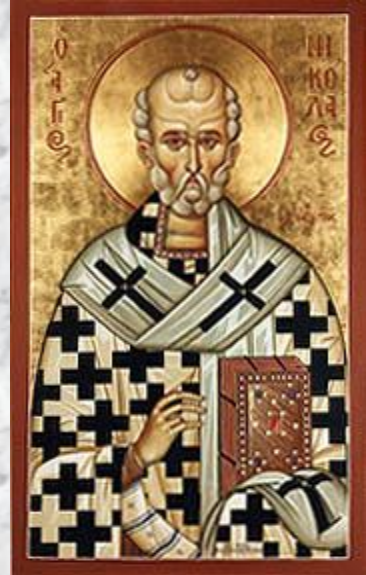


The Life of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

Introduction

“The saints show us what a glorious destiny we have in God. Through the glorious example of their lives, they point the way to our becoming ‘partakers of divine nature.’” (Anthony M. Coniaris, "Introducing the Orthodox Church," p. 91)

“Thy work of justice did show thee to thy congregation a rule of faith, the likeness of humility, and a teacher of abstinence, O Father and Bishop Nicholas. Wherefore, by humility thou didst achieve exaltation, and by meekness, riches. Intercede, therefore, with Christ to save our souls.” (Troparion of Saint Nicholas)



In the weekly cycle of services, the Orthodox Church singles out only three persons by name: the Virgin Mary, John the Forerunner,¹ and St. Nicholas. In this series we'll be focusing our attention on St. Nicholas.

The Orthodox Church sees in St. Nicholas the personification of a true shepherd. As it says in the Canon of Tone 3 and the Sedalen of Tone 8, “Having fulfilled the Gospel of Christ ... thou hast appeared in truth as a most hallowed shepherd to the world.” Constantine the Great² himself said: “There are three pillars of the world, Antony in Egypt,³ Nicholas of Myra, **James in Assyria.**”

Who was this man that he deserves such an honor and why do millions of people around the world still cherish his witness for Jesus and love him today?

¹ Also known as John the Baptist.

² **Constantine the Great** (about AD 274-337): Roman emperor (306-37), the first Roman ruler to be converted to Christianity. He was the founder of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), which remained the capital of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire until 1453.

³ **Antony of Egypt, Saint:** (251-356) Antony of Egypt, the son of Christian parents, inherited a large estate. On his way to church one day, he found himself meditating on the text, "Sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and come follow me." When he got to church, he heard the preacher speaking on that very text. He took this as a message for him, and, having provided for the care of his sister, he gave his land to the tenants who lived on it, and gave his other wealth to the poor, and became a hermit, living alone for twenty years, praying and reading, and doing manual labor. He soon became a model of humility, piety, and self-discipline. Notwithstanding his stringent self-discipline, he always maintained that perfection consisted not in mortification of the flesh but in love of God. He taught his monks to have eternity always present to their minds and to perform every act with all the fervor of their souls, as if it were to be their last. The Emperor Constantine and his two sons, Constantius and Constans, once sent Antony a joint letter, recommending themselves to his prayers. Noting the astonishment of some of the monks present, Antony said, "Do not wonder that the Emperor writes to us, even to a man such as I am; rather be astounded that God has communicated with us, and has spoken to us by His Son." Replying to the letter, he exhorted the Emperor and his sons to contempt of the world and to constant remembrance of the final judgment.

St. Nicholas would probably never be asked to “give his testimony” at a revival meeting. There had been no dramatic conversion in his life when he “met Christ.” Rather than a salvation from a life of sin and shame like St. Augustine,⁴ Nicholas grew in a life of grace from the moment of his birth. In fact, it is said that St. Nicholas’ sense of God began right at his birth and that he had stood up immediately after birth to thank God for a safe delivery!

As a young boy he did not involve himself in the games and pranks of the other children of Patara, but spent his time at church studying Scripture. He was a good student and attended church services regularly, where he assisted the older men so that he might benefit from their example and guidance.

His uncle (who was also named Nicholas) served as bishop in a neighboring community where young Nicholas often visited and helped with church services. Under Uncle Nicholas’ guardianship, the young boy learned the texts of prayers, details of church rituals, and showed a remarkably quick mind and sincere devotion to Jesus.

