughters with dowries. Out of desperation, he forced them into prostitution. Nicholas heard the devastating story and secretly gifted three bags of gold to save the daughters from lives of prostitution. His defense of the poor and innocent would become one of his most notable qualities.⁹ Furthermore, his participation in the Council of Nicaea of 325 and defense of the Nicene Creed cemented him as an important representative of early Christianity and key defender of Christian Orthodoxy. It was said by Symeon the Metaphrast, a tenth-century writer, in the episode of *Nicea 15* found in his narrative called the *Life of Nicholas* that as the bishop of Myra, Nicholas “was training his people to accept the righteous dogma” of Emperor Constantine. He emphasized the belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were one united entity, which is known as Trinitarianism. This significance would later become relevant in the context of church reform occurring in the eleventh century.¹⁰

After the reported death of Saint Nicholas on December 6th of 343 CE—and burial in the Myra church which would adopt his patronage—his cult flourished across the Eastern Roman Empire.¹¹ The cult eventually spread westward, across the Mediterranean basin, and ultimately, such popular veneration and widespread knowledge of him resulted in the translation of his relics in 1087 from Myra, Turkey, to Bari, Italy. The populations that had venerated him included those throughout the Italian peninsula and then the territories conquered by the Normans, in addition to

⁸ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 79.

⁹ “Medieval Sourcebook: The Golden Legend, St. Nicholas,” Internet History Sourcebooks, accessed February 10, <https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/basis/goldenlegend/GL-vol2-nicholas.asp>.

¹⁰ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 63.

¹¹ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 12.

the Byzantines. I will evaluate the origins and material evidence of these various cults, all of which culminated in the late eleventh-century transfer of his relics.

Imperial officials in the Byzantine Empire embraced the saint's cult. His divine influence on Emperor Constantine, interpreted in a dream in which he encouraged the emperor to free three innocent generals, established him as an imperially connected religious figure. In this episode, Bishop Nicholas spoke with Constantine's generals at Andriake—the port of Myra—who were on their way to put down a revolt in Phrygia, a region located in western central Anatolia. Nicholas received news that the three generals were going to be executed for the alleged crime of instigating the revolt in Myra, and he immediately went there to stop the execution as it was about to occur.¹² After these men were saved by Bishop Nicholas, they departed for Phrygia, put down the revolt, and returned to Constantinople. Soon after, the Roman prefect, Ablabius, was bribed by men to tell Constantine that the three generals were traitors and tried to start the revolt in Phrygia. Constantine imprisoned them and ordered them to be executed. The three generals prayed to Saint Nicholas, remembering how he had previously saved the other set of three innocent men.¹³ Nicholas heard these prayers and appeared to the emperor, ordering him to release the men and threatening him with great misfortune. Constantine asked who he was, and he responded as “the bishop of Myra and vanished.”¹⁴ On the same evening, he appeared to Ablabius, relaying the same message and response.¹⁵ Constantine and Ablabius discussed their dreams the following morning and called upon the three generals, inquiring about Saint Nicholas. They told the emperor and Ablabius about Saint Nicholas' miracles, and Constantine released them and gave them gifts to bring to Nicholas in Myra.¹⁶ They made the trip, paid their

¹² Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 105.

¹³ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 110.

¹⁴ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 117.

¹⁵ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 121.

¹⁶ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 123.

respects to the saint, and he reassured them.¹⁷ The power of Saint Nicholas, being able to appear to both the emperor and Roman high official Ablabius in dreams and answering the three generals' prayers, truly impressed Constantine, prompting him to personally venerate the saint.

Theological and Historical Context of Nicholas' Life

The association of Saint Nicholas with the legendary Council of Nicaea cemented him as a valuable figure to both Western (Latin) and Eastern (Greek) Christians. The concept of each member of the Holy Trinity being equal to the others became a core tenet of Christianity. According to tradition, Saint Nicholas was one of the main defenders of this idea of Trinitarianism. The time in which the saint lived, the late third century and early fourth century, saw conflict over various church definitions. One of the most crucial arguments involved the priest of the church in Alexandria, named Arius. Conflicting ideas surrounding the relationship of the Son to the Father made up this conflict. Arius' belief was that Christ was created by God, making them different in "essence."¹⁸ Arius was depicted as a cunning character with snake-like qualities and even compared to Judas, the apostle who betrayed Jesus. In fact, his stance on the separate entities of the Son and the Father led to the creation of the Council of Nicaea.¹⁹ A supporter of Arius who preached in central Asia Minor was Eusebius of Caesarea.²⁰ Saint Nicholas would have likely been aware of this theological threat to unity. As a bishop practicing church duties in the same century and in a relatively close region, he would have likely been in the midst of this conflict plaguing the early church. This historical association of Saint Nicholas

¹⁷ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 128.

¹⁸ Richard Young Kim, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Richard Young Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 4.

¹⁹ Kim, "Introduction," 6.

²⁰ Raymond Van Dam, "Imperial Fathers and Their Sons: Licinius, Constantine, and the Council of Nicaea," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Richard Young Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 24.

and the creation of church doctrine in the fourth century would become a lasting image. In the centuries to come, his role at the Council would be embraced by church reformers.

The creation of the Nicene Creed was pivotal to the development of a united Christian religion in the religion's early days. It became a solid and unwavering testament of faith in the Christian East and was strictly prohibited from being questioned.²¹ In addition to the Creed's connection to a united Christian identity, it was associated with politics.²² All following councils were to be modeled off the Council of Nicaea, as it was the original attempt of the church to establish tradition and a set of orthodox interpretations.²³ The legacy of the Nicene Creed is intertwined with the legend of Saint Nicholas. The hymns of the Feast of Saint Nicholas²⁴ depict the famous confrontation between him and Arius, in which Nicholas slapped Arius after he questioned the united nature of the Trinity. Arius became a key figure from the council, and was described as "foolish" and "demonic" in the hymn.²⁵ Arius fits into the antithesis role often seen in Byzantine hymnography.²⁶ The later adaptation of Saint Nicholas slapping the so-called evil and cunning villain of the council undeniably established Saint Nicholas as a valiant defender of church orthodoxy.

Saint Nicholas' Early Byzantine Cult

²¹ Paul Gravilyuck, "The Legacy of the Council of Nicaea in the Orthodox Tradition: The Principle of Unchangeability and the Hermeneutic of Continuity," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Richard Young Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 327.

²² Gravilyuck, "The Legacy of the Council of Nicaea," 329.

²³ Gravilyuck, "The Legacy of the Council of Nicaea," 335.

²⁴ The dating for the hymns and the feast are unclear, but the two vitae of St. Nicholas, *Vita per Michaelem* and *Methodius ad Theodorum* were composed in Constantinople in the ninth century. According to Milanovic, the official St. Nicholas Feast on December 6th was celebrated once the cult was established in Constantinople and the celebration was held in Saint Sophia: Милановић, "Illegal Traffic," 399.

²⁵ Gravilyuck, "The Legacy of the Council of Nicaea," 336.

²⁶ Gravilyuck, "The Legacy of the Council of Nicaea," 337.

The earliest evidence of a church dedicated to the saint was constructed under Emperor Justinian's rule during the sixth century.²⁷ This church was located on the outskirts of the city of Myra and featured a portico, an extended and covered walkway. The portico connected the church with houses for the poor, which lined this path. According to tradition, the three generals whom Saint Nicholas had spared built porticos and charitable houses for the poor like the ones found by the early church.²⁸ The association of the three generals with care for the poor is a telling testament as to how the cult of St. Nicholas contributed to the community. Not only did the houses for the poor have an association with one of the saint's earliest miracles, but they also physically connected those from the lower class to the church itself. Myra was an important regional center, and the local economy benefited from visits to the shrine, as well as local festivals.²⁹ Pilgrims from distant lands would visit the church, which held the neighborhood's annual festival.³⁰ The church functioned as both a center of local activity for the community of Myra and a destination for those from distant lands. Venerators of Saint Nicholas could travel to the prosperous city of Myra, regardless of ranking or origin.³¹

A telling association of this cult with imperial leaders and administrative figures is found in the Byzantine seals housed at the Dumbarton Oaks Museum in Washington, DC. Over 250 seals featuring Saint Nicholas are part of this collection and they range in date from the seventh to the twelfth century. According to scholar John Costonis, the seal depictions of Saint Nicholas are the “earliest known surviving images of the saint in any medium.”³² Of the saints'

²⁷ Sarah Burnett, “The Cult of St. Nicholas in Medieval Italy” (Phd diss., University of Warwick, 2009), 10.

²⁸ Clive Foss, “The Lycian Coast in the Byzantine Age,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 48, (1994), 24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1291721>.

²⁹ Foss, “The Lycian Coast,” 26.

³⁰ Foss, “The Lycian Coast,” 30.

³¹ Foss, “The Lycian Coast,” 31.

³² John Cotsonis, “The Contribution of Byzantine Lead Seals to the Study of the Cult of the Saints (Sixth-Twelfth Century),” *Byzantion* 75 (2005): 433, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44173007>.

representations on seals, Nicholas appears to be the most popular behind the Virgin Mary.³³ It is noted that he may have been believed to aid in the funerary process and hopes of salvation, as well as representing justice in the context of the last judgement.³⁴ Out of all the saints, he is paired most frequently with the Virgin Mary, and both are associated with victory, as seen in Nicholas' name and the Virgin as the "victory bearer."³⁵ Of the coins, including the titles of their owners, the majority are from civil administrators. Diversity in the saints' application can also be seen in the use of his imagery on seals belonging to church hierarchs, lower clergy, monastic members, and military officials.³⁶

One of the examples of various tenth-century coins inscribed with the owner's name is that of Leo, an "imperial protospatharios and logothetes of the stratiotikon" in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Seal Collection. This title means that Leo, the owner of this coin, held a respectable position in the military and in handling finances. On one side of the seal, in Figure 1.1, Nicholas is displayed between two columns, and the border is decorated with dots. On the other side of the seal, there is a cross and five lines of inscription. The inscription states, "Saint Nicholas, help your servant Leo imperial *protospatharios* and *logothetes* of the *stratiotikon*."³⁷ These seals would have marked important documents involving Leo's administrative work. As mentioned before, Saint Nicholas depictions were adopted by individuals across social classes, but in this case, he is blessing the work of a high-ranking official. This helps to cement the saint's authority in areas of justice and advice as he acted as a wise consultant to the emperor.

³³ Cotsonis, "The Contribution of Byzantine Lead Seals," 434.

³⁴ Cotsonis, "The Contribution of Byzantine Lead Seals," 435.

³⁵ Cotsonis, "The Contribution of Byzantine Lead Seals," 436.

³⁶ Cotsonis, "The Contribution of Byzantine Lead Seals," 437.

³⁷ *Leo imperial protospatharios and logothetes of the stratiotikon (tenth century)*, Byzantine seal, 23.0 mm, The Museum at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C., object no. BZS.1955.1.2801, <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1955.1.2801/view>.



Figure 1.1 *Leo imperial protospatharios and logothetes of the stratotikon (tenth century)*, Byzantine seal, 23.0 mm, The Museum at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C., object no. BZS.1955.1.2801, <https://www.doaks.org/resources/seals/byzantine-seals/BZS.1955.1.2801/view>.

Another aspect of Nicholas' origins in Byzantine cult veneration is his association with merchants and the sea. It was said that when Myra was enduring a famine, a captain of a grain ship saw an apparition of Saint Nicholas. Nicholas gave him three gold pieces and directed him to sail to Myra. When the captain woke up, he had the pieces of gold in his possession and went to relieve the Myrans from the famine. This is illustrative of how St. Nicholas became the patron saint of merchants and sea travelers. In the ninth and tenth-century Greek texts, *Encomium Methodii* authored by St. Methodius of Constantinople, and the anonymous Latin biography of the saint, known as the *Vita Complitata*, or the "Collected Life," this story of Nicholas saving Myra from a famine features Nicholas appearing as a merchant, specifically after his death. He physically embodies a merchant in this version. Also, in his biography, the *Bíos én συντόμῳ*, he appeared gliding across the sea with a scepter in hand. The sailors who saw him, en route to Byzantium from Cyprus, thought he was just an illusion, but when they cried out to the saint for help during a storm, he guided them to Myra to relieve the famine. The story ends with the

sailors going to worship his tomb at Myra.³⁸ Images of Nicholas on a boat in the middle of the sea commonly appear, the most popular being the Jerusalem journey, in which he is depicted sitting across from a sailor as a demon clings to the stern of the boat.³⁹ This association would become the basis of the Bari merchants and sailors' mission. The actual process of the translation was executed by sea and by men from an influential Italian port city. These components helped to form a narrative justifying the future translation.

A Nicene Controversy: The Makings of the Schism

As previously mentioned, the Council of Nicaea established the guidelines for a united church. In the centuries following the 325 Council, evolving differences in Western and Eastern interpretations of certain doctrines contributed to rising tensions across the Mediterranean. The Filioque Controversy extended over several centuries and displayed a key point of disagreement between the two church traditions. Beginning in the eighth century, it contributed to the widening gap between East and West Christian worship. The controversy originates from an idea that was expanded upon by Nicaean rule. At another formative church council known as the Council of Constantinople in 381, the third article of the Nicene Creed received an additional detail. It stated, "And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father." The *filioque*, or phrase, "and from the Son," was added to the Constantinople Creed in the West. In an attempt to dispel Arianism in the West, the Spanish Church adopted the *filioque*.⁴⁰ Any alteration to the creed was considered flawed, and objections to the West's interpretation of the Constantinople Creed launched the beginnings of the battle between the Latin and Byzantine

³⁸ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 97.

