

Peculiarity of the cult of St. Fosca in Istria in Croatia – charisma coupling geophysical specificities of the ground

Posebnost kulta sv. Foske v Istri na Hrvaškem – karizma, združena z geofizikalnimi lasnostmi terena

Tatjana Čulina,¹ Ana Lesac,² Ante Škrobonja²

¹ *Teaching Institute of Public Health, Rijeka, Croatia*

² *Center for proteomics University of Rijeka, Croatia*

³ *Croatian Scientific Society for the History of Health Culture, Rijeka, Croatia*

Korespondenca/ Correspondence:

prof. Ante Škrobonja, M.D., Ph.D. Croatian Scientific Society for the History of Health Culture. Ul. Braće Branchetta 20, HR-51000 Rijeka. e: anteskrobonja@yahoo.com

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Izvleček

Namen: Ugotoviti razširjenost in ohranjenost kulta sv. Foske, zavetnice proti različnim boleznim, v Istri (Hrvaška) s pomočjo hagiotopografske in hagiokronološke metode, ter osvetliti posebne povezave med kultom in njegovim glavnim svetiščem v majhni vasi Batvači pri Peroju.

Rezultati: Sv. Fosko častijo v sedmih istrskih krajih. V petih cerkvah, ki so posvečene tej svetnici, se nahajajo tri njene podobe in dva kipa, ki izvirajo iz 7. do 18. stoletja, ter ena relikvija iz 18. stoletja. Obstajal je nenavaden običaj, da so ljudje prinašali v svetišče v Batvačih kose oblačil, ki pokrivajo obolele dele telesa, da bi preprečili bolezen, jo ozdravili ali se s tem zahvalili svetnici, da je obolelega ozdravila. Glede na geofizikalne posebnosti tal menijo, da imajo znatno povečane emisije, ki so posledica tektonskih premikov, verjetno pozitiven vpliv na občutljive osebe, ki na ta način posredno potrjujejo tudi kult karizmatične osebe.

Zaključki: Prikazani primeri ohranjanja čaščenje kulta sv. Foske kot univerzalne zavetnice proti boleznim, kažejo na pomen hagioterapije in tradicionalnih metod zdravljenja v ljudski medicini. Kult sv. Foske je živ primer pomena, ki ga imajo svetniki-zavetniki v tradicionalni ljudski medicini.

Abstract

Aim: To determine the dissemination and preservation of the cult of St. Fosca, patron saint against various diseases in Istria (Croatia) using hagiotopographical and hagiochronological methods and to discuss specific relations between the cult and its main sanctuary in a small village Batvači near Peroj.

Results: St. Fosca is venerated in seven Istrian localities. Five churches that are dedicated to her keep three paintings and two statues of the saint, dating from the 7th to the 18th century, and one relic dating from the 18th century. There was a curious practice that people would bring pieces of clothing covering the sick body part to the sanctuary in Batvači to either prevent a disease, have it healed or offer thanks to the saint for having it healed. Considering the impact of geophysical specificities of the ground, it is believed that considerably increased emission as a consequence of tectonic movements probably exerts a positive influence on sensitive persons and in this way they indirectly affirm a cult of charismatic person.

Conclusion: Demonstrated examples of preservation of homage of the cult of St. Fosca as a universal patron saint against diseases point to a meaning of hagiotherapy and traditional methods of treatment in ethno medicine. The cult of St. Fosca is a vivid example of the importance of patron saints in traditional ethno medicine.



Figure 1: Piero Ferreri: Martyrdom of St. Fosca, oil on canvas, 1664. Church of St. Fosca, Vrsar. (Photo by A. Škrobonja)

Introduction

The tradition of venerating great many Christian saints as patrons against troubles and diseases seems to have survived for all these centuries in spite of the progress of medical science. About 150 of the patron saints have been attributed specific protective abilities for about eighty common diseases and symptoms and for 15 organs and related diseases.¹⁻³

One of them is the early Christian martyr St. Fosca, who has universally been worshipped as a patron saint against diseases afflicting a variety of body parts. The aim of our study was to investigate this cult in Istria,

Croatia, and see how it related to the local ethno medicine.

Methods

As in our earlier studies,⁴⁻⁹ we applied similar methods that include collection of data from general hagiographic literature¹⁰ and from local church history sources.^{11,12} Data were also collected from interviews with local pastors, worshippers, and pilgrims to the main sanctuary dedicated to St. Fosca in the Istrian village of Batvači near Peroj. All objects related to the cult were photographed (see Figures 1–3 below).

Short hagiography

St. Fosca was born in Ravenna around 235 to a rich pagan family. At the age of fifteen, she secretly converted to Christianity under the influence of her nurse Maura. When her parents found that out, they first tried to make her abandon her new religion, but when they realized that even threats would not make her change her mind, her father reported his unfortunate daughter and her nurse to the local prefect. In accordance with the then Emperor Detius' law that persecuted Christians, the prefect had the two of them arrested and brought to the court. The tradition has it that at the time of arrest soldiers could not carry out the order as they saw two angels beside the girls, who were there to protect them. Inspired by the divine sign, the two brave girls volunteered to face the court. They were tortured, executed by decapitation (Figure 1), and their dead bodies cast into the sea. The sea washed their bodies to the shores of Tripolitania in Africa, where they were buried by Christians, and their graves revered by pilgrims. Their relics were later carried to the island of Torcello near Venice, where a church was erected in the 12th century to honor the memory of St. Fosca.^{13,14}

The veneration of St. Fosca by the people of Istria

Given the close relations with Venice, the cult of St. Fosca soon took root in several

Figure 2: Statue of St. Fosca in the front of her church in the village of Batvači in the Deanery of Vodnjan. (Photo by M. Jelenić)



parts of Croatia, Istria in particular. Today, the cult of St. Fosca is venerated in seven Istrian localities.^{11,12} One village and five churches carry the saint's name. The churches treasure three of the saint's paintings, two statues, and one relic. For practical reasons, we will describe the sites in alphabetical order.