Nicholas’ parents set an example for him through their service to the poor. The epistle for his Feast Day (**Hebrews 13:16-21**) contains the verse, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God...” It was a lesson he never forgot.

As he grew older, he learned to share the love he had seen in his parents with the people of his village. His father had left him a small inheritance, which enabled him to give gifts of food, clothing and money to the poor.

Nicholas was careful to remain anonymous with his charities. Usually he preferred to receive no credit for his gifts, desiring rather to make his visits to the homes of the poor and unfortunate under the cloak of darkness so that no one would know who he was. He felt that if anyone should receive the praise and glory, it should be *God*, and *not* Nicholas.

St. Simeon Metaphrastes⁵ writes that, “Being humble, the Saint sought to avoid men’s praises, but once again he could not hide his virtues, as they were God-given and served all those who followed his guidance.”

⁴ **Augustine, Saint** (354-430): greatest of the Latin Fathers and one of the most eminent Western Doctors of the Church.

⁵ **Simeon Logotheta Metaphrastes** (tenth century): The principal compiler of the legends of Saints in the Menologia of the Byzantine Church. Simeon collected the lives of the Saints from oral tradition and written collections. He copied some lives as written and rewrote others. He arranged the lives in the order of the Saints’ feast days, and his work became so popular that many earlier hagiographies have been lost. His *Vita Per Metaphrasten* was the last classical Greek text on the life of St. Nicholas. It drew upon the *Vita Per Michaëlem* and the *Laudatioi Sancti Nicolai* by Methodius. This biography was the most widely read and, in fact, became the generally accepted and, so to speak, *canonical* text on St. Nicholas. Through the importance of this collection his name has become one of the most famous among those of Medieval Greek writers. Michael Psellus (1018-78) tells us that Symeon was a favorite of the emperor, at whose command he made his collection of legends. He has often been compared to the great Western compiler of legends, Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298).

Eventually he put on the robes of a monk. He joined a desert community where he lived a simple life, working in the fields and vineyards by day and praising God by night.

Young Nicholas became a priest when he was nineteen years old and devoted his life to Jesus and to the salvation of sinners. Nicholas was not only a diligent young man and student, but he proved to be an exceptional priest as well. His uncle the bishop – addressing him as he took his vows – prophesied that his nephew would offer guidance and comfort to many, would *himself* attain the rank of bishop, and live a life of enlightenment.

Not long afterward, young Nicholas became Archbishop of Myra, as his uncle had prophesied. According to “The Life of St. Nicholas,” when Nicholas became bishop, he declared: “This dignity and this office demand different usages, in order that one should live no longer for oneself but for others.”

He restored many to health. He calmed storms at sea and saved the sailors from shipwreck each time, restoring the dead to life as the Lord Jesus had instructed. Through the power of God, Nicholas took a crippled woman and made her strong, well and walking free. He changed the spirit of a mean-hearted miser and made him the Christmas benefactor in the city, long before Charles Dickens wrote “A Christmas Carol.”

He protected the innocent from thieves and a boy from drowning. He restored a strangled boy from death, put Mohammed in his place, and saved kidnapped children from pirates or pagans. In one story alone, he saved six men from the sentence of death.

Nicholas’ reputation for graciousness, compassion and kindness to all quickly spread throughout the district. He gave himself to the work of the Lord and generously bestowed his belongings upon those whose needs were greater than his own. This “life for others” is his characteristic feature and is clear from the great variety of forms of his concern for people – his care for their preservation, their protection from the elements, from human injustice, from heresies and so forth.

He was not an ascetic and did no outstanding feats of fasting and vigils, yet he is praised for his possession of the “fruit of the Spirit ... love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [and] self-control” (**Galatians 5:22 NKJV**). He was meek and gentle in nature and humble in spirit.

Nicholas was not a mystic in our present meaning of the term, but he lived daily with the Lord and was godly in all his words and deeds. He reflected the goodness of God Himself, and showed us that *real* goodness is possible. “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (**Matthew 19:26 NKJV**)

He was not a prophet in the technical sense, yet he proclaimed the Word of God, exposed the sins of the wicked, defended the rights of the oppressed and diseased, and battled against every form of injustice – all with supernatural compassion and mercy.