³⁹ Ševčenko, *The Life of Saint Nicholas*, 99.

⁴⁰ Gravilyuck, "The Legacy of the Council of Nicaea," 339.

churches. This difference was to become one of the “weapons of identity politics” in the following centuries.⁴¹

⁴¹ Gravilyuck, “The Legacy of the Council of Nicaea,” 341.

Chapter Two

The Growth of Italian Cities: Trade Moves East

Expanding Italian Cities

The second chapter of this thesis will explore the growing interconnectedness of the medieval Mediterranean in terms of trade and politics. Trade expanded in a time that is known as the second great Mediterranean trade cycle, from the end of the tenth century to the Black Death.⁴² During this period of economic growth, crises occurred in the eleventh century when Byzantium was threatened on all fronts. The Normans conquered Southern Italy in the 1050s while lordships engaged in battles, and also expanded into the British Isles. Despite these shortcomings, Mediterranean trade in the eleventh century did not suffer any negative impacts on productivity.⁴³ The Mediterranean saw the expansion of Italian maritime cities and the struggle for power amongst foreigners over Southern Italy.

One of medieval Italy's greatest maritime cities, Venice, was part of the Byzantine Empire until the eleventh century. The Venetians were key figures in the Aegean trade preceding the twelfth century and helped to maintain the economy of Byzantium.⁴⁴ By the ninth century, they had distanced themselves from Byzantine authorities despite still being part of the empire. As of the early tenth century, they had expanded down the Adriatic, and by the eleventh century, the duchy of Venice and the Byzantine Empire were separate. Their maritime might under direction from the Byzantine Empire can be seen in their aid provided to Bari against the Arab expansion into the central and western Mediterranean in 1002 and 1003.⁴⁵ Venice emerged as a

⁴² Chris Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat: Reinterpreting the Mediterranean Economy, 950-1180* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 630.

⁴³ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*: 627.

⁴⁴ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 502.

⁴⁵ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 503-504.

growing commercial power in the ninth century. In the will of the patriarch of Grado, Fortunato—who had connections to the Franks and to the Byzantines—there are mentions of great numbers of luxury goods. In the same century, Venetians stole Saint Mark’s relics from Alexandria, Egypt. The fact that they were able to accomplish this demonstrates their familiarity with trade routes eastward, to Egypt.⁴⁶ The Venetians focused on luxury trade in an efficient system up to the early eleventh century.⁴⁷ After this century, contracts for trade within the Byzantine Empire exploded in numbers, followed by Egypt.⁴⁸ Venice’s valuable connections to eastern trade placed the city at the forefront of an emerging, competitive Mediterranean trade.

Pisa was the most active Italian maritime city in the eleventh century, participating in frequent naval battles with Arabs in the western Mediterranean. Battles in Reggio Calabria, Sardinia, Palermo, Mahdia, and Tortosa took place throughout the eleventh century, leading up to the First Crusade in the Levant. With spoils from war, the Pisans built their magnificent cathedral. Along with Saint Mark’s Basilica in Venice, this Pisa Cathedral was the most expensive building in Italy in the later decades of the eleventh century. This building was associated with war, marking this as a characteristic of the expanding state of Pisa.⁴⁹ The Pisan cathedral was also built thanks to a prosperous economy, as urban production, agriculture, and overseas trade all expanded after 1050.⁵⁰ As for trade with the Byzantine empire, Venice was the most dominant, followed by Pisa and Genoa.⁵¹

By the end of the twelfth century, Italian maritime cities had become intimidating and profitable Mediterranean traders.⁵² From 1100 to 1300, the port cities rose in power, and cities in

⁴⁶ It is important to note the context in which Venice stole these significant relics. This could be considered a precursor to their future interest in Saint Nicholas’ remains.

⁴⁷ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 506-509.

⁴⁸ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 514.

⁴⁹ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 559.

⁵⁰ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 568.

⁵¹ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 566.

⁵² Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 612.

North-Central Italy were trying to catch up with powerful eastern Mediterranean centers like Byzantium and Egypt.⁵³ Evidence of a “Byzantine east-west exchange network” extended up the Adriatic.⁵⁴ Archaeological objects like amphorae were found throughout the Adriatic and Ionian seas after the tenth century.⁵⁵ The route along the Adriatic passed by Bari, which would be the eventual resting place of Saint Nicholas’ relics. Historian Chris Wickham’s study claims that Mediterranean maritime trade noticeably increased from 950 to 1100 along the southern east-west coast.⁵⁶ The increase in Mediterranean trade connections after the year 1000 created the far-reaching routes, placing merchants along complex and profitable networks.

The expansion of Italian cities during this period inevitably created rivalry. The example of Bari and Venice’s rivalry is perfectly illustrated by their conflict over the claim to Saint Nicholas’ relics. The scholar Alasdair Grant’s evaluation of the two cities’ translation accounts accurately describes the 1087 event as one of the “flashpoints” of the eleventh century, leading to the First Crusade.⁵⁷ In Chapter 4, I will explore the Venetian translation. The expansion of these cities, in the context of Latin Christendom’s expansion, demonstrates the competitive and politically shifting world of the late eleventh century.⁵⁸ The maritime cities of Italy signaled the changing power balance in these decades, as they expanded economically and militarily.

Clashing Powers in Bari

Significant cross-cultural interaction is recorded in *Annales*, or *Chronicles*, of Bari from the end of the tenth century to the beginning of the twelfth century. This port city conducted

⁵³ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 619.

⁵⁴ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 636.

⁵⁵ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 637.

⁵⁶ Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat*, 647.

⁵⁷ Alasdair Grant, “Byzantium’s Ashes and the Bones of St. Nicholas: Two Translations as Turning Points, 1087-1100,” in *Trends and Turning Points: Constructing the Late Antique and Byzantine World*, ed. Matthew Kinloch and Alex MacFarlane (Brill, 2019), 248.

⁵⁸ Grant, “Byzantium’s Ashes,” 247.

trade along the southern coast of the Adriatic Sea and had great significance to the developing eastern trade route connecting the Italian peninsula to the eastern Mediterranean. The *annales* provide an insight into the various alliances created during this politically complex time, as well as tensions and battles between Arabs, Normans, and Byzantines for control of Southern Italy.

In the *Composite Chronicles from Bari, ca. 1000-1117*, scholars Tehmina Goskar and Patricia Skinner translated and compiled three valuable narratives from Bari: the *Bari Annals*, the text by Lupus Protospatharius, and the *Bari Anonymus*. At the beginning of the chronicles from the late tenth century, there were various Arab raids. As previously mentioned, Venice intervened in this conflict on behalf of the Baresi against the expanding eastern forces. Then, various battles ensued between the Normans and the Byzantines, starting in the first decade of the eleventh century. It is explicitly mentioned that the Greeks turned the castle of Bari into the seat of their government, which would subsequently be transformed into the Basilica of San Nicola.⁵⁹ Particularly violent battles between the Normans and Greeks occurred in 1041 and 1042. Foreigners were reportedly involved in these conflicts, including Russians, Anatolians, and Thracians. The Greeks lost terribly, and “were half dead by the fear of the Normans, who did every sort of violence.”⁶⁰ Norman plundering continued and conquered scattered lands through military might and marriage alliances. Bari was conquered by the Normans in 1071, although, interestingly enough, this was not mentioned in any of these three *annales*. In 1084, it was reported that the Norman Duke Robert Guiscard gathered Normans, Lombards, and others to free Pope Gregory VII, who was being held in captivity in Rome. They were able to bring him safely to Salerno.⁶¹ This presents a question of alliance at this point in time between the papacy and the

⁵⁹ Tehmina Goskar and Patricia Skinner, “Composite Chronicles from Bari (ca. 1000-1117),” in *Medieval Italy: Texts in Translation*, ed. Katherine L. Jansen, Joanna Drell, and Frances Andrews, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 490-491.

⁶⁰ Goskar and Skinner, “Composite Chronicles,” 493.

⁶¹ Goskar and Skinner, “Composite Chronicles,” 495-496.

Normans. One of the final battles took place in 1085 between the Normans and Venetians, in which the Normans won under Guiscard. In 1087, it was reported that “our Baresi” brought back Saint Nicholas’ relics in the *Bari Anonymous* narrative.⁶² The Venetian interventions recorded in the three *annales* reveal their Byzantine alliance. Originally, they saved the city of Bari from a Saracen invasion, but about two centuries later, they lost against the reportedly vicious Normans. Venice’s military initiatives reflect the broader Byzantine agenda in maintaining control of Southern Italy, and the city’s previous expansion into the Mediterranean fits into the medieval theme of expanding Italian maritime cities. Furthermore, the chronicles reveal the rising tensions between the Byzantine and Latin populations. As previously explained regarding the Great Schism, Eastern and Western Christian populations had evolved into their own traditions, but a series of heated disagreements between Rome and Constantinople had escalated tensions. The battles between the severely unprepared Byzantines and the fierce Normans illustrate a military continuation of the religious conflict.

The eleventh-century historian and monk, Geoffrey Malaterra, wrote *The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of his brother Duke Robert Guiscard* around the year 1097. This valuable source highlights the details of the Norman Conquest of Southern Italy. In *The Deeds*, another instance of a papal rescue is recorded, this one being a few decades prior to the rescue of Pope Gregory VII mentioned in the *Chronicles*. The complicated relationship between the papacy and the Normans ultimately resulted in an alliance after the pope saw their unrelenting power since their initial invasions. According to Malaterra, the individuals from Bari’s region, Apulia, appealed to Pope Leo IX for aid during the Norman invasions around the year 1053. The pope arrived with his German army, which was slaughtered by the Normans.

⁶² Goskar and Skinner, “Composite Chronicles,” 497.

After the pope's army was defeated, the Normans out of respect—of course—honored the pope and he responded with a cession of the land, as well as a promise to papal-controlled land in other Southern Italian territories, like Calabria.⁶³

“Receiving him, the opposing knights prostrated themselves at his feet with great devotion on account of their reverence for the holy Roman see, seeking the pope's indulgence and benediction. They escorted him to that very place where the army had set up its camp and tents, and served him with great humility. The pope, accepting the rightful benevolence of these men with gratitude, conferred on them his blessing and his indulgence for their offenses. He also conceded to them all the land that they had conquered—as well as any that they might acquire in the future in the regions of Calabria and Sicily—as a hereditary fief from St. Peter to be held by Humphrey and his heirs.”⁶⁴

Malaterra presented a nuanced interaction, one in which the Normans crushed the threat to their claim in Apulia, while maintaining reverence for the pope. As shown, they balanced the line between personal gain and allegiance to Rome. Furthermore, this account covers the conquest of Bari, which the local annales do not. Duke Robert Guiscard was said to have invaded “that most famous city known as Bari, which was faithful to the emperor in Constantinople and therefore rebellious to the duke.”⁶⁵ The Baresi resisting Norman expansion were deemed rebels as they still respected Byzantine rule. The port city of Bari was undergoing frequent regime shifts, as was characteristic of Southern Italian centers in the Middle Ages. The Normans had defeated the papacy, a respected rival, and would soon defeat the Byzantine control over the strategically important city.

The interactions between Saracens, Venetians, Normans, Byzantines, and the local peoples of Bari demonstrate the increasingly tense atmosphere of the eleventh century and the transformation of southern Italian ports into sites of cross-cultural interaction. Bari was a place

⁶³ Geoffrey Malaterra, *The deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of his brother Duke Robert Guiscard / by Geoffrey Malaterra ; translated by Kenneth Baxter Wolf* (University of Michigan Press), 61-62.

⁶⁴ Malaterra, *The deeds of Count Roger*, 62.

⁶⁵ Malaterra, *The deeds of Count Roger*, 117.

of intermingling cults—Muslim, Greek Orthodox, and Latin Christian, and a series of attempted and successful invasions destabilized the region.

Cult Formation in Southern Italy

Two significant Adriatic maritime cities, Venice and Bari, would proclaim—and justify—their right to the relics in their respective translations in “the backdrop of the explosion of Latin Europe.”⁶⁶

Eleventh-century Southern Italy saw political regime change with the violent Norman conquest. In such unpredictable times, cults and their associated pilgrimages offered a sense of protection and stability for local people. The Central Middle Ages became known as the golden era of pilgrimage. The historian, Paul Oldfield, notes that relics appeared at moments of chaos and political shifts.⁶⁷ In addition to encroaching political powers like the Byzantines and the Normans, the papacy had been intervening in Southern Italian life, going back to the tenth century. Church reform was beginning to take form in the disorganized church administration of the South. The papacy attempted to establish a more ordered church, and in a wise use of resources, the pope decided that he could use the plundering Normans as agents in church reform. The church accepted the Norman victory and made use of this.⁶⁸ For the Normans, papal approval meant the highest form of justification for their rule. A previous alliance between the papacy is also evident, as discussed in the *Chronicles*, in which the Normans rescued Pope Gregory from German emperor Henry IV’s threat in Rome. By the second half of the eleventh

⁶⁶ Grant, “Byzantium’s Ashes,” 248.

⁶⁷ Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage*, 2.

