

The Cult of St. Febronia: From Nisibis to Rome

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According to her sixth-century *Vita*, Febronia of Nisibis was a beautiful nun martyred during the Diocletianic persecution. I have examined the Greek, Syriac, and Latin versions of her life and traced the diffusion of Febronia's cult in Syria, Constantinople, Southern Italy and Sicily,¹ and I have gathered medieval and modern artistic depictions of her. No such synthetic study on Febronia has been done before.

In Tell Tuneir, Syria, the archeologist M. Fuller has found the remains of a Syrian monastery. They discovered a tooth-shaped reliquary that may have contained Febronia's tooth.

P. Chiesa has produced a new edition of the Latin and Greek versions of Febronia's life.²

Chiesa has untangled the complexity of the translations of Febronia's *Passio*. Febronia's name reappears as Phebronia, Pambroniya, Sefbronia, Sophronia, and Trofimenia. In *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*, she is remembered on the first day of Hamle (July 5- Aug 3), as *Cephronia*.³

Although the *Synaxarium of Constantinople* claims that Febronia's relics reached the city by 363, there seems to be no evidence of her cult in Constantinople before the seventh century. At that time she appears as an assistant to St. Artemios in the *Miracles of St. Artemios*, which describe a chapel erected to Febronia in the church of St. John Prodomos.⁴ Emperor Heraclius (610-641) may have had a daughter by his second wife, Martina, named Febronia. Heraclius' campaigns in Mesopotamia could perhaps have brought him into contact with the legend of a local martyr, Febronia, and through him, therefore, her story could have been "Byzantinized." Attestations of other "Febronias" in the Greek-speaking world include the mother of the eighth-century iconodule confessor St. Anthousa of Mantineon and a girl featured in the 8-9th c. hagiography of Sts. David, Symeon and George of Lesbos.⁵ The Russian Church venerates a Princess Febronia of Murom, the Wonderworker, whose relics were transferred to St. Sofia in Kiev in 1228. She is featured in a mosaic cycle of this church.

Febronia's Latin life dates to the ninth century, not long after a series of Syrian popes came to Italy in the eighth century. A cult around Febronia springs up in Patti/Messina. The community of Palagonia in Sicily continues to celebrate her feast-day, parading with a relic of her arm.

My next task is to posit how this material fits together. A photocopy from Venice of the unedited *Laudatio* on St. Febronia by the fourteenth century Patriarch Philokteos Kokkinos has been sent to me.⁶ This will provide further evidence of later reception of her cult. The results of this study will be published as an article.

1. For an English translation of Febronia's *Vita*, see S. A. Harvey and S. Brock, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 150-176.

2. P. Chiesa, *Le Versioni Latine della Passio Sanctae Febroniae: Storia, Metodo, Modelli di Due Traduzioni Agiografiche Altomedievali* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano de Studi Sull'alto Medioevo, 1990).

3. Budge, E. A. W., *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church: A translation of the Ethiopic Synaxarium*, Vol. IV (Cambridge University Press, 1928), p. 1049.

4. See D. Knipp, "The Chapel of Physicians at Santa Maria Antigua," in *DOP* 56 (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2002), 6; C. Mango, "On the History of the Templon and the Martyrion of St. Artemios of Constantinople," *Zograf* 10 (1979): 41-42, plan fig. 1; V. S. Crisafulli and J.W. Nesbitt, *The Miracles of St. Artemios* (Leiden, 1997), 13-14, 140-44 (miracle 24), 198-99 (miracle 38), 222-25 (miracle 45).

5. I am grateful to Alice-Mary Talbot for both of these references. Translations of these texts can be found in A-M. Talbot (ed) *Byzantine Defenders of Images: Eight Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998). See A-M. Talbot (trans.) "Life of St. Anthousa of Mantineon," p. 16 and D. Abrahamse and D. Domingo-Forasté (trans.) "Life of Sts. David, Symeon, and George of Lesbos," pp. 193-197.

6. I thank Alice-Mary Talbot for this reference, as well.

7. I thank Donald McColl for this reference.



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FEBRONIA

Fourteenth century icon of St. Febronia's Martyrdom from Monastery of Gracanica, Kosovo.⁷