Nicholas was a zealous and ardent warrior of the Church. Fighting evil spirits, he made the rounds of the pagan temples and shrines in the city of Myra and its surroundings. He shattered the idols, routed the demons and destroyed the temples. When a boatload of pilgrims was in danger of death, he exposed the demons' plot and saved the pilgrims.

His tenure as bishop occurred during the most hateful persecutions of Emperor Diocletian.⁶ In the city of Nicomedia, pagans burned Christians to death while they were praying in a church. Even such despicable acts as this did not discourage Nicholas from teaching of Christ and His Church. Because of his witness for Christ, the pagans imprisoned and tortured him as well. Eventually, the Emperor Constantine⁷ set him free.



During a period of famine, Nicholas saved his people from starvation and three young students from death at the hands of a butcher. And these are just a few of the stories!

Stories of his calming raging seas, saving sailors and resurrecting crewmen and children are many. All of the stories, however, point to the kindness of this child of God, a kindness that resulted in his giving gifts and offering care, especially to children. When Nicholas was declared a Saint, he gained a great following simply because he had been kind and approachable during his life.

The hymn of the Feast of St. Nicholas touches on some of his spiritual qualities:

“The truth of your deeds has set you before your flock as a standard of faith, an example of meekness and a teacher of self-control. Thus you acquired greatness through humility and spiritual wealth through poverty. O Father and Hierarch Nicholas, intercede with Christ, our God, that He may save our souls.” (**Dismissal Hymn, Feast of St. Nicholas**)

St. Simeon Metaphrastes wrote that St. Nicholas was respected and loved by all. As people observed his goodness, many followed his example and teachings. *They scorned a material, transient existence and placed their trust in Jesus Christ.*

⁶ **Diocletian** (245-313): emperor of Rome (284-305), who reformed the administrative machinery of the empire, introducing the two-tiered system of augusti and caesars.

⁷ **Constantine the Great** (about AD 274-337): Roman emperor (306-37), the first Roman ruler to be converted to Christianity. He was the founder of Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), which remained the capital of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire until 1453.

When Nicholas had grown very old and tired, the Lord told him in a vision that he would soon rest from his labors on behalf of humankind. He said farewell to his people and retired to the monastery in Myra where he had begun his life in the Church. He received the sacraments and waited with joy to leave this world. It was on December 6th that he departed, reciting Psalm 11 (“In the Lord I take refuge...”) with his very last breath.



The Death of St. Nicholas

The monks who were assembled around him all declared that they saw with their own eyes a throng of patriarchs, Saints, angels and archangels who came to carry him to his home in Heaven.

The people of Myra buried him in a beautiful tomb within a church that became the first of hundreds to bear his name. The church was south of the town, not far from a promontory by the mouth of the Myros River, on the road from Myra to Andraki. It soon became a well-known place of pilgrimage, particularly on December 6th, his Feast Day. By the eleventh century, St. Nicholas’ was one of the most visited Christian tombs in the world.

His grave produced a miracle: from the tomb there flowed scented oil (commonly called “manna” or “myrrh”) that could cure the sick.

In 1087, when Muslims overran this area, Italian sailors carried the precious bones of their patron to Bari, a port in southern Italy. The mausoleum that they built over his grave became the center of veneration to St. Nicholas. From his shrine at Bari there again came the scented oil. When the sick were anointed with it, they became well.

An irresistible force seemed to propel devotion to St. Nicholas across all Christian lands, with its survival mainly dependent on its ability to grow through the invention of new legends. Tales abounded. Dead men, missing children, and stolen relics were restored. Satan was defeated or the sick cured. Criminals and non-Christians were converted by miracles involving his image.

No other Saint and few other men embrace such a wide variety of benevolent ideas as St. Nicholas, with such duration in time and such extent throughout the Christian world. And he is probably the only serious figure in religious history in any way associated with humor, with the spirit of fun. For he’s the patron of giving... and it’s fun to give.

Children love and honor St. Nicholas because they conceive of him as a guardian angel, not only looking after their safety and well being, but bringing them substantial rewards as well. Many stories led children to feel the warmest gratitude toward him and at the same time to look to him as a semi-divine protector in time of trouble.