⁶⁸ Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage*, 12-15.

century, Southern Italy was living through the effects of urbanization with the growth of cities, pilgrimages, and church reform.⁶⁹

The final decades of the eleventh century saw the beginnings of cult revivals and expansions of newly founded ones. Norman rule found a sense of legitimization by adopting patronages of saints.⁷⁰ Oldfield's study investigated the growth of cities during this time and its association with the growth of civic consciousness and the search for identity. The emerging cults in medieval Southern Italy were rooted in significant social change.⁷¹ The turbulent eleventh century in Bari is evidence of the conditions that ushered in cult adoption and obtaining a saint's relics would give the city authority as a prominent trading center in the Mediterranean. As saints represent specific ideals and demographics, Saint Nicholas' patronage would elevate the city as a Latin Christian center with blessed commerce. A city defeated by the Normans and undergoing a political shift could promote its reputation and even industry by introducing relics. Expeditions for saints' relics were specific in mission, and it is no coincidence that Venice and Bari competed for the patron saint of merchants. The era of maritime expansion called for a protector of safety across the seas and of the maritime economy.

⁶⁹ Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage*, 58.

⁷⁰ Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage*, 59.

⁷¹ Oldfield, *Sanctity and Pilgrimage*, 95.

Chapter Three

Preexisting Devotion: Saint Nicholas' Cult in the West

The expansion of Saint Nicholas' cult westward can be explained by the established presence of Byzantines in Italy, resulting from the Justinianic "reconquest" and from invasions in the Byzantine Empire. Byzantine populations moving west and Italian expansion into the East undoubtedly resulted in the cult taking root in the West. The cult of Saint Nicholas took form in various artistic and literary forms throughout Italy.

Byzantines moving Westward

The presence of Greek religious cults on the Italian peninsula can be attributed to Justinian's conquest, dating back to the sixth century.⁷² Byzantine troops had landed in Italy in 536, and the last Gothic presence was felt until 561 or 562.⁷³ Procopius of Caesarea is the most well-known author of the events of the Gothic War.⁷⁴ Gothic rule had ended in Italy with the victories of famed military commanders Belisarius and Narses. Agathias—a poet and historian who lived under Justinian's imperial rule—stated that "Sicily, Rome, and Italy cast off the yoke of foreign domination and were restored to their ancient way of life," in his *Historarum libri quinque*. The Byzantine victory and subsequent return to an "ancient way of life" is referencing the previously united Roman Empire, which included the Western Roman Empire that had existed a century before.⁷⁵

Byzantine expansion, done in an effort to reclaim the Roman imperial lands, along with the Arab invasions, likely contributed to the Greek population in Italy, which was vital to the

⁷² John Moorhead, "Italian Loyalties During Justinian's Gothic War," *Byzantion* 53, no. 2 (1983): 575, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44170834>.

⁷³ Moorhead, "Italian Loyalties," 576.

⁷⁴ Moorhead, "Italian Loyalties," 577-578.

⁷⁵ Moorhead, "Italian Loyalties," 575.

translation and formation of Saint Nicholas' cult. This movement further west can be seen in the pattern of Mediterranean exchange as the Greek Orthodox cult spread west. It is key to note that Justinian's conquest was part of the formation of Greek communities on the Italian peninsula.

Beginning in 632 and ending in 750, the Arab conquests started thirty years after Muhammad's death. Arabs had invaded the Arabian Peninsula and claimed the former Greco-Roman territories. In the Levant, which had previously been under Greek control, Christianity was no longer the main religion and cultural influence after the first phase of Islamic expansion. Texts from as early as the fifth and sixth centuries discussed Arab raids on Christian areas, even before the Islamic wars emerged.⁷⁶

Invasions in the Byzantine Empire clearly pushed populations westward. In an evaluation of urban life and the Byzantine city, scholar Ufuk Serin elaborated on the 'urban decline' of Byzantine cities starting around the second half of the sixth century and lasting until the ninth century.⁷⁷ At the end of Late Antiquity, urban areas were on the decline, and monuments were either abandoned or destroyed. This was attributed to Persian and Arab raids from the middle of the seventh century to the ninth century. Urban areas appeared to shrink, hilltop towns emerged, and the 'ruralisation' of towns emerged due to the unstable climate of this time. Many cities on the southern Anatolian coast were abandoned after the Battle of Phoenix from 641 to 668 and from the Justinian plague. In Lycia, the region of Myra, there was very little activity concerning construction from the seventh to the eighth centuries.⁷⁸ In 838, the greatest Arab victory in Anatolia occurred with the destruction of Ancyra.⁷⁹ Such destruction more than likely led to displaced populations who moved west.

⁷⁶ Demetrios J. Constantelos, "The Moslem Conquests of the Near East as Revealed in the Greek Sources of the Seventh and the Eighth Centuries," *Byzantion* 42, no. 6 (1972): 326-327, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44170360>.

⁷⁷ Ufuk Serin, "The Byzantine 'City' in Asia Minor," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Byzantine City*, ed. N. Bakirtzis and L. Zavagno (Routledge, 2024), 139.

⁷⁸ Serin, "The Byzantine 'City'," 150.

⁷⁹ Serin, "The Byzantine 'City'," 154.

Although the Byzantine Empire survived for several more centuries, this era of Justinian's reconquest and Arab expansion contributed to widespread emigration. My following discussion of the early cults of Saint Nicholas in Italy is based on the dispersion of Byzantine populations and cults into the Italian peninsula.

Early Presence of St. Nicholas' Cult in Italy

Before the 1087 translation—or relocation of a saint's relics—to the Italian Peninsula, Saint Nicholas' cult had already been established in various regions of mainland Europe. In Rome, as early as the 7th century, Saint Nicholas had become a celebrated saint.⁸⁰ Jones discusses the appearance of Saint Nicholas' accounts, which he constructs into what he calls *Stratilates 3*. The *Stratilates 3* was a St. Nicholas narrative named by Jones following the actions of his predecessors. It dates back to the seventh century in Latin, and it was the first recording of Saint Nicholas' life and miracles to be included in liturgy. It was written before any of the other Latin Lives of St. Nicholas were composed. It established the reputation of Nicholas' personality and played a key role in future narratives.⁸¹ This record, as named and translated from Latin by Jones, describes Nicholas' intervention in saving the three men condemned to death in Adrianke.⁸² He is characterized as being a defender of the common person and being the people's victor, as his name references. He defended citizens from imperial power and protected those in his flock as a model bishop. Furthermore, he is marked unusual in his ability to be in multiple places at once, intervening on the people's behalf while still ruling as a dutiful bishop at Myra.⁸³

⁸⁰ Burnett, "The Cult of St. Nicholas," 34.

⁸¹ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 29.

⁸² Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 30-36.

⁸³ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 37.

Nicholas became a symbol for checking tyrannical power, but without threatening it.⁸⁴ This account also emphasizes Nicholas as the defender of the innocents and prisoners.

The earliest indication of his cult's dedication was the Roman church of "Saint Nicholas in Carcere" (literally, St. Nicholas in prison), which was next to a civil prison and constructed around the end of the sixth century and the start of the seventh century. This was described by the historian Anna Comnena as "The Sanctuary," a place of refuge for those accused of crimes.⁸⁵ Every year on the feast day of St. Nicholas, the clergy were allowed to pardon a prisoner who had received the death sentence. This reflects the association of Saint Nicholas with prisoners.⁸⁶ The church was likely built in the seventh century and provided a worship space for the Greek quarter of Rome. Furthermore, Pope Nicholas I, who had entered the papacy as a subdeacon in the 840s, had an oratory dedicated to Saint Nicholas built in the basilica of Saint Mary in Cosmedin (Santa Maria de Schola Graeca), which was likewise located in a neighborhood populated in this period by Greek immigrants. This elaborate, highly decorated basilica proved this devotion to Nicholas in its elaborate aesthetics.⁸⁷ Though Pope Nicholas expanded the powers of the papacy, earning the title of "the founder of the papal monarchy," he established productive political relationships with emperors, advising the Byzantine Emperor Michael III to continue venerating images.⁸⁸ He pushed the boundaries of political intervention for the papacy, all in the name of his patron saint. Pope Nicholas' actions are reflective of Saint Nicholas' talents as an advisor. Saint Nicholas' intervention with Emperor Constantine and Roman official Ablabius in the legend of the Three Generals is reflected in Pope Nicholas' behavior as an advisor to top political figures.

⁸⁴ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 40.

⁸⁵ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 41-42.

⁸⁶ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 87.

⁸⁷ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 87.

⁸⁸ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 89.

The earliest Italian artistic depiction of Saint Nicholas was at the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, where there is an eighth-century fresco. The saint is seen amongst other Greek saints in a procession and is identified as an aged Orthodox bishop and marked by an inscription in Greek.⁸⁹ Santa Maria Antiqua is marked by an overwhelming expression of Byzantine influences, as early medieval Rome was heavily dependent on Constantinople, culturally, in the seventh and eighth centuries. The structure was connected to the seat of the Byzantine government, the Palatine, and was in close vicinity to the official Byzantine church of Rome known as S. Anastasia in the Greek quarter.⁹⁰ In a time of great cultural influence originating from the Byzantine capital, this church would have clearly reflected the eastern Roman—or Byzantine—Empire’s glory. The community in which it was centered carried over its religious and local traditions, which included saints, thereby establishing an early representation of the cult of Saint Nicholas in Rome. The Italian foundations of Saint Nicholas’ cult were clearly recorded in Roman records, liturgy, and art. The saint’s cult emerged in the context of a Roman Greek community and the cult then spread and was adopted into Western tradition.

The cult’s presence appeared in various Italian locations, and in Calabria, the southwest region of Italy, Saint Nicholas appears in the tale of the *Iconia 34*. The earliest form of this story is in Greek, as Calabria was part of the Byzantine Empire. It is also known as the *Thauma de imagine*. The narrative describes the Vandal invasion of the region of Calabria and was written around the year 900. In the story, a Vandal found an image of Saint Nicholas and took it with him on his plundering, not knowing the significance of the image. He showed it to his captives, and they wept upon seeing the icon, identifying that it was Saint Nicholas and praising his divinity.⁹¹ He hid it among his possessions, and upon returning to Africa, he displayed the icon in his

⁸⁹ Burnett, “The Cult of St. Nicholas,” 33-34.

⁹⁰ G.M. Rushforth, *The Church of S. Maria Antiqua* (R. Clay and Sons, 1902), 11.

⁹¹ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 79.

home.⁹² As a test of Saint Nicholas' divinity, he placed it among his unprotected and vulnerable treasures to see if the saint's protection truly worked. The treasures were stolen, and the Vandal cursed the icon, even going so far as to beat it.⁹³ Saint Nicholas immediately appeared to the thieves and scolded them, demanding they return the goods and threatening them with death sentences if they did not do so. The thieves returned everything in the night, so when the owner awoke, he praised Saint Nicholas for his intervention and miracle. This incident converted him and his household to Christianity. As an expression of his devotion, he constructed a church dedicated to the saint, marking the first time in which Nicholas was introduced to Africa.⁹⁴ This text, the *Iconia 34*, became the major Latin writing recounting the saint's power and spread across the Alps to the West, laying the foundations of a mainland European cult of Saint Nicholas.⁹⁵ The dramatic details of this story allowed for its popularity. The story recounts the familiar qualities of Saint Nicholas, like his sudden appearances, sense of justice, and passion for morality. Jones states it is "the primary source for N[icholas's] emergence as the hero of the western tales of thieves and judges."⁹⁶ As described in the story, Byzantine Calabria had Saint Nicholas rooted in its culture. He was a popular icon found in a household and was not only recognized but praised by the imprisoned Greek population, demonstrating how individuals in Southern Italian lands were recorded as venerators of the saint under Greek rule.

In the Central Italian region of Umbria, the cult of Saint Nicholas was evidently celebrated with the early eleventh-century construction of a church dedicated to him in the town of Sangemini. A document in the Register of the abbey of Farfa records the church existing as early as 1037. The marble doorway to this church sits in the Metropolitan Museum of Art today

⁹² It is unclear where in Africa the "Vandal" traveled from.

⁹³ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 80.

⁹⁴ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 81-82.

⁹⁵ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 79.

⁹⁶ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 82.

and is “derived from Greco-Roman architecture and ornament.”⁹⁷ It was the main entrance to the Abbey Church of San Nicolo, which is now in ruins in the town of Sangemini. Around the year 790, Saint Gemine, a Syrian monk, arrived at a monastery in the town of Casventino. The main church and its monastery were dedicated to Saint Gemini after the town was destroyed by the Saracens in 882. The town became known as Sangemini as the Saint Gemini’s cult grew.

According to a document from 1037 in the register of the Abbey of Farfa, the Church of San Nicolo was established.⁹⁸ It was constructed in the 1000s, and the door is believed to be from a later date. According to the style of the facade, it is believed to be from the twelfth century.⁹⁹

Although the doorway itself does not prove the existence of Saint Nicholas in Italy before the 1087 translation, it decorated the entry to the eleventh-century church of his.

Venice was the other main claimant of Saint Nicholas’ relics and patronage, most notably after the relic translation to Bari. A small portion of his relics was brought to Venice from Myra in 1100 by returning Crusaders.¹⁰⁰ The church of main dedication was San Nicolo al Lido. The site was either founded in 1043¹⁰¹ or in 1053 by the Doge Domenico Contarini,¹⁰² and has two original capitals in the Veneto-Byzantine style from the eleventh century.¹⁰³ It was recorded that in 1071, the Doge, Domenico Selvo was elected here while the Church of Saint Mark was under construction.¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that the church was created in the mid-eleventh century, before the relics of Saint Nicholas had reached Italy.