Batvači (*a small village near Peroj*) – Its Church of St. Fosca is a pre-Romanic basilica dating from the 7th century, expanded in the 12th, 15th, and 17th century, which is traditionally considered the main sanctuary of St. Fosca in Istria. For centuries it has been a place of pilgrimage of many worshippers, sick persons in particular, who would arrive even from distant places, inspired by the tradition of miraculous healings associated with that locality. The oldest record of healing from 1681 was made by Giacomo Filippo Tommasini, who was the bishop of Istria between 1642 and 1655.¹⁵ Our interviews with several Istrian priests have confirmed that the bishop's testimony lives in national legends to this day.

The procession of St. Fosca on February 13th is an occasion for the pilgrims to bring peculiar votive offerings to the place of worship. Most often, these are pieces of garment

or objects associated with a body part or organ that is ill or needs protection. A scarf is offered for headache, a waistcoat or a shirt for chest and back conditions, a belt for the low back pain, a ring for hand or finger conditions, and socks for conditions related to feet. The offerings brought before St. Fosca's altar are accompanied by a prayer to invoke the desired effect. Particularly impressive are the orthopedic devices made by common people – crutches, walking sticks, and wooden prostheses. Even though most of these votive offerings have been lost over time, their description has been preserved in the recollections of common people, according to which most were related to various aches, such as headache, arthritis, low back pain, rheumatic diseases, waist and stomach pain, and functional problems caused by diseases and injuries.

Until recently, the procession would follow an old painted statue of St. Fosca, of unknown origin, that would be taken from the main altar for the occasion. This practice has now been abandoned for safety reasons, and the statue is now kept in the parish church of St. Blase in Vodnjan, only seldom to be displayed before (Figure 2).¹⁶ The main altar of the church of St. Fosca now displays the saint's painting of a recent date made by Franjo Molnar.

Kanfanar – The parish church of St. Silvester, keeps an altar painting of St. Fosca, by unknown local artisan dating from the 18th century. It is placed beside the Mother of God (in the middle of the altar) and two other martyrs – St. Lucia (*patron saint of the eyes, sight, and eye diseases*) and St. Agatha (*patron saint of the breasts and nurses*).^{12,17,18}

Medulin – Until recently, the main altar of the Church of St. Fosca displayed a retable with a painting of St. Fosca and one of the fourteen holy helpers, including St. Blase (*patron saint against sore throat*). Unfortunately, St. Fosca's painting has been stolen and all trace of it lost.^{12,19}

Pomer – The main altar of the old church of St. Fosca displays a recently restored statue of the saint. Although the little church is closed for the best part of the year, it opens its doors during the traditional three-day fe-

Figure 3: Reliquary with a vertebra of St. Fosca from 1732. Diocesan Museum of the Church of St. Blase, Vodnjan. (Photo by A. Škrobonja)



stivity of St. Fosca that includes a procession and a mass.²⁰

Vodnjan – One of the altars of the magnificent parish church of St. Blase (Sv. Blaž) displays the 17th century statue of St. Fosca (wood, polychromy,) brought over from the basilica in Batvači. The diocese museum within the church treasures a unique collection of relics belonging to 289 saints, including the 1732 reliquary with the vertebra of St. Fosca (Figure 3).^{21,22}

Vrsar – The Church of St. Fosca has recently been renovated, but it was originally built in the Renaissance and Baroque style of the 17th century. The church treasures a sacral collection that includes a 17th century oil on canvas »Martyrdom of St. Fosca« painted by Italian painter Pietro Ferrari in 1664 (Figure 3).^{12,17,23,24}

Žminj – The marble altar of a little church of St. Fosca from the 11th century displays a statue of the saint by unknown author.^{10,25}

Instead of discussion and conclusion

Truth, myth, or a tourist attraction? Christian cult? Alternative medicine?

Can the efficiency of treatment be diminished by rational explanations and can a disease be controlled by faith? Will the pilgrims who visit the church of St. Fosca achieve a different result, depending on whether they kneel with their head down or stand barefoot with their palms facing upwards? For example, why is that the church is built on a secluded place, instead in a village, like other churches? Common answer is: because it is built on the place where energy radiation from the ground improves human health. But if so, why isn't the whole village built 300 meters further from its current location? Why isn't the local population objectively "more healthy" than other people? But then again, there are many who claim to have been cured in the church of St. Fosca, although none of this miraculous healing has been accepted by Vatican. Could it be just due to the lack of medical Commission? Do all unaccountable have an official stamp that they are – unaccountable?

Characters whose cult is being worshiped, in ethical and psychological sense represent some character or psychological feature. Without that spiritual uniqueness, they would be "just another patient /injured person". However, it is reasonable to wonder whether indeed one (and only) man can heal someone just by the power of the Spirit? And if so, is it not possible that it is actually the healed person itself who is responsible for the whole process of inexplicable healings, and that the elements of cult worship only symbolically help channeling the power of thoughts? Does the above mentioned have anything to do with the power of the saint, or are geophysical forces that govern the area of the church responsible for all? Should, therefore, the pilgrims on pilgrimage inhabit the Christian saint, or Mother Nature? And ... is it important in what people invest their emotions and hopes if they are multiply rewarded.

Many seemingly contradictory information regarding the cult worship of St. Fosca make it very unique and intriguing for a wide range of people: religious ones as well as skeptical; medically trained, and »alter-

native« ones. The inexplicability of certain events related to the cult worship of St. Fosca are undeniable. Who should they be attributed to? Creator? Geophysics? Or the power of the human mind?

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