It’s not at all surprising, then, that since the ninth century in the East and the eleventh century in the West, St. Nicholas has been one of the most popular Saints of Christendom: a patron of countries, provinces, dioceses and cities; the Saint of sailors, children, merchants, pawnbrokers

and others; a man celebrated in pious custom and folklore; and one represented countless times in icons, paintings and carvings.

An anonymous Greek wrote in the tenth century that,

“...the West as well as the East acclaims and glorifies him. Wherever there are people, in the country and the town, in the villages, in the isles, in the furthest parts of the Earth, his name is revered and churches are built in his honor. Images of him are set up, panegyrics preached and festivals celebrated. All Christians, young and old, men and women, boys and girls, reverence his memory and call upon his protection. And his favors, which know no limit of time and continue from age to age, are poured out over all the Earth; the Scythians know them, as do the Indians and the barbarians, the Africans as well as the Italians.”

To many people, Saints seem like just a relic of the past (no pun intended). And yet, this one has endured and is alive and well today. In both the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, St. Nicholas is the object of extreme love, to a degree unequalled in the case of any other Saint. No Saint in the calendar has so many churches, chapels and altars dedicated to him throughout the world.

Much of this is accomplished through the legends that come to us from the earliest years. To disregard the legends would be to condemn ourselves to lose so much of the past. Let us give the word back its real meaning: legends are “legenda,” things we must *read*. There are icons, statues, paintings and stained-glass windows depicting St. Nicholas everywhere in Christendom. In memory of the devoted hands that made them, and of the innumerable people who have prayed beside them, let us quite simply read these legends, with, if possible, the eyes of the past in search of God’s true witness, St. Nicholas.

My hope is that by reading these essays, you’ll come to discover that there is a Christian alternative to Santa Claus and you’ll learn how to keep his witness to the Lord alive to your family.

May the Triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glorified in St. Nicholas and may his holy name be extolled by the lips of all unto the ages. Amen.

Sources on St. Nicholas Through the Ages

Actual biographic data on Nicholas is severely limited. Although he lived in the fourth century, the records of his life and miracles – at least those records that have remained intact – only began to accumulate from the sixth century onward. To what degree these are based on earlier writings or oral traditions is hardly ever clear. The various *Vitae* (life stories) of St. Nicholas borrow heavily from each other.

Historians readily admit that the seventh and eighth centuries in the East were “dark ages,” so little have they left us in the way of writings; we have nothing from them about St. Nicholas. But, on the other hand, the ninth and tenth centuries give us an abundance of documents about him. He was venerated throughout the Christian Church at that time. Calendars put his name to the sixth of December.

Many people wrote about the life of St. Nicholas throughout the ages. This appears to be the order of the main writings:

Archimandrite Michael (ninth century): His *Vita Per Michaëlem* is said to be the earliest of all the biographies of St. Nicholas. The author says that others have written about St. Nicholas before him, but it’s clear from his text that no complete biography existed before his time; still, at least partial accounts must, in fact, have been written. Michael also refers to an oral tradition he received from a monk. His work is punctuated by moral and theological considerations.

Methodius (ninth century): Patriarch of Constantinople (842-846), defender of images during the second Iconoclast persecution, b. at Syracuse, towards the end of the eighth century; d. at Constantinople, 14 June, 846. Methodius wrote the oldest known account of the life of St. Nicholas (*Laudatioi Sancti Nicolai*, contained in *Membrano Cod. Vatic.*, No. 824, fol. 151).

Johannes Diaconus (ninth century): In 880, Johannes Diaconus of Naples wrote the first Latin biography of St. Nicholas based on Greek texts. It’s based largely on the letter from Methodius to Theodore. As the *Vita* by Johannes Diaconus became known outside of Italy, other Latin *Lives of St. Nicholas* were based upon it. The earliest of these is that by Reginold, bishop of Eichstaett from 966 to 991. From about the same period are three hymns in a manuscript from Monte Cassino.⁸

⁸ **Monte Cassino:** Benedictine monastery, situated on the hill of the same name overlooking the town of Cassino, Italy, northwest of Naples. Founded in 529 by Saint Benedict of Nursia on the site of an Apollonian temple, the monastery became the home of the Benedictine Order and was for many centuries the leading monastery in western Europe. It was destroyed by Lombards in 590, by Saracens in 884, and by earthquake in 1349, and was rebuilt each time. The present buildings are in the style of the 16th and 17th centuries. During the 11th and 12th centuries it was a center of learning, particularly in the field of medicine. The famous medical school at Salerno was established by Monte Cassino monks. In 1866, when monasticism was abolished in Italy, Monte Cassino was made a national monument. After the collapse (1943) of the Italian Fascist regime during World War II, German troops occupied the town of Cassino. Monte Cassino, which was believed to be in use by the Germans as a fortress, was severely damaged during the course of the subsequent Allied siege of the town; it was later reconstructed.