⁹⁷ William H. Forsyth, “The Sangemini Doorway.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 23, no. 10 (1965): 373, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3258175>.

⁹⁸ Forsyth, “The Sangemini Doorway,” 373.

⁹⁹ Forsyth, “The Sangemini Doorway,” 374.

¹⁰⁰ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 209.

¹⁰¹ Giulio Lorenzetti, *Venice and Its Lagoon : Historical-Artistic Guide* (Lint, 1975), 800.

¹⁰² Burnett, “The Cult of St. Nicholas,” 221.

¹⁰³ Lorenzetti, *Venice and Its Lagoon*, 800.

¹⁰⁴ Burnett, “The Cult of St. Nicholas,” 219.

Devotion to the saint was already present in Bari before the translation of 1087. In fact, the established various cults were what facilitated the translation, as multiple cultures culminated in this single city. Before the translation in 1087, five churches were under the patronage of Nicholas in Bari and its surrounding area. One of these churches was established under Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, who was in power from 1042-1055. This church, in the city of Bari, was dedicated to Saint Nicholas and served by Basilian monks. An earlier church in the surrounding area was that of San Nicola in Turre Musarra. It is recorded in a charter existing as early as 1039. As for liturgical evidence of the existing cult, the Bari Exultet displayed an image of Saint Nicholas. The Exultet presented a hymn meant for Holy Saturday during the paschal candle blessing. It originated around 1000 and asks God to protect those in danger of violent winds or storms. There is an image of Christ in the center with various saints surrounding him, including Saint Nicholas. The exultet from Bari is the only one out of the southern Italian exultets that features a wind rose, a medieval navigation tool used by sailors.¹⁰⁵ This unique feature included in the Bari Exultet clearly demonstrates the importance of sailing to the city. Decades before the city's adoption of Nicholas' relics, his symbols were already being embraced, as the activity of sailing was incorporated in religious ritual. Considering the saint was the protector of sailors, his presence seems fitting in this local exultet. Local veneration in the eleventh century helped to establish a receptive population at the time of the translation.

¹⁰⁵ Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas," 497-498.

Chapter Four

Relic Theft Narratives

Furta Sacra

A *furta sacra*, or holy theft, is the relocation of a saint's relics; if the relics are successfully moved, the theft is considered approved by divine force. In historian Patrick J. Geary's foundational work on the medieval *furta sacra*, *Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*, he outlines the conditions and beliefs surrounding relic thefts. Relics, once moved, lost their "cultural context," and the new location that received the relics would have to assign a new meaning. Relic thefts often take place during periods of chaos and invasion, or some form of disruption, which is what put the relics' identity in jeopardy in the first place. Geary's study examines the social and cultural context that characterized the relic's symbolism after the theft, and the role of the "translations", or narratives composed to recount and justify the theft, in shaping the histories of the relic's journey.¹⁰⁶

In fact, Geary even addresses the *furta sacra* of Saint Nicholas' relics, as this was a significant moment in the Middle Ages. He presented Saint Nicholas' theft as representative of a sub-category of *furta sacra* that he labels "Urban Thefts." These thefts were typically perpetrated by ordinary city dwellers (generally Italians) who wanted to adopt patrons for their towns.¹⁰⁷ The Central Middle Ages Italian thefts were characterized by organized groups of citizens.¹⁰⁸ Geary states that the economic crisis of the late eleventh century in Bari was a key part of the context in which the relics were stolen, thereby providing an answer to the crisis in an eastern saint's

¹⁰⁶ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁷ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 87.

¹⁰⁸ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 88.

bones.¹⁰⁹ Establishing Bari as the home of St. Nicholas would place it on the map as a pilgrimage center, drawing in visitors. Additionally, the status of a town like Bari would be honored and blessed, encouraging trade. He describes the translation of Saint Nicholas as a response to economic threats, like the Venetians, and disrupted trade due to Norman and Byzantine wars.¹¹⁰

Furta sacras were recorded in *translationes*, or narratives recounting the movement of relics. They were written by educated individuals like monks, clerics, or scholars to demonstrate the values of their own society, thereby serving as a form of propaganda justifying and even celebrating relic theft.¹¹¹ This genre was a mix between the lives of the saints, or *vitae*, and the *annales* and *chronicles*.¹¹² As the remains of saints increasingly circulated during this time, *translationes* became more widespread. Liturgical celebrations developed from the anniversaries of relic translations, and new readings were needed. The *translationes* focused more on the relics and their powers rather than the lives of the saints. They were connected to specific churches and their processions and displayed a particular community's pride in their saintly patrons and benefactors.¹¹³ Furthermore, Geary claims that a *translatione* could have been written to connect a city to relics it would otherwise have had no connection to. The liturgical celebrations for a translation's anniversary were public events and part of the liturgy of the feast, which was separated into lessons read throughout the day.¹¹⁴ In this chapter, I will focus on three *translationes* or narratives of the theft of St. Nicholas's relics: the first is from a Baresi monk, the second is from an anonymous Greek writer, and the third is from a Venetian monk. The latter tells of the Venetian claim to possess St. Nicholas's relics, a translation account describing events which took place in 1100.

¹⁰⁹ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 95.

¹¹⁰ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 101.

¹¹¹ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 9.

¹¹² Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 10.

¹¹³ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 11.

¹¹⁴ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 13.

Nicephorus

This translation account, *The Translation of Saint Nicholas, Confessor*, was written by Nicephorus, a monk from Bari, shortly after the theft occurred. It is the foundational Saint Nicholas translation account, as the following ones depend on its recounting of events.¹¹⁵ It is the primary account I will focus on, as it provides the most information surrounding Saint Nicholas' relocation. Nicephorus begins his work by naming the individuals who hired him to write. Lord Curcorius (a local judge), other magnates from Bari, and church officials pushed Nicephorus to record the translation, and he agreed only because of his love for Saint Nicholas. He describes the actions of the Baresi, composed of merchants, sailors, two pilgrims, and two priests, and how they planned to take the relics upon finding out about the Venetians' similar goal. Hearing about this competition, the Baresi sailors were determined to reach Myra first.¹¹⁶ They were already bound for Antioch when they found out about the Venetian plan. After rapidly conducting trade, the Baresi sailors set sail for Myra. On the crew's way back from Antioch, they recruited two pilgrims from Jerusalem who checked to see if the Turks were still present in the area of Myra. Once the pilgrims reported the area as safe, the forty-seven sailors arrived at the place of the relics and found four custodians there, demanding that they tell them where Saint Nicholas' body was.¹¹⁷ After much hesitation from the custodians, the Baresi sailors began to argue and claimed that the pope himself sent them to transfer Saint Nicholas' relics after appearing to the pope in a dream.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 176.

¹¹⁶ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 177

¹¹⁷ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 178.

¹¹⁸ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 179.

A great description is included of the custodians' despair once the Baresi sailors began to break the stone floor in which the body was buried, as "they wailed and rent their priestly garments from their breasts" over the theft of their saint. The custodians went to let the townspeople know what was happening, but the Baresi prevented this from occurring. They bound the monks and recruited others to guard the basilica's gates, roads, and plazas. Then, one of the two Baresi priests who had seized a glass phial of the holy liquid of Saint Nicholas lost hold of it and dropped it, and when it fell, it remained intact. Nicephorus relates how they saw this as miraculous and interpreted it as an expression of holy will and encouragement by Saint Nicholas to move his body to Bari.¹¹⁹

Nicephorus further relates how, after a scuffle between one of the Barians and the custodians, the Greek custodians themselves had acknowledged that a year prior, Saint Nicholas appeared to them, warning them that his body would be moved if they did not do a better job of defending his sanctuary. The Myran townspeople had fled their city upon the Turkish invasions, thereby justifying the Baresi sailors' accusations of abandonment. In this vision, Saint Nicholas told three residents of Myra to return and guard their city from the Turks, or else he would move.¹²⁰ The Barians proceeded and smashed the ground, reaching the tomb and found the coffin filled with holy liquid and a heavenly perfume, which intoxicated everyone and traveled as far as three miles by sea. The fragrance confirmed Nicholas' desire to join the Bari sailors, as scent had this power according to divine will. The pleasing scent demonstrated the saint's consent to travel to Bari. The scent prompted the custodians to weep and say: "The saint is yours, for he has never accorded such treatment to others. Alas for sorrow, how great an evil has happened to our fatherland."¹²¹ The Baresi wrapped the relics in silk and intentionally left behind a

¹¹⁹ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 180.

¹²⁰ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 181.

¹²¹ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 182-83.

wonder-working icon of the saint. Nicephorus writes that St. Nicholas never wanted the Myrans to be completely robbed of their holy treasures. They sang while participating in a procession on their way back to the ship with the gift which God “had crowned the Barians.”¹²²

In a dramatic scene, the Myrans gathered at the seashore and wept in despair, accusing the Baresi of savagery for stealing their relics dating back to antiquity. They accused Nicholas of orphaning them and having “reestablished his fatherhood” among the Baresi, whom they call “unknowns.” The Myrans swam into the water and reached for the ship, begging for a piece of their patron's body. The Baresi sympathized with the townspeople, but repeated their message that they were sent via revelation and deserve Nicholas’ grace after he had been in Myra for hundreds of years.¹²³ In their final exchange with the Myrans, they stated: “It is only right that so important and illustrious a state as Bari should enjoy this great patronage.” As they sailed away, they could hear the dirges—or wails—and were greatly moved.¹²⁴

After some trouble sailing, they discovered that the Baresi sailors had stolen pieces of the relics. Once they returned the stolen pieces, they sailed in peace and understood that the relics should never be divided.¹²⁵ Various miracles, including dreams and a visit from a bird, occurred at sea. A sailor named Disigius saw St. Nicholas in a dream and was reassured of their voyage together as the saint told him that in twenty days, they would reach Bari. Another miracle involved a small bird that flew onto the ship at sea. It landed on the starboard of the ship where the body of the saint lay. The bird was said to have sung as it touched the area holding the relics. The bird celebrated and sang while flying around the ship, praising the crew and the saint.¹²⁶ The

¹²² Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 183.

¹²³ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 184.

¹²⁴ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 185.

¹²⁵ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 186.

¹²⁶ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 186-87.

recording of these miracles serves as further evidence of St. Nicholas' "will" to be moved to Bari.

The crew arrived at the city of Bari, and a lengthy praise of the city was provided. Bari and its residents are described as being holy and the foremost center in Apulia, as they embrace Saint Nicholas as their protector.¹²⁷ The Baresi arrived at the shore, and their relatives even rowed out to them. It was then announced that a church dedicated to the saint was to be called in the domanial court, or the court of the Byzantine catapan, which sparked a controversy with others who wanted the saint to be buried at the episcopal see.¹²⁸ The abbot of the Saint Benedict monastery, Dom Elias, led the effort in making the domanial court Nicholas' home. The archbishop of Bari, Lord Urso, received word of this development and ordered the relics to be redirected to his episcopal palace. The sailors, upon hearing this, protested Lord Urso's decision, and both parties began to fight, resulting in two deaths. They agreed to take the body to the domanial court and into the Church of Saint Eustratius the Martyr of Christ, one of the churches that would be leveled days later. On this leveled site, Abbot Elias and nobles from Bari managed the project of the future Basilica di San Nicola.¹²⁹ Then, a list of miracles and descriptions of pilgrims who visited the relics are recorded.¹³⁰

In this descriptive account of Saint Nicholas' translation, Nicephorus clearly states the reasons for the Bari initiative. First, competition with the Venetians is highlighted. Further into the account, the Pope's dream is cited as the motive for their trip, as St. Nicholas reportedly appealed to the Pope and requested that the people of Bari rescue his relics from the invading Turks who had been conquering eastern Christendom. I am investigating the two main

¹²⁷ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 188.

¹²⁸ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 189.

¹²⁹ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 190-91.

¹³⁰ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 192.

justifications cited in Nicephorus's account to highlight the commercial tensions between Italian peninsular cities and the rising Mediterranean tensions of the late eleventh century between the Latin Christian and Eastern Orthodox worlds.

Venetian Tensions and Eastern Instability

Tensions between Bari and Venice are illustrated in their race for Saint Nicholas' relics. In Nicephorus's first description of the plot to "liberate" St. Nicholas's relics, the men of Bari determined they would take the relics from Myra as part of their trading expedition from Antioch. While formulating this plan, they found out about the Venetians' identical plan. "At the moment, the Venetians, too, were headed for Antioch for similar commercial reasons. When the Barians had verified that fact, in checking on the Venetians' actions they found out that the Venetians had equipped themselves with iron instruments with which they might, if they could get there first, enter the Myran shrine of blessed Nicholas the confessor." Once they found out about this, they swore to "outdo not only the Venetians but all those stationed in Myra."¹³¹ It appears that the threat from the Venetians expedited their initiative. Furthermore, both cities were traveling to the same trading destination in Antioch from their homes on the Adriatic Sea. Not only were the two trading port cities competing commercially, but they were also competing for religious patronage. Obtaining the relics of Saint Nicholas became an object of immense desire between the two cities, as this would enhance their city's reputation. When they finally made it to the tomb, the Barians removed the relics intact and covered them with silk and intentionally left behind a wonder-working icon.¹³² The Venetians would dispute the entirety of the relics taken, and I will elaborate on their translation record and perspective in the following section.

¹³¹ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 177-78.

¹³² Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 183.

