Who was Saint Nicholas - Santa Claus

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WHO WAS SAINT NICHOLAS?

Find out why St. Nicholas became a beloved figure all over the world, and how his image has changed over the years.

4 MINUTE READ

BY BRIAN HANDWERK (National Geographic)

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The story of how St. Nicholas became the red-suited chimney hopper we know as Santa is fascinating in its own right. But the final chapter of the holy man's own story is equally intriguing—and controversial.

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Dating and DNA tests may allow scientists to piece together which relics are actually from the same man. In 2017 Oxford University scholars announced a first step in that direction: A radiocarbon study that shows a bone long thought to be a St. Nicholas relic and housed in St. Martha of Bethany Church in Morton Grove, Illinois, does in fact date to the time of the saint's death.

The Greek bishop, known as a patron of children, likely died in A.D. 343 in Myra, a small town now called Demre in modern-day Turkey. Though the year of his death is disputed, the day is not—December 6, now celebrated as St.

Nicholas Day.

An "Outback Santa" in South Australia blows in the breeze in 2006.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TRENT PARKE, MAGNUM PHOTOS

"Many relics that we study turn out to date to a period somewhat later than the historic attestation would suggest," archaeological dating expert Tom Higham said in a statement. “This bone fragment, in contrast, suggests that we could possibly be looking at remains from St Nicholas himself.”

Here are a few more places where the real Father Christmas could be buried.

Bari, Italy

St. Nicholas's remains, or most of them, may have been spirited from what's now Turkey to the Adriatic port city of Bari in 1087, according to Reverend Michael Witczak, professor of liturgical studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

“During the time of the Crusades, when the Byzantine Empire was slowly eroding, a group of Italians removed his body from Myra and brought it to Bari with the goal of safeguarding a number of the relics from the Turks who really didn't have any interest in Christian saints,” Witczak says.

These remains still lie in the Basilica of Saint Nicholas, a destination for both Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic pilgrims. Each May a festival celebrates their homecoming, re-enacted by priests who arrive by boat with an icon-style painting of the saint.

Adam English, author of the book The Saint Who Would Be Santa Claus, notes the people who moved the bones documented their journey in detail.

“We have a pretty good amount of confidence that these are bones of Nicholas in Bari. But of course, even that can be contested,” adds English, a Christian theologian and philosopher at Campbell University in North Carolina.

Intriguingly, the Bari relics include only a partial pelvis. So it's also anatomically possible that the Illinois fragment is part of the same skeleton.

Venice, Italy

Bari isn't the only Italian city with a claim to the saint's body parts. Venice's Church of St. Nicholas in the Lido contains small bone fragments from the saint that Venetian sailors claimed to have unearthed in 1099 at the nearly abandoned church in Myra.

The story goes that the Bari sailors who took the remains from Turkey in left some of them at the Church of St. Nicholas. “It was essentially a holy robbery. They feared not only the locals coming after them, but also the bones and power of Nicholas. So, it seems they left some small fragments behind, which the Venetians took later.” (See amazing pictures of cathedrals and churches worldwide.)

Decades ago, anatomy professor Luigi Martino examined the Bari and Venice bones and concluded that they could have come from the same skeleton. But that explanation hasn't entirely extinguished the controversy.

Demre, Turkey

For more than seven centuries after St. Nicholas's death, until his remains were allegedly taken to Italy, Christians had no doubt where his corpse was located: The Cathedral of Myra, where the saint had served the faithful.

In October 2017, Turkish authorities suggested that St. Nicholas may still be in Demre after all. Various types of imaging, they claim, revealed an unexplored chamber beneath the mosaic floors of the city's ancient St. Nicholas

Church, leading some Turkish archaeologists to hypothesize it could include Santa's tomb.

Campbell University's English is skeptical. For one, nothing has been found, he says. What's more, "the church has been sacked and abandoned and rebuilt, so it has a long, checkered history with many gaps," he says.

"What's left in the church to find if they ever do open up that space? Who knows?"

Around the World

Historically, saints were considered miracle workers because God's power and presence flowed through them. “After they died, that same power was seen to reside in their mortal remains that were buried in the church,” Witczak says.

Because there were more churches than saints, some people who didn't have their own martyrs or miracle-working saints "managed by hook or by crook to get hold of the various relics of the saints,” he says. (Read "Christmas in July—Inside a Santa Summer Camp.")

That's seems especially true when it comes to the remains of St. Nicholas. His alleged teeth and finger bones are cherished relics in over a dozen churches in places including Russia, France, and the Palestinian territories.

Notable among them was New York City's St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, which was destroyed during the collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The relics were never recovered.

“The question is, where did they get them?” English says. “They are hundreds of years old, and it would be very difficult to trace where some of them originally came from, or if they are part of the same skeleton.”

In that respect, these sacred relics of St. Nicholas may have something in common with Santa; what really matters is whether you choose to believe.