This and the *Vita Per Metaphrasten* (next) were to be the chief sources for all later western biographies. John, a ninth century chronicler, is one of the best-known compilers and elaborators of the St. Nicholas legends.

Simeon Logotheta Metaphrastes (tenth century): The principal compiler of the legends of Saints in the Menologia of the Byzantine Church. Simeon collected the lives of the Saints from oral tradition and written collections. He copied some lives as written and rewrote others. He arranged the lives in the order of the Saints' feast days, and his work became so popular that many earlier hagiographies have been lost. His *Vita Per Metaphrasten* was the last classical Greek text on the life of St. Nicholas. It drew upon the *Vita Per Michaëlem* and the *Laudatioi Sancti Nicolai* by Methodius. This biography was the most widely read and, in fact, became the generally accepted and, so to speak, *canonical* text on St. Nicholas. Through the importance of this collection his name has become one of the most famous among those of Medieval Greek writers. Michael Psellus (1018-78) tells us that Symeon was a favorite of the emperor, at whose command he made his collection of legends. He has often been compared to the great Western compiler of legends, Jacobus de Voragine (d. 1298).

Robert Wace (or Guace) (1100 – 1174): Poet. When very young, as he was destined to the Church, he was sent to Caen to make his studies, and afterwards to Paris. Between 1130 and 1135 he returned to Caen, where he was appointed *clerc lisant* (reader) to King Henry I. Being in straitened circumstances, he began to write to increase his resources. Wace wrote a very early, and perhaps, the *earliest* life of Nicholas written in French. The nautical vocabulary employed by Wace in his life of St. Nicholas, his descriptions of storms at sea, and the many journeys to which references are made, journeys in almost every instance by ship, must have had an uncommon interest to people familiar with the sea. His great importance is due to the fact that instead of writing in Latin like the other educated men of his day, he was among the first and ablest to introduce the vernacular. This gained for him a much larger audience. The evidence points clearly to the fact that Johannes Diaconus, rather than Methodius, was the chief source from which Wace drew his material for the life of St. Nicholas.

Hilarius (twelfth century): A wandering scholar and pupil of Abelard, whose works comprise a number of poems and three plays. His drama must have held particular appeal for the common people, since it combined the language of the locals, French, with the language of the Church, Latin. He is the assumed author of "The Barbarian and the St. Nicholas Icon."

Hildesheim and Fleury (twelfth or thirteenth century): Plays from the life of St. Nicholas. The Hildesheim⁹ plays are apparently earlier than the Fleury¹⁰ plays.

⁹ **Hildesheim:** city in northwestern Germany, in Lower Saxony (Niedersachsen), at the base of the Harz Mountains, near Hannover. In the early 9th century Hildesheim became the seat of a bishopric; in the early 11th century the bishop of Hildesheim, Saint Bernward, made the city an important center of Romanesque art. After it became a free city of the Holy Roman Empire in the 13th century, Hildesheim was accorded municipal rights (1249) and in the same period joined the Hanseatic League. Texts on St. Nicholas are from the eleventh or twelfth century.

¹⁰ **Fleury:** One of the oldest and most celebrated Benedictine abbeys of Western Europe. Its modern name is Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, applicable both to the monastery and the township with which the abbey has always been associated. Situated, as its name implies, on the banks of the Loire, the little town is of easy access from Orléans. The boast of Fleury is the relics of St. Benedict, the father of Western monasticism.