Another crucial component of the Bari and Venetian intervention is the context of the expanding Seljuk Turks and declining Byzantine power. Nicephorus discusses how Myrans had fled their homes because of Turkish raids. The series of invasions in the Byzantine Empire by the Seljuk Turks during the eleventh century severely weakened the Empire, along with the explosion of the Crusades at the end of the century. In the 1040s, the Seljuks expanded into eastern Anatolia.¹³³ By the mid-1060s, southwestern Byzantine territories were infiltrated by the Seljuks.¹³⁴ Byzantine weakness can be attributed to years of civil wars after the death of Emperor Basil II in 1025,¹³⁵ as well as Norman incursions. In the 1040s, the Normans began to establish strongholds in Byzantine-controlled Apulia in Southern Italy, while Eastern Anatolia faced invasions from Turkomans.¹³⁶ In 1071 Byzantine commander, Diogenes, while leading his forces in central Anatolia, would have likely heard about the fall of the katepanato of Longobardia, or the fall of Bari to the Normans.¹³⁷ The famous Byzantine-Seljuk battle, the Battle of Manzikert, resulted in the capture of Byzantine Emperor Romanos by the Seljuks.¹³⁸ The defeat at Manzikert and the capture of the emperor allowed for further Seljuk encroachment in the Byzantine political vacuum.¹³⁹ Following the Byzantine loss, civil unrest followed, and the loss of Byzantine power in Anatolia is believed to be due to the actions of the Norman mercenary leader, Roussel of Bailleuil. Battles against him in 1073 and 1074, along with civil wars in the following decade, greatly destabilized the empire, as Seljuk influence increased.¹⁴⁰ From 1073 to

¹³³ Georgios Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert, 1071*, (ARC Humanities Press, 2024), 82, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781802701722>.

¹³⁴ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 92.

¹³⁵ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 99.

¹³⁶ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 100.

¹³⁷ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 118.

¹³⁸ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 166.

¹³⁹ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 180.

¹⁴⁰ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 171.

1076, the Byzantine Empire lost central and eastern Asia Minor to the Turks, and in the west of the empire, revolts from 1077 to 1081 established further Turkish presence.¹⁴¹

The political instability in the Byzantine Empire during the eleventh century was a primary justification for the theft of Saint Nicholas' relics. The Myrans' alleged cowardice and abandonment of their city contributed to the justification provided for the theft. The "Greek" Myrans were criticized for fleeing in the face of the invaders, as described by Saint Nicholas' demand to the Myrans to stay and defend their city. The context of the invasion of the Seljuk Turks paints a complete picture of this part of the translation. In the laments of the Greek townspeople, the Myrans claim Nicholas as the only form of remaining protection. They felt as if their father figure was abandoning them. Such confusion as to why he would leave after almost seven centuries plagued them, and the Baresi's only answer was that it was his will, as communicated through the pope. This reflects the instability of the Byzantine Empire, leaving its people clinging to relics for any sense of safety against invaders. Nicephorus made it clear that Bari was in a tricky position: trying to affirm its economic preeminence in the Eastern Mediterranean in competition with Venice, and to transfer Christian relics from the East to the West as a way to safeguard them from the Muslim Turks. Transferring an important saint into the hands of Western Christianity was able to be completed during this unstable time in the Byzantine Empire.

Papal Message

The other primary motive behind the translation, according to Nicephorus, was the pope's¹⁴² alleged dream, relaying a direct message to the Baresi to transport the relics. This was

¹⁴¹ Theotokis, *The Campaign and Battle of Manzikert*, 176.

¹⁴² The exact pope mentioned is unclear.

revealed when the Baresi merchants were talking with the Byzantine custodians. The Myrans immediately regretted telling the Baresi the whereabouts of the holy liquid—and thereby the corpse—and stated that Saint Nicholas would never let the merchants touch him, threatening to alert the citizens. In the heat of an argument, the Baresi “chose their words with saintly ingenuity” to de-escalate the situation. To justify their demands, they said to the custodians:

“You should know that when the pope of the city of Rome came to our city of Bari, accompanied by many archbishops and a retinue of clergy and laity, he himself sent us to these parts to transfer this sacred body there. He did all this because that confessor of God appeared to him in his sleep and requested to be transported to our land...”

and followed this with an offer of payment.¹⁴³ By claiming that the pope, the head of the Catholic Church, received a message from Saint Nicholas, they evoked a sense of unquestionable authority that the custodians were intimidated by. It is unclear whether the pope actually traveled to Bari or if this was a rhetorical device employed by Nicephorus. This vision of Nicholas asking to be moved coincides with the alleged visions of three Myra citizens reported by the custodians of St. Nicholas's tomb. The monks admitted that they now see the validity in the prediction conveyed by Nicholas.¹⁴⁴

Contextually speaking, the translation occurred a few decades after the official split of the church into Catholic and Orthodox. The 1054 separation of the Christian Church into East and West, known as the Great Schism, occurred about thirty years before the theft of Saint Nicholas' relics from the Byzantine to the Latin lands. It is valuable to note this Byzantine-Latin tension in the context of the translation. It begs the question of why Christians would steal relics from other Christians. The centuries-long tensions between the two traditions had recently manifested in the Schism. The two churches decided to excommunicate each other after a series of arguments over

¹⁴³ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 179.

¹⁴⁴ Jones, *Saint Nicolas of Myra*, 181.

ritual and doctrine, one of them being over what sort of bread should be served at communion. The Greek patriarch had denounced the Pope and Franks for celebrating the eucharist with "azymes," which was the unleavened bread used by Jews during Passover. Meanwhile, Pope Leo IX heard news of the condemnation of the Latin rite followers in Constantinople. The following excommunications resulted in the event known as the Great Schism.¹⁴⁵ Scholar Brett Whalen places the controversy over the eucharist in the context of the beginning of the ecclesiastical reform movement. It was intended to purify the church, create a distinction between laity and clergy, and assert Roman supremacy over the offices and teachings of the church.¹⁴⁶ It is important to note that this movement intended to bring Christians united under one *populus christianus*. This idea of homogenous religion, however, only exacerbated divisions between Latins and Greeks—especially since papal supremacy was promoted above all else. The Greek patriarch's accusation offended the West, as they were in the midst of cementing their renewed definitions of Christianity and promoting papal power.¹⁴⁷ The Greek patriarch's actions fit into the "history of arrogance and rebellion against the Roman church since the era of the Constantinian peace." Rome historically saw heresies and threats to a unified doctrine come out of the East.¹⁴⁸ The followers of the Constantinople church were now seen as heretics and in opposition to orthodoxy.¹⁴⁹

In the broader context of Greek and Latin tensions in the medieval Mediterranean, the Myran and Baresi competing ownership of St. Nicholas' relics clearly display the two religions' turbulent relationship. A clear example of this complicated dialogue between the Greek guardians and the Baresi thieves is exemplified in Nicephorus' statement on the meaning of

¹⁴⁵ Brett Whalen, "Rethinking the Schism of 1054: Authority, Heresy, and the Latin Rite," *Traditio* 62, (2007): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S036215290000519>.

¹⁴⁶ Whalen, "Rethinking the Schism," 4.

¹⁴⁷ Whalen, "Rethinking the Schism," 5.

¹⁴⁸ Whalen, "Rethinking the Schism," 13.

¹⁴⁹ Whalen, "Rethinking the Schism," 21.

Nicholas' name. "For 'Nicholas' in Greek means 'Victory of the People' in Latin. He truly was Victor when he acquired the Barians and Apulians as protector, freeing them from the grip of infirmities!"¹⁵⁰ Nicholas is presented as both Latin and Greek, a mediator between the Latin and Greek schism. This may appear contradictory to the aforementioned tense relationship between the Latins and Greeks, but after considering the broader Mediterranean context in which the theft occurred, the potential unification of Latin Christianity and Greek Orthodoxy makes sense. In the early years of the Crusades, Christian religious leaders wanted a united front against the Muslims. Nicholas thereby exemplifies another aspect of Latin and Greek relations. Translating his name from Greek into Latin, meaning "Victory of the People," paints the saint as a cross-cultural figure, uniting his followers under Christianity.

The competing claims of the Baresi merchants and the residents of Myra to the relics of Saint Nicholas reveal the saint's importance to both Eastern and Western—or Greek and Latin—Christians, since he was a foundational figure in the church with his involvement at Nicaea. The Baresi citizens' theft of the relics of St. Nicholas reflects the broader struggle between Western and Eastern Christianity across the Mediterranean throughout the so-called crusading era of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries.

Hometown Promotion

The language of Nicephorus's account of the translation heavily applauds the city of Bari and celebrates its glory as well as the bravery of its devoted citizens. This is hardly surprising since *translationes* were written to justify acts of theft. Nicephorus was sponsored by local officials to write this piece and thereby establishes the civically minded intention that went into

¹⁵⁰ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 188.

writing. Such self-promotion from the city of Bari is particularly strong in this piece. Considering Bari's recent history, having been taken over from the Greek Byzantines by the Latin Normans eighteen years prior, this attempt at bolstering the city's newly "Latinized" status under the religious patronage of a saint who was venerated across the Mediterranean by both Eastern and Western Christians would have helped to establish their identity. A clear example of this complicated dialogue between the Greek guardians and the Baresi thieves, as Nicephorus wrote: "It was determined by God that the city of Bari and the whole province of Apulia were to be visited and ennobled by a most propitious and lasting splendor," that being Saint Nicholas' relics. It was also decided by God that merchants from Bari would take the relics on their journey from Antioch, which was intended for trade purposes.¹⁵¹ Not only would Bari residents themselves complete the translation, but they would also bring Bari's own province, Apulia (Puglia), immense honor.

Housing the relics would also promote the city as an important pilgrimage center. The basilica was built as soon as the relics were brought to Bari, and the crypt was designed with stairways leading down from all aisles. Great volumes of people were expected as visitors, clearly.¹⁵² At the end of the narrative, Nicephorus describes the various miracles that took place and the pilgrims who visited the relics. People from varying classes, from nobles to paupers, visited the relics. Plenty of Bari citizens, of course, visited, as well as a Pisan man and a pilgrim—although it is unclear where he traveled from. People from all over Puglia, in towns including Betuntus (Bitonto), Ascalon (Ascoli Satriano), Taranto, and Saint Vitus, all visited the Basilica di San Nicola's famed relics.¹⁵³ This demonstrates the popularity of the cult, especially within the region of Puglia. Nicephorus presents St. Nicholas as a protector of the Pugliesi, or

¹⁵¹ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 177.

¹⁵² Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 103.

¹⁵³ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 192.

people of the region. Saint Nicholas' relics clearly attracted people from various regions, displaying the widespread nature of his cult and moldable nature as a multidimensional patron saint.

When the relics arrive at the port of Saint George, just four miles away from Bari, Nicephorus expands on the miraculous translation in a lengthy praise.

“How many glories are associated with that city of Bari! That it should transcend others as does the Samaritan, I will try to set forth in the fewest words: O Bari with all thy residents, at one with the angelic Jerusalem, exultingly rejoice in thy infinite favors! Rejoice Bari without restraint, full of delight! Rejoice Bari, overwhelmed with so many eulogies! Rejoice Bari, drawing to thyself this new legacy of salvation! Rejoice that thou shouldst prove more worthy of praise than all the strong points of Apulia! Rejoice that thou art crowned in triumphant victory!”¹⁵⁴

This passionate celebration for the city displays the city's desire for an enhanced personal identity. In this commercially competitive world, a heavily celebrated city like Nicephorus' Bari seemed blessed and chosen by divine will as protectors of Saint Nicholas' relics. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, Geary's work in *Furta Sacra* discusses the idea of relics providing people with identity—an identity they can mold for their own ideals after the translation. Bari knew that by rehousing a significant early Christian saint, their city would increase in prestige.

Anonymous Greek Account

A telling sign of the Byzantine decline in power is evident in the translation account provided by an anonymous thirteenth-century Greek monk. This account praises the Baresi for their doings, which is surprising considering they stole relics belonging to the author's Byzantine culture for more than seven centuries. One would think they would complain of the theft, but rather, they praise the Baresi.

¹⁵⁴ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 188.

This account, written in the thirteenth century, starts by situating the translation during the time in which “the foreign and infidel hordes that had migrated through the Roman Empire had been pacified, and the bold Normans who had voyaged thither had been beaten and dispersed.” This is in reference to the invading Seljuk Turks and wars between the Normans and Byzantines throughout the 1080s.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, the author celebrates the Baresi for their work and supposed pure intentions, having been moved by God. The same translation story originating from Nicephorus' popular account is told, but a bold statement is made in the discussion about the divine fragrance. After the Baresi broke into the tomb, the author says, “From these portents it was clear to see that the Bishop of Christ was bestowing himself on the Italians.” This Byzantine concession to the Baresi is shocking. A Byzantine, Greek Orthodox monk admitted that Saint Nicholas had moved according to his own will—from being the protector of Myra to the patron of Bari.¹⁵⁶ Jones comments on this, claiming that Byzantium should have reacted strongly against the theft of Saint Nicholas’ relics.¹⁵⁷ This Greek Orthodox monk's account, however, suggests that—at least at the time when he was writing in thirteenth century—Eastern Christians viewed their Western Christian counterparts as brethren, contending that the Byzantine patriarchs and emperors, in fact, were grateful that Nicholas was safe outside of the Turkish sphere of influence.

