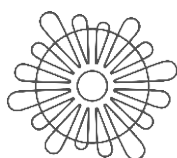


The Sacred Sea: Religious Practices in Maritime Context

Zadar, 2-5 May 2024



University of Zadar, Department of Ethnology and Anthropology
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Representations of boats and ships in temples and tombs and their connection to the divine have been present in the Mediterranean context since humans 'set sail.' Already in the late Neolithic period the inhabitants of Malta and Gozo constructed places of worship along the coast which contained depictions of sea creatures. The Caananites also worshipped the god, Yam, who represented the sea, while among the Levantines the god, Astarte, had a special place among seafarers, and Greeks worshipped Poseidon, the god of the sea. Although many holy figures connected to the sea were male, goddesses were also common throughout the Mediterranean (Gambin 2014: 4). In ancient Egypt the cult of the goddess, Isis, was connected to boats and sea (Canney 1938) and in Roman times there was a twin cult of Isis-Sarapis that was respected by seafarers. Navigium Isidis, a Roman festival in honour of the goddess Isis, was held in early March to open the sailing season.

Although a direct connection cannot be proved, it is evident that Christianity adopted the tradition belief in female deities intervening on behalf of seafarers (Gambin 2014: 4). It seems that the earliest formal evidence of the Madonna being venerated in a maritime context comes from Barcelona in Catalonia. Here we can find a church dedicated to the Virgin named Santa Maria del Mar. The contemporary church dates from the late 14th century but the first reference to Santa Maria del Mar is from 1102 (Gertwagen 2006: 151).

Some authors argue that Marian devotionism is a product of Tridentine educational reforms and baroque Catholicism (Stevens-Arroyo 1998: 55 and 69), which emphasized subjective feelings. The spiritual was miraculous, magical, and mystical, manifesting itself by merging material with the divine (Stevens-Arroyo 1998: 59).

Although Mary was a very important figure to eastern Christians, it seems that her role as a maritime saint among Greeks emerged only after Latin Christians spread the idea in the eastern Mediterranean (Remensnyder 2018: 306). By the late Middle Ages even non-Christian seafarers such as Muslims and Jews knew her reputation as the star of the Mediterranean and her powers over sea (Remensnyder 2018: 299).

Religious practices connected to the sea are also well represented beyond the Mediterranean. For example, in Bali, Hindus carry small statues that embody gods and deified ancestors from temples and homes to the sea for a symbolic washing ceremony called Melasti. Iemanjá, the African goddess of the sea, is worshiped by coastal Brazilians, particularly those who practise the religion of Candomblé. During the ritual of Tashlikh, Jews also gather by the ocean to symbolically cast away their sins and ask for forgiveness. It is safe to conclude that all world religions have saints connected to the sea and have some form of religious practices performed within a maritime context.



Since the beginning of the 21st century a body of literature has emerged that covers almost every aspect of the social and cultural contexts within which pilgrimage sites and practices exist and are created and (re)created, i.e. politics, tourism, migration, place-making, heritage, etc. (see, for example, Badone and Roseman 2004; Coleman and Eade 2004; Collins-Kreiner and Gattrell 2006; Ross-Bryant 2013; Eade and Katić 2014; Katić et al. 2014; Maddrell et al. 2014; Reader 1993, 2013, 2015; Di Giovine and Garcia- Fuentes 2016; Pazos 2016; Eade and Katić 2018; Flakerud and Natvig 2017; Coleman and Eade 2018; Coleman and Bowman 2019; Rousseau 2022). However, scant attention has been paid to pilgrimage and religious practices, in general, within a maritime context. Scholarly work has been undertaken on historical and diachronic perspectives and descriptions of the saint cults connected to the sea but very little has been done on the development of sites, cults and practices in contemporary times. For example, while there are many religious rituals and pilgrimages connected to the sea within Europe, including those in Ireland (Harbinson 1992; Katić & McDonald 2020), Norway (Mikaelsson & Selberg 2020), Poland (Palmowski & Przybylska 2022), Spain (Gambin 2014: 8), Italy (Gambin 2014: 8), France (Badone 2008), Greece (Gertwagen 2006), and Croatia and Montenegro (Katić & Blaće 2023), so far no one has addressed the diversity of ritual practices linked to contemporary maritime pilgrimages and processions. Recent process of caminoisation across Europe (Bowman et al. 2020) revealed the long-established tradition of maritime pilgrimage

in northern Europe, while at the same time new routes are being invented which cross the sea and land (Mikaelsson and Selberg 2020; Lunde 2022). Although all pilgrimages involve some measure of an embodied experience, this aspect comes forth, especially in maritime pilgrimages. Traveling by boat creates a different bodily and thus spiritual experience. While the traveller may not exert the same level of physical energy or effort when journeying on water, the sea is a 'dangerous and alien environment... in which man is poorly equipped to survive, ... a realm that man enters only with the support of artificial devices' (Acheson, 1981, p. 276). Therefore, the pilgrim traversing water faces greater physical and perhaps spiritual risk while in transit to the sacred site than would a walking pilgrim (Katić and McDonald 2020: 13). Religious practices in maritime context raises the issue of materiality as well as symbols since it involves the relationship between humans and other-than-humans (the sea, wind, boats, sails) and different skills from walking, i.e. rowing, use of the wind and currents. So, it can be approached through both the representational and the relational perspective.

With this conference we want to gather scholars interested in both past and present religious practices within a maritime context, so that we can discuss, combine and compare different approaches, problems and perspectives towards the study of the connection between saints and the sea. We do not want to focus on any particular geographical and religious context, or moment in time, and we welcome different disciplinary approaches.



The deadline for sending abstracts is January 15, 2024, and a decision about accepting a particular proposal will be made by January 31, 2024.

Participation fee is 50 euros that covers daily refreshment and field trip to maritime pilgrimage in Nin

Organizing Committee:

Mario Katić
Adriana Pojatina
Petra Valovičić
Mirela Hrovatin
Karmen Turčinov
Trpimir Vedriš
Ante Blaće
Tomislav Klarin

Scientific Committee:

Dionigi Albera
Marion Bowman
John Eade
Josip Faričić
Marijana Belaj
Michael McDonald
Mario Katić

Invited Speakers:

Dionigi Albera
Marion Bowman

Interested participants are asked to send a paper title, paper abstract (max 300 words) and short CV (max one page) to sacredseazadar@gmail.com

We look forward to your proposals!