Jean Bodel (died c. 1210): French poet and dramatist. Author of “Le Jeu de St Nicolas,” which is by far the most elaborate and the best-known treatment of the legend of the barbarian and the icon of St. Nicholas. Here the barbarian has become a pagan king and the setting is the Crusades. To be sure, the tavern scenes are more suggestive of the everyday life of Arras than they are in keeping with the miraculous intervention of the Saint, but the theme of the *Iconia* remains essentially the same. Bodel depended heavily on both the Fleury and Hilarius plays for his material. In the opinion of one critic, Jean Bodel wrote under Norman influence. There was much in the accounts of the life of St. Nicholas that presented a peculiar appeal to the Normans. Many of the Saint’s miracles were performed at sea, or in behalf of sailors, and he was held in such reverence by the Normans, a sea-faring people, that he became the patron Saint of sailors.

Jacobus de Voragine (1230? – 1298?): Archbishop of Genoa and medieval hagiologist. In 1244 he entered the Order of St. Dominic, and soon became famous for his piety, learning, and zeal in the care of souls. His fame as a preacher spread throughout Italy, and he was called upon to preach from the most celebrated pulpits of Lombardy. Jacopo de Voragine is best known as the author of a collection of legendary lives of the saints, which was entitled “Legenda Sanctorum” by the author, but soon became universally known as “Legenda Aurea” (*The Golden Legend*), because the people of those times considered it worth its weight in gold. *The Golden Legend* was the most popular collection of lives of the Saints during the Middle Ages, and from 1470 to 1530 it was also the most often printed book in Europe. In 1500 as many as seventy-four Latin editions of it had been published, not counting the three translations into English, five French, eight Italian, fourteen Low German, and three Bohemian. About 900 manuscripts of his *Golden Legend* survive.

Jos. Simon Assomane (eighteenth century): Jos. Simon Assomane published a life of St. Nicholas from Methodius and other sources in *Kalendaria Ecclesiae Universae*, Rome, 1755. *The Life of St. Nicholas* is in Vol. V, p. 419.

Others: Others wrote about him, too, basing themselves chiefly on Archimandrite Michael, but they improvised on the miracles a good deal. There were biographies and eulogies, sermons, stories of the miracles, hymns and poems. Some are anonymous, others signed by, or attributed to, well-known authors. To mention a few in passing, there is the *Passionale* by Konrad von Würzburg¹¹ and the English and Scottish *Legendaries*. The most comprehensive coverage, the *Vita Compilata*, sought to include all known facts on St. Nicholas and contains data, such as the names of his parents, not recorded elsewhere.

¹¹ **Konrad von Würzburg** (1220?-1287): German poet, who marked the transition in German literature from the period of the minnesingers to that of the Meistersinger. He was probably born in Würzburg and lived and worked chiefly in Strasbourg. Konrad wrote short literary or art epics and legends, poetic narratives, and romances. Many of his writings were derived from older Latin and French sources. Author of “Passionale.”

We must also mention another Latin *Vita* belonging to this period written by the monk Otloh,¹² of the monastery of St. Emmeram¹³ in Regensburg, between 1060 and 1062, and a complete *Historia* or office for St. Nicholas' Day, with music. The latter exists in eleventh century manuscripts from Evreux and St. Maur-les-Fossés. These manuscripts correspond closely to the twelfth century version from Worcester and to the Sarum use. This office is probably one written in Rouen about 1030, which had a wide circulation in Normandy. In addition to the foregoing, a number of hymns have come down from the eleventh century, most of which are to be found in several manuscripts.

Any given detail we are told about St. Nicholas may or may not correspond with historical reality. While we do not deny the possibility of miracles, it is up to us which of these particular miracles we accept. There is no incontestable evidence for the truth of the details of his life and miracles.

All efforts have been taken to identify people referenced in this research. In the occasional case where positive identification was possible, the name appears in **bold blue** script.

¹² **Monk Otloh [or Othlo]** (1013 – 1072): A Benedictine monk of St. Emmeran's, Ratisbon (Regensburg). Having made his studies at Tegernsee and Hersfeld, he was called to Würzburg by Bishop Meginhard on account of his skill in writing. He entered the Benedictine Order, 1032, at St. Emmeran's in Ratisbon, was appointed dean, 1055, and entrusted with the care of the monastic school.

¹³ **Monastery of St. Emmeram:** A Benedictine monastery at Ratisbon (Regensburg), named after its traditional founder, the patron Saint of the city. The exact date of foundation is unknown. St. Emmeram flourished in the middle of the seventh century and 652 is given by most authorities as the approximate date of the establishment of this monastery.