This is an intriguing counterpoint to the narrative surrounding Western Christian and Eastern Orthodox tensions—though not unusual, as Latins and Greeks had a tumultuous relationship in the centuries of the Crusades. The struggle over Nicholas’ relics, as he was a

¹⁵⁵ It is vital to note that in 1204, Constantinople was sacked by the Latins, which included Venetian involvement. This adds further complication to the time period in which this perspective was written. Such an applaudatory account celebrating the Latin Baresi demonstrates this back-and-forth relationship between the Greek Orthodox and Latin Christian communities.

¹⁵⁶ “Medieval Sourcebook: The Translation of Saint Nicholas (Greek Anonymous Account, 13th Cent. MS)”, Internet History Sourcebook, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/nicholas-bari.asp>.

¹⁵⁷ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 197.

significant saint to both populations, seems to be dismissed in this account. It is unclear the year in which the account was written, but considering it was written in the thirteenth century, this account could have been written from the perspective of a united Christian initiative moving relics westward. It is also representative of the turbulent relationship between the Greek Orthodox and Latin Christians, as the Greeks clearly supported the Bari during this time period. This Bari-sympathizing account reveals a look into the complicated politics of the Mediterranean Middle Ages, as a Greek praised the Bari merchants for stealing a saint born in and significant to his empire.

The Venetian Lido Account

The Venetians completed their own translation of Saint Nicholas' relics in 1100, meaning it took place thirteen years *after* the Bari translation. The account was written by an anonymous monk at the church of San Nicolò al Lido in Venice. This Benedictine house had prior devotion to Saint Nicholas, though there is no recording of any relics already present.¹⁵⁸ The Venetian translation account is known as the *Monachi Anonymi Littorensis Historia De Translatione Sanctorum Magni Nicolai*. The author describes this work as serving two purposes: providing an argument against the authenticity of the Bari relics and providing a history of the First Crusade.¹⁵⁹

This translation account has historically been evaluated as a crucial Crusades source, as described by scholar Alasdair Grant, but overlooked in the significance of the translation story. I will look at the Venetian interest in Saint Nicholas' relics, their time in Myra, and the celebration

¹⁵⁸ Grant, "Byzantium's Ashes," 253.

¹⁵⁹ "Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum: Magni Nicolai, Terra Marique Miraculis Gloriosi, Ejusdem Avunculi, Alterius Nicolai, Theodorique, Martyris Pretiosi, De Civitate Mirea In Monasterium S. Nicolai De Littore Venetiarum, 6 Dec. 1100," in *Recueil Des Historiens Des Croisades* (Paris Imprimerie Nationale, 1895), XLIX.

of the saint. It was written sometime between the events of 1100 and 1116. After organizing their fleet at the Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Venice, the Venetians engaged in an altercation with the Pisans after spending a winter in Rhodes.¹⁶⁰

The text begins with the departure of a Venetian fleet to Jerusalem as they passed the city's basilica dedicated to St. Nicholas. The crew received blessings from the Venetian patriarch and various bishops as they left for the Holy Land. The author mentions the longstanding devotion of the Venetians to Nicholas and the glory he would bring to the West.¹⁶¹ They also justified their rightful claim by citing divine intervention in the form of the miraculous materialization of a holy wind, as the wind redirected their ship to Myra.¹⁶² This divinely-directed "detour" occurred in the context of these Venetian First Crusaders' trip to Jerusalem. They had departed from Rhodes, had just passed Smyrna—or the modern-day Turkish city of Izmir—when the sails of the ship were redirected. The writer attributed this to Saint Nicholas' devotion to his city of Myra and to the greater glory of the West. The Venetians eventually landed at Myra and described it as being destroyed by pagans and deserted by clergy and other men. They had relocated to a castle about two miles away from the St. Nicholas' basilica and operated on a shift system, going to the site of the church four times a week. The Venetians rushed to the basilica and put down their weapons, praising the saint.¹⁶³ They described the chest, partly broken from the time the Baresi came and took only part of the relics. Aggressively, the Venetian thieves threatened the guards with torture. The guards even referenced a past attempt, under Emperor Basil, in which he tried to transport the relics but was unsuccessful.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Grant, "Byzantium's Ashes," 255.

¹⁶¹ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 256.

¹⁶² Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 259.

¹⁶³ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 260.

¹⁶⁴ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 261.

This narrative poses a stark contrast to the Baresi, claiming that not only did the Baresi savagely take the relics but also carelessly leave pieces behind. The Baresi described their actions—carefully transporting the relics in silk and keeping them intact, as that was the wish of Saint Nicholas which was demonstrated in the miracle revealing the importance of his intactness. Regarding the Baresi and Venetian approaches to taking the relics, there are differences in their dealings with the Myrans. According to Nicephorus’ account, the Baresi sailors had to physically hold back the Myran monks, while in the Venetian account, the thieves threatened the monks. This paints the Baresi as messier in their approach, and less honorable in comparison to the Venetians who arrived in a large, organized fleet and used only words of negotiation, according to the Venetian anonymous author.

In the midst of the heated argument between the Venetians and Byzantine guards, one of these guards—who was terrified of being tortured—told the Venetian bishops on the ship that he would reveal where the relics were. Bishop Henry and the leader of the army, John, approached the city with warriors. The language of this Venetian narrative makes a distinction between the two arriving groups: the fighting soldiers and the clergy singing their psalms. Then, the bishop delivered a grand speech in the church and appealed to San Nicholas, asking him to grace the West and the Latin people with his presence after spending centuries in the East with the Greeks.¹⁶⁵ One of the monks then revealed a chest that housed relics that preceded Saint Nicholas. The relics were described as useless to the Greeks but useful to the Venetians. There were two bodies in this chest, those of St. Theodore and Nicholas’ uncle, both of whom were past archbishops of Myra.¹⁶⁶ Saint Nicholas had healed a blind man with the oil of Saint Theodore’s lamp, and Nicholas’ uncle had blessed him. The relics being described as “useless”

¹⁶⁵ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, “Historia De Translatione Sanctorum,” 262.

¹⁶⁶ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, “Historia De Translatione Sanctorum,” 263.

could possibly demonstrate the fear and pessimism associated with increased instability in the Byzantine Empire, as Myra had recently been invaded by the Seljuk Turks decades prior.

Whether or not the Greeks actually admitted that the relics of St. Theodore and Nicholas' uncle were useless, this description is vital to note the conditions in which the Venetian theft took place.

Then, the Venetians smelled the sweet odor of the relics, signaling the saint's divine presence and request to be transported.¹⁶⁷ Once they cracked the tomb open, they found an epitaph that read *Hic Requiescit Magnus B Episcopus Nicolaus, Terra Marique Miraculis Gloriosus*, or "Here Rests the Great Bishop Nicholas, Glorious of Earth and Sea for Miracles." The anonymous Venetian then recounts the story describing Nicholas' unwillingness to move to Constantinople under Emperor Basil, which is why he was left in the Myra church.¹⁶⁸ The guards accused the Venetians of being cruel and said that they had left not only them but all of Greece hopeless. They even go as far as to say that even the Turks, despite destroying their lands, left them with some sense of hope. They ask that, for the empires' honor, the Venetians return part of the relics. The Venetians negotiated with the local Myra clergy and returned a box they had found in the altar and gave gold pieces to help restore the church.¹⁶⁹ The large fleet of the embassy was described as being stocked with arms.¹⁷⁰

After participating in the First Crusade to the Holy Land, the Venetians returned to their city to place the relics in the Littore Rivoalti monastery, which was the church they had departed from that was dedicated to Saint Nicholas.¹⁷¹ The abbot and the congregation met the fleet with crosses and banners.¹⁷² In a praising devotion to the three patrons and their previous patron, Saint

¹⁶⁷ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 264.

¹⁶⁸ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 266.

¹⁶⁹ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 268.

¹⁷⁰ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 269.

¹⁷¹ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 278.

¹⁷² Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 279.

Mark, the author promotes Venice. They call Mark their defender in war and Nicholas the father of Greeks and the helmsman in ships. With Mark, they attack the enemy, and with Nicholas, they can travel the seas safely.¹⁷³ By calling Nicholas the father of the Greeks, the Venetians associated their identity with Byzantine culture, as Venice had been part of the Byzantine Empire and maintained strong connections. This embrace of Nicholas likely resonated with the Byzantine population in Venice, promoting the city as a multicultural community home to both Greeks and Latins. Alongside this alliance between the two societies, the Venetians could have also embraced St. Nicholas as a result of his early Christian association. As active participants in the Crusades, Venetian officials would have benefited from St. Nicholas' orthodox, Christian patronage. A unique feature of this account is a flashback to the years between 1043 and 1065, in which the Venetians were visited by a man greatly resembling Saint Nicholas who said he would later return and who told them that he would reside in a monastery dedicated to him in the Rivoalti.¹⁷⁴

The Venetians completed their mission on the way back from the First Crusade, and their mindset is evident in the author's use of militarized language. He focused on the military power of Venice and the prestige Saint Nicholas could bring to their fleets. This greatly differs from the Baresi motives. The Baresi were not known for their military power, in contrast to Venice who participated in the First Crusade. The Venetians' reasons for obtaining the remaining relics reveal their goals as a powerful Mediterranean state that Saint Nicholas' patronage could promote or protect on the seas. Completing their translation in the context of a military expedition, the Venetians reveal their perceived notion of Saint Nicholas' powers and patronage, as they desired military enhancement. As leaders of the crusading effort, the Venetian author portrays the fleet as

¹⁷³ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 281.

¹⁷⁴ Monachi Anonymi Littorensis, "Historia De Translatione Sanctorum," 282.

defenders of Christianity against the infidel. He paints them as the legitimate possessors of the authentic relics of Saint Nicholas, in comparison to the chaotic, unorganized Baresi sailors who had taken the relics in 1087.

Another notable feature of this account is the Venetian acquisition of two additional relics. According to the writer, not just Nicholas was gained, but so was his Uncle Nicholas and Saint Theodore. If the Venetians did indeed only take part of Nicholas' relics, the other two gains could have made up for their late arrival at Saint Nicholas tomb. Both bodies had significance and association with Saint Nicholas, which should have satisfied the Venetians. At this point, the Venetians had claimed the three bodies from Myra, demonstrating just how desperate they were for relics. In a time of escalating violence in the Mediterranean, it would make sense for them to gather as many protectors as they could. The Venetian authors accuse the Greeks of describing the relics as pointless for their use, but helpful for their own. This could reflect awareness of their declining state and was crafted as a piece of propaganda—a “passing of the torch” of their beloved relics. Essentially, the Venetian writer painted the Greeks as having greater faith in the Venetians' use of the relics. Venice was promoted as the most worthy to hold these relics, promoting them as the new defenders of Latin Christendom. Referring back to the troubled state of the Byzantine Empire at this time, the Myrans were clearly hopeless according to the Venetians. They believed that the powerful Venetian state could benefit from additional patronage of St. Theodore and the uncle of Nicholas, also named Nicholas. As both sets of relics were associated with Saint Nicholas and were also past archbishops of Myra, the Venetian claim was further backed. The cult would hold deeper importance and establish the Venetians as superior competitors to the Baresi as they held the sacred relics of Saint Nicholas' predecessors.

While the Venetians clearly presented themselves as Crusaders and used this identity as a form of justification for obtaining the relics, the Baresi asserted their involvement in the Crusades with the creation of the Bishop's Throne in 1098—as seen in Figure 4.1—in preparation for the arrival of Pope Urban II. The throne is in the style of Italian Romanesque in the basilica's central apse, and the symbols seen in the church include a calf, a heraldic eagle, a lion, a pelican, and a griffin. These reflect the Byzantine Eastern Christian legacy of Bari.¹⁷⁵ According to Dorin, the throne would have been created in the context of Archbishop Elias preparing the basilica for the 1098 Council of Bari as a show of strength and importance to the visiting Pope Urban II.

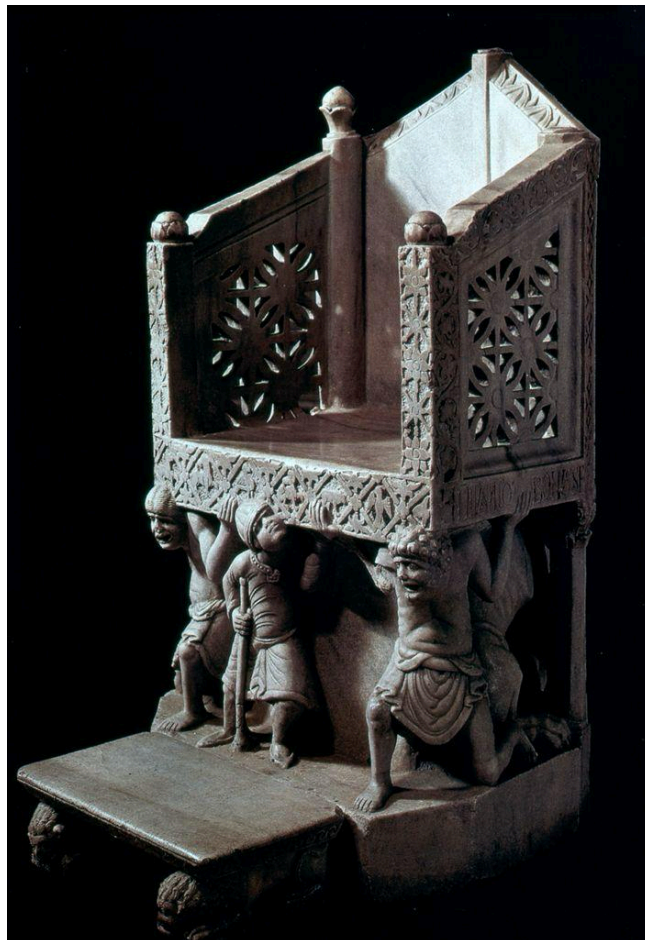


Figure 4.1: The Bari Episcopal Throne. *Bari: S. Nicola Int.: Throne of Archbishop Helie*. 12th C. Visual Arts Legacy Collection. Artstor. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13911342>.

¹⁷⁵ Dorin, “The Mystery of the Marble Man,” 29.

Byzantine symbols cover the throne, referencing Bari's past cultural heritage and calling on early Christianity. By presenting himself as a Greek sitting on the throne, Abbot Elias presented himself as a ruler over a cosmopolitan, diverse city. Considering Bari had a Greek population from the past Byzantine occupation, Elias could have been attempting to identify with and appeal to its citizenry. Moving on to the seat of the chair, there are five figures presented.¹⁷⁶ The central figure among these five has historically been difficult to identify. The figure has roots in Islamic artistic tradition, as seen by its zodiac figures and geometric and floral details. The author agrees that the figure resembles a Seljuk Turk or an Arab due to the staff, robe, and hat.¹⁷⁷ There was a similar-looking figure in a wooden door panel from the western palace of the Fatimids in Cairo from the eleventh century, which is now destroyed. They both carry staffs, wear knee-length robes, and headgear. Other ivory Islamic sculptures show the same headgear, which represents a turban. This shows that the dress was a common theme throughout Muslim societies in the Mediterranean.¹⁷⁸

Islamic artistic influence in Puglia was still commonplace at this time, despite the Muslim end to rule in the late tenth century.¹⁷⁹ The headgear was a depiction of exoticism in this type of art, as the hat was designed with grooves that were also seen on centaurs and monkeys in the cathedral of Barletta, north of Bari. In the context of trade with the Levant and the years leading up to the Crusades, this depiction would have resonated with Baresi.¹⁸⁰ Dorin claims that the throne can be interpreted in two perspectives: that of "Elias's Solomonic ambitions," representing the center of his authority as one of the most powerful church figures in the area, or that of victory in the Crusades. This second perspective is fitting in the context of my discussion

¹⁷⁶ Dorin, "The Mystery of the Marble Man," 39-40.

¹⁷⁷ Dorin, "The Mystery of the Marble Man," 42.

¹⁷⁸ Dorin, "The Mystery of the Marble Man," 43.

¹⁷⁹ Dorin, "The Mystery of the Marble Man," 46.

¹⁸⁰ Dorin, "The Mystery of the Marble Man," 47.

surrounding Urban's visit, as Pope Urban II commissioned the throne, literally giving Archbishop Elias "the seat" to Bari's church. The throne in this case would represent the subjugation of the Eastern enemies, as the central figure looks up toward the throne. This would have been an intense image, that of a Catholic official sitting on top of a Muslim depicted figure. The figures on both sides of the central figure are depicted as barbarians, particularly from North Africa as described by Dorin, and this also adds to the complete image of the throne, diminishing the Muslim presence.¹⁸¹

The nature of the basilica takes on a different meaning with the addition of the throne. Obviously, the throne was a later addition to the structure originally dedicated to house Saint Nicholas' relics. With the Council of Bari and its discussion of the Crusades, the basilica arguably became a crucial gathering place for Latin Christendom. Pope Urban II, who was responsible for launching the First Crusade, consecrated the basilica and blessed the relics before the Council. This action, in addition to the context in which the relics were stolen, places Nicholas in the crusading context. The saint who represents Christian orthodoxy, the sea, sailors, and various other symbols, was now adopted in the Crusades. Considering also that Bari by the 1090s had turned into a prominent point of embarkation for the Holy Land, the city came to hold great significance, in addition to its significance as a pilgrimage site.¹⁸² Furthermore, the attraction to Saint Nicholas increased as more people were drawn to the city to participate in the Crusades.¹⁸³

Before the Council of Bari, the translation of St. Nicholas' relics was evidently associated with the rising tensions of the Mediterranean, leading to the Crusades. Pope Urban's visit and the Council of Bari were turning points: placing crusading discussions in Saint Nicholas' Basilica.

¹⁸¹ Dorin, "The Mystery of the Marble Man," 48.

¹⁸² Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas," 507.

¹⁸³ Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas," 509.

Bari can be considered a worthy competitor to the Venetians in terms of their crusading identities. The throne was commissioned just two years before the Venetian translation occurred. This places Bari in the crusading effort, on par with Venice. In this context, the two cities were also engaging in a military competition, in addition to commercial and religious competitions.

Chapter Five

The Basilica di San Nicola a Bari

As described by Nicephorus, the city of Bari decided to build a basilica in honor of its new patron saint. Constructed under Norman rule, the basilica replaced the Byzantine government headquarters. In this chapter, I will explore the elements of the basilica that demonstrate values associated with the adoption of the city's new patron. Saint Nicholas' patronage would become Bari's identity and an attempt at reestablishing itself as an important Norman port along the Adriatic after it took a blow, losing its status in the Byzantine realm.

Byzantine Architectural Influences

In the construction of the late eleventh and early twelfth-century Basilica di San Nicola in Bari, elements from the various cults came together, culminating in one space. Before the basilica was constructed under Norman rule, the site was the Byzantine citadel, known as the Court of the Catepan. This included the administrative center, the governor's palace, and several churches.¹⁸⁴ The construction of the basilica incorporated *spolia*, or repurposed architectural features, as well as adopted styles from Byzantine lands, and was inspired by Norman imagery. Emphasizing how the basilica was constructed in the midst of the Gregorian Reform movement, the architectural historian Clare Vernon argues that the design of the church was consciously modeled after Late Antique and early Christian prototypes,¹⁸⁵ in accordance with the Reform movement's aim to return the church to its pure state, referencing the first few centuries of Christianity. Church officials aimed to reverse several of the medieval church's corruptions and,

¹⁸⁴ Clare Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy: Mediterranean Art and Architecture in Medieval Bari* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), 14-15.

¹⁸⁵ Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy*, 75.

notably, place renewed emphasis on the orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed.¹⁸⁶ In the eleventh century, Pope Urban II was even recorded claiming that the teachings of the Nicene Synod should be equally venerated as the Gospel. Jones states that scholars consider St. Nicholas to be the model spokesman for Trinitarianism put forward by the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea.¹⁸⁷ His staunch defense of this religious doctrine connected him to this foundational moment in early Christianity.

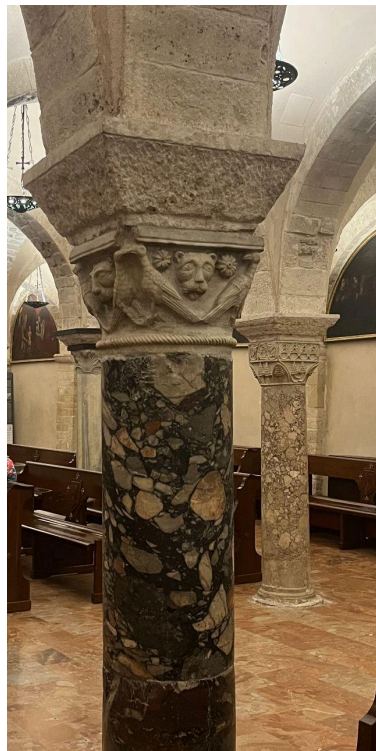


Figure 5.1: Photo taken by Nicolette D'Ingillo, 2025, Byzantine style capital in the crypt of the Basilica of Saint Nicholas, Bari.

In evaluating the imagery found in the crypt of the basilica, Vernon describes the iconography of the "recycled" and "Eastern early Christian" capitals in the crypt. Several capitals in the crypt originate from the sixth century and were created in Byzantine territories. Two of the

¹⁸⁶ Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy*, 78.

¹⁸⁷ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 63.

capitals, which Vernon numbered 26 and 28, feature early Christian symbols of fertility, like cornucopias made from goats' horns filled with fruit and flowers. The recycled capitals collection was assembled from different parts of the Byzantine Empire under the direction of a patron who collaborated with Bari merchants, looking for specific designs from the period of Late Antiquity.¹⁸⁸ Images of various animals, cornucopia, and foliage referencing ideas of paradise are seen in early Christian art, as depicted in Figure 5.1.¹⁸⁹ Vernon explains that Bari has often been overlooked in its demonstration of reform values, as the Gregorian Reform movement is more traditionally associated with the Southern Italian cities of Montecassino and Salerno.¹⁹⁰

Norman Veneration and Imagery

Even before the Normans adopted this saint as the protector of Bari, they venerated him in Northern France. The scholar Marie Dawn Hayes claims that the Norman adoption could have to do with the fact that Nicholas was never adopted by a particular ethnicity or nationality. To the Normans, who were known to be adventurous conquerors, this cult could have been more adaptable. There is evidence of his cult existing in the West around the ninth century and in Rouen, France, by the mid-tenth century. In the eleventh century, the name Nicholas became increasingly popular, and the cult expanded as seen from the chapels and churches dedicated to him. One of the chapels was founded in the Abbey of Jumieges, which is said to share similarities in architecture with the Basilica di San Nicola in Bari.¹⁹¹ Fulk Nerra, Count of Anjou (970-1040), was particularly devoted to the saint. He had survived a shipwreck that left him in Myra, the saint's territory. He credited his survival to Saint Nicholas, once again referencing

¹⁸⁸ Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy*, 16-18.

¹⁸⁹ Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy*, 75.

¹⁹⁰ Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy*, 78.

¹⁹¹ Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas," 494.

Nicholas' association with the sea. It was also said by Bernard Bachrach, in his biography of Fulk, that the count wanted to be associated with Nicholas' other tributes, like the military, secular piety, and merchants. He hoped for honor from his time in the military and built and restored churches in an attempt to promote secular piety.¹⁹² Furthermore, William the Conqueror claimed to have been saved from death by the intercession of Saint Nicholas, according to the English chronicler Oderic Vitalis. When crossing the English Channel on the sixth of December, Saint Nicholas' feast day, he secured safe travel. With all odds against him, including winds and a rough sea, he landed in England safely. Hayes explains that in this same account, the Oderic, it is apparent that Nicholas is a guardian for the Normans.¹⁹³ Once again, topics of sea voyages and favourable weather conditions are associated with the intercession of Saint Nicholas.

As for Norman aspects of the basilica, the North Portal, specifically in its archivolt, displays what most scholars believe to be an Arthurian legend. There are knights and soldiers dressed in Norman military clothes, and the frieze depicts a castle with mounted knights and soldiers guarding it. Vernon connects this image to a frieze on the portal of the Modena Cathedral, where inscriptions identify the figures, namely Arthur of Bretagne, his knights, and a woman who is most likely Guinevere. The image in the Bari frieze is believed to represent this story. This legend of King Arthur could have been introduced into this region by Crusaders arriving in Bari in 1096,¹⁹⁴ or could also have been brought by pilgrims.¹⁹⁵ From the Byzantine capitals in the crypt to the Norman-inspired imagery of the portals, there is a clear demonstration of the broad appeal of Saint Nicholas across the Mediterranean world and beyond, into the British Isles. The saints' followings from the Byzantine Empire and Northern France converge in

¹⁹² Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas," 495.

¹⁹³ Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas," 495-496.

¹⁹⁴ Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy*, 111-113.

¹⁹⁵ Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy*, 116.

the space of the basilica. The columns of Byzantine origin and the portals of Norman influence come together to display the growing reach of Saint Nicholas' cult, and his transformation from an Eastern Archbishop to a widely revered saint in the multicultural center of Bari.

Pope Urban II's Visit to the Basilica

Pope Urban II personally blessed the crypt housing Saint Nicholas' relics in 1089, and his visit was of great significance to the local church in Bari. Urban's visit to the basilica provided justification for the relic theft, as the Baresi received the most official form of approval for this theft. The head of Latin Christianity blessed the relics and their newly constructed basilica. When Bari was under Byzantine control, the papacy was distant from the church in Bari, but after the Norman conquest, this relationship shifted. The reformist papacy became more active in the region of Puglia. As previously discussed, there was debate over where to house Nicholas' relics. This ended in the relics' placement in the domonial court under Abbot Elias' direction. Elias' victory over the relic placement allowed him to oversee the construction of the basilica, which would soon be personally blessed by Pope Urban II and incorporated into the expanding world of Latin Christianity. The Council of Bari took place in 1098 and, in an incompletely built basilica, hosted around two hundred bishops, ecclesiastical and feudal officials. One of the main topics was the *filioque* controversy and dogma. The unification between the Eastern and Western churches was one of Pope Urban's main concerns. Furthermore, since 1095 at the Council of Clermont—which launched the First Crusade—Urban had been pushing for the cause. The Council of Bari would have focused on the Crusade discussion, as it was the launching point for the crusading fleet in 1096.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ Dorin, "The Mystery of the Marble Man," 38-39.

In Hayes' study on the Saint Nicholas cult, she focused on the ecclesiastical politics in Bari. While this is not a focus of my research, a brief background of the figures involved will provide clarification on the significance of Pope Urban II's visit to the basilica. The previously mentioned Abbot Elias took power as Archbishop of Bari after Archbishop Urso (a close supporter of Guiscard and the Normans). The recently conquered Bari could have supported Elias more, since he was not directly aligned with the Normans. Also, Urban and Elias had a relationship and shared reformist ideals. Elias invited Urban to consecrate the crypt at the Basilica di San Nicola, solidifying Urban's involvement in the city. This marked a strong contrast to the papacy's previous distant involvement in Puglia. After the visit to the basilica, donations increased, and Abbot Elias became a reputable figure in Puglia, with the pope, political figures, and citizens supporting him. Urban now extended the reach of the papacy into the prominent port city of Bari. Clearly, after the Norman conquest in Southern Italy, the papacy's influence dramatically increased in Puglia. Through Elias' rise in ecclesiastical politics, the Normans in Bari promoted Urban's agenda as part of the larger Gregorian Reform.

In regard to Pope Urban II's attempt at repairing the relationship between the Greek and Latin churches, Urban declared May 9th as the translation's anniversary and as a feast for the universal church. The transfer of Saint Nicholas' relics westward, to Latin lands, solidified his importance in the Roman church. As a key figure in the development of early Christian thought based in the Eastern Roman Empire, Nicholas' legacy had spread westward. The Council of Bari allowed for Saint Nicholas to become "a powerful symbol of ecumenical exchange." Nicholas' relics in Bari allowed a unique opportunity for Urban to reassert the power of Rome in an area dominated by Greek presence just decades before.¹⁹⁷ Urban's involvement in the Basilica di San Nicola placed his seal of approval on the significance of the relics. In the context of lasting

¹⁹⁷ Hayes, "The Cult of St Nicholas," 506.

tensions between Byzantium and Rome's religions, he took advantage of the unique position of St. Nicholas in both realms to further his ideals. Bari was enlisted in the papal effort to mend the schism between Latin Christianity and Greek Orthodoxy. The 1087 translation makes sense in terms of this papal attempt to mend the schism, as well as the Norman rule of the multicultural region of Puglia, which was previously under Byzantine rule.

Commemoration of the Bari Sailors

The Bari sailors who completed the translation were known as the *Societas Sancti Nicolai*. They would become prominent figures in the town, leading religious, political, and social areas.¹⁹⁸ Their celebration in Nicephorus' account reinforces the idea of the translation as a civic enterprise. They were assigned privileges, with Archbishop Elias granting each of the sixty-two men six privileges, including the right to burial next to the external walls of the basilica, and financial support provided for the *Societas* with funds from the clergy and Norman dukes.¹⁹⁹ Their privileges were considered exceptional, and this group of men formed a brotherhood which was supported by the clergy.²⁰⁰ This society was able to be buried on the site of the basilica, forever memorializing them. While housing the relics of Saint Nicholas, the basilica's property would also house the sailors who had "rescued" him and transported him to Bari. This act establishes them as vital to the basilica. Essentially, the basilica can also be seen as a memorial to the civilians who facilitated St. Nicholas' relocation to Bari and the city's adoption of the saint.

¹⁹⁸ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 88.

¹⁹⁹ Francesco Babudri, "Sinossi critica dei traslatori nicolaiani di Bari," *Archivio Storico Pugliese* 3 (1950): 64-65, <https://emeroteca.provincia.brindisi.it/Archivio%20Storico%20Pugliese/1950/fasc.%201-2%20articoli/Sinossi%20Critica%20dei%20Traslatori%20Nicolaiani%20di%20Bari.pdf>.

²⁰⁰ Babudri, "Sinossi critica," 71.

Chapter Six

Nicholas' Incorporation into the Western Collection of Saints

Pope Urban II's visit to the Basilica di San Nicola a Bari personally blessed the cult of St. Nicholas in the final years of the eleventh century. As saints' lives were collected in organized works in the following centuries, the figure of Saint Nicholas was popularized to populations living north of the Southern Mediterranean. The cult had already spread to Normandy, appearing as early as the mid-tenth century. In a telling comparison of legends, it is clear just how Saint Nicholas' cult was included in the Western collection and popular knowledge of saints.

The Book of Golden Legends and the Iconia 34

The Book of Golden Legends is a medieval collection of saints' lives. It was written by Jacobus de Voragine in the middle of the thirteenth century, and responded to the public's desire for an encyclopedia of saints.²⁰¹ De Voragine was born in 1228 near Genoa and entered the Dominican order as a teenager.²⁰² In his account of the legend of Saint Nicholas, he first discusses Nicholas' name, noting how, in Greek, it meant victory of the people, and that his name was very fitting because this saint was celebrated for teaching men and women how to overcome sin. Jacobus de Voragine then provides a full biography of the saint, highlighting his prominent role at the Council of Nicaea. Various miracles are recorded, including his saving of Myra from a famine, and the tale of the three generals who were to be punished, as previously mentioned.

²⁰¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Lives of the Saints / Translated by William Caxton from the Latin of Jacobus de Voragine. Selected and Edited by George V. O'Neill*, (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1914), vii.

²⁰² De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 1.

Voragine briefly records the Bari translation and characterizes the merchants who executed the theft as honorable figures. He calls the merchants “knights” and says they carried the relics “honourably into the city of Bari.”²⁰³ Calling merchants “knights” is a point that reflects the values of the author and his audience. He characterizes the citizens of Bari as noble warriors with honorable status. This could also have been an effort to equate the Bari sailors with holy Crusaders. In the original translations, they were described simply as brave merchants and sailors. This transition is a clear representation of the shift in time and location of Saint Nicholas’ cult, as the thieves changed from merchants to honorable knights. Here, Bari are portrayed as models, idealized versions of their original occupations as local heroes of their city.

Jacobus of Voragine's account of the life and miracles of St. Nicholas, however, also tells of two particular stories involving Jews. In the first story, a Christian man had borrowed money from a Jew and, on the altar of Saint Nicholas, the Christian swore he would repay it. When confronted for not paying the Jew back, this Christian claimed he had already paid. The Jew made him swear an oath, and the Christian who had borrowed the money brought a staff with him, inside of which he had secretly placed the money he had borrowed in the form of gold. The Christian cunningly swore he had already paid the Jew back while making the Jew hold his staff. After this incident, the Christian trickster went to sleep, and a cart slew him and broke the staff filled with gold. The God-fearing Jew heard about this and refused to take the gold, protesting that he would only take the gold if the thief was raised from the dead by Saint Nicholas’ intercession. The Christian trickster was, in fact, raised from the dead, and the Jewish man converted to Christianity.²⁰⁴ In this story, notably, Nicholas defended the Jew’s rights and punished the Christian for his trickery. He plays the role of a converter, leading the Jew to

²⁰³ Internet History Sourcebooks, “Medieval Sourcebook: The Golden Legend.”

²⁰⁴ Internet History Sourcebooks, “Medieval Sourcebook: The Golden Legend.”

embrace Christianity after he raised the thief from the dead. Nicholas here, once again, is presented as an advocate for those who have been cheated. But he was not just a defender of his fellow Christians who had been cheated, but also intervened on behalf of all those who had been cheated or wrongfully treated, regardless of their faith.

In the following story, a different Jew kept an image of St. Nicholas in his house and demanded that the saint protect his household or else he would beat the image. After thieves came and robbed his house, the Jew tortured the image, scolding Nicholas for failing to protect his goods. Saint Nicholas then appeared to the thieves and said that if they did not return the stolen goods, they would be hanged. After the thieves returned the stolen goods to the Jew and told him what happened, the Jew, in awe, converted to Christianity. This story is shockingly similar to the *Iconia 34*.²⁰⁵

This story, in contrast, was situated in the context of a Vandal raid of Greek Calabria. It memorializes a time of invasion in Southern Italy by the Vandals, and the power of St. Nicholas' icon. Considering Voragine was based in Northern Italy, his influences would have been dominated more by mainland Europe than by the Eastern Mediterranean. This could explain the different uses of characters. Rather than a Vandal coming from North Africa testing Saint Nicholas' power, in Jacobus of Voragine's account, a Jewish man tests Nicholas' power. According to Jones, the *Iconia* story became incredibly influential in the West. It contains plenty of drama, which allows it to be interpreted as a Romance drama. The spontaneous appearances and disappearances of Saint Nicholas and his sense of justice resonated with readers throughout the centuries. This narrative characterized his role as a hero involving judges and thieves in Western stories.²⁰⁶ It contains all of the main elements, like a nonbeliever testing the powers of

²⁰⁵ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 78.

²⁰⁶ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 82-83.

St. Nicholas. They proceed to get robbed, then Nicholas appears to the robbers and demands that they return the stolen goods. Upon this return, the nonbeliever is shocked and decides to convert to Christianity.²⁰⁷ Jacobus of Voragine's retelling of this tale thus places Nicholas in a broader context, as opposed to the earlier and more localized Byzantine Italian context. As later authors wrote about him, he became a mainstream Western character who could fit into several societies and categories.

²⁰⁷ Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra*, 78.

Conclusion

My own interest in the Basilica di San Nicola and the cult of St. Nicholas came from a personal connection to the city of Bari. Having a father from this city and a first name deriving from Nicholas—or Nicola—I grew up familiar with the cult of this saint, having visited the Basilica di San Nicola and hearing stories about Bari's patron saint for as long as I can remember. As I visited the basilica the past few times, I began to piece together my preexisting experiences and perceptions of this monument with historical knowledge. The Norman Romanesque elements, combined with Byzantine features, caught my eye and greatly inspired my research. I wanted to know who was involved with the building of the structure, why the relics were stolen and placed in the crypt, and explore the multicultural nature of the city, which I had visited so many times and only so recently questioned. I found the theft story to be unbelievably complex and fascinating, prompting my research into the historical context in which the theft occurred. This opened up many windows, helping me expand my knowledge on the saint's life and cult that attracted great numbers and established his popularity across the Mediterranean.

In Chapter 1, we looked at the fourth-century Eastern Roman Empire in which Saint Nicholas lived and his Byzantine cult, and in chapter 2, the eastward-expanding Italian trade in the centuries approaching the 1087 relic theft was explored. Chapter 3 covered the images of Saint Nicholas' cult on the Italian peninsula through material evidence and explained the reasons why Byzantine populations were present in Italy, whether it be from the sixth-century Justinian Conquest or westward migrations from Arab raids. This effectively traces the transmission of the Saint Nicholas cult to the West. Chapter 4 included interpretations of the *translationes* from various sources, all displaying the common theme of theft justification. The structure of the Basilica di San Nicola a Bari—as described in Chapter 5—features a reflection on Byzantine

heritage. Reconciling Latin and Greek Christianity, these multicultural elements place Bari in the context of the Crusades. In the final chapter, I discussed the post-translation adaptation of the saint as his cult was popularized in the West. Ultimately, as part of an expanding Mediterranean trade network, Bari took advantage of a weakened Byzantine Empire and stole St. Nicholas relics, thereby boosting the city's reputations and establishing it as a pilgrimage center. The city was promoted through the construction of the Basilica di San Nicola—from features like column capitals, the Bishop's throne, and the Baresi sailors' graves, the structure referenced the city's past Byzantine glory and Crusade involvement. Bari's adoption of Saint Nicholas' patronage promoted the city as a true cosmopolitan, elevated center in the medieval Mediterranean.

As demonstrated, Saint Nicholas' appeal has transcended centuries and geographical borders. A telling testament to the power of the *translationes* in justifying thefts occurred to me just recently through a conversation with my grandmother. While telling my 81-year-old grandmother—who lived in Bari until she was thirty-five—about my thesis topic, she mentioned a curious detail that struck me. This detail, from Nicephorus' very own translation, was a blip of information my grandmother had remembered learning through common, oral tradition; that is, that a pope had pushed for Saint Nicholas' relocation to Bari. This was extremely powerful to hear, demonstrating just how potent the divine justifications used by writers of translations were, and still are. Nicephorus' eleventh-century narrative clearly has had a lasting impact on the Bari citizenry. In a casual conversation with my grandmother, it became clear just how timeless and propagandistic the methods of translation justifications are. This narrative is clearly part of the city's cultural memory. The translation reveals how the evolving image of Nicholas was used as an instrument for various competing eleventh-century Mediterranean powers. Ultimately, his

presentation as a defender of orthodoxy and protector of sailors made him an undeniable Mediterranean saint.

As a symbol, Saint Nicholas was embraced by cultures across the Mediterranean for reasons varying from personal security, profit, and safety at sea. As Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean from Late Antiquity onwards, populations embraced his cult for their respective purposes. Seaside communities engaged in growing, extensive trade networks and adopted Nicholas as a protector of their livelihoods. These communities, sprinkled throughout the Mediterranean, eventually fell under the dominion of both the Eastern Orthodox and the Latin Christian, or Catholic religions. A shared saint of Eastern origin, he became representative of a common Christian history between regions under Byzantine control and Latin control. Alternatively, he also became a symbol of contention between the two communities, as the West took advantage of political instability on the eastern front and committed their holy theft. In the broader theme of moving Christian Orthodoxy to the West, Saint Nicholas represented the growing eleventh-century Roman Catholic focus on church purification. A mediator yet also a point of contention between West and East, Nicholas' patronage was embraced by those promoting an expanding Latin Christendom. The translation taking place just a decade before the launching of the First Crusade places the relocation of Nicholas' relics to Bari, Norman territory, as pivotal to his embrace as a saint at the Western Christian, increasingly militarized front. Reinterpreted across medieval Mediterranean populations, Saint Nicholas' religious patronage was pivotal to an expanding commercial and religious society.

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