

TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS OF THE FEAST OF ST. HARALAMBOS WONDERWORKER IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: According to the Orthodox Church calendar, 10 February marks the feast of St. Haralambos the Wonderworker. In Bulgarian traditional culture, this saint is worshipped as the commander of diseases, especially the plague, as well as the patron saint of beekeepers. On St. Haralambos's Day, new season's honey is brought to church to be consecrated and is kept as a remedy in every home. Nowadays, the cult of the saint is celebrated locally, in Blagoevgrad region being updated with some contemporary practices.

The text presents the result of a field research carried out in 2017 during the feast of St. Haralambos at the Presentation of the Virgin Church in Blagoevgrad. The focus is on traditional practices related to the patron saint of the beekeepers and the contemporary manifestations of the feast in the local community.

Keywords: beekeeping, beliefs, customs and rituals, St. Haralambos's Day

Hagiography of St. Haralambos

On 10 February, the Orthodox Christian Church celebrates the memory of St. Haralambos who was a bishop in Magnesia, Thessaly¹. According to his hagiography, he was born around the year 85 and died in 198. He perished like a martyr at the time when the Christians were persecuted during the reign of the Roman emperor Septimius Severus who ruled between 196 and 210. St. Haralambos was not afraid of the persecutions and bravely preached the Christian faith. He was captured by the pagans and was severely tortured. As the church tradition affirms, the torturers lacerated his body with iron hooks and hammered nails in it, they scorched him with fire and broke his mouth with a stone, but the old man endured with patience and courage the torments, and every night his wounds were miraculously healed. St. Haralambos cured the sick and with the help of God's power worked many miracles. At the Emperor's orders, he was sentenced to death by beheading with a sword. When taken to the place of his execution, St. Haralambos raised his hands to heaven and prayed to God for all the people – to give them physical health and spiritual salvation, to multiply their earthly prosperity and to bless the fruits of their labour. After the pray, the holy old man gave up his ghost before the executioner could touch his neck with the sword. This happened in 198, when he was 113 years old. St. Haralambos is considered one of the saints-healers along with Saints Cosmas and Damian, St. Panteleimon, St. Trifon, and others.²

Beliefs Connected with St. Haralambos in Bulgarian Traditional Culture

In Bulgarian traditional culture, the saint is honoured as the lord of all diseases and especially of the plague; he is venerated as the patron of beekeepers as well. He is called *St. Haralampi*, *St. Haralambi*, *St. Aralambos* (Marinov 1994: 492). On his day, the fresh honey is brought in the temple to be consecrated and then is kept for healing in every household. "People call him *father*, *bey*, *door-keeper of the pains*, and his holiday is known as the Plague's or the Aunt's Day. Sporadically in the Thracian lands as the *Plague's father* is honored St. Spyridon, in the region of Sliven – St. Minas, and in Macedonia – St. Euthymius" (Popov 2008: 155).



Figure 1. Icon of St. Haralambos (FtAIF No. 1581, arch. unit 36).

In the entire Bulgarian ethnic territory, the two saints Anthony and Athanasius are considered brothers and are honoured as patrons of the plague. “According to the different regional and local folk notions, the Bulgarians believe that ‘the plague was born (sometimes together with the bear) on St. Athanasius’s Day’, that ‘St. Athanasius released the plague in the world’ or that ‘St. Anthony gathers the diseases, while St. Athanasius sends them to the people, who work on those days’ (Blagoevgrad region). Long years ago the bad disease stalked at large and exterminated people until St. Haralambos’s Day, when he managed to capture her and to put her in chains” (Popov 2008: 156–157).

A legend from Plovdiv region recounts that the plague went to take Haralambos’s soul and found him at the beehives, as he was a beekeeper. He told her to wait for him, while he bids farewell to his bees. Then he opened the beehives, let the insects out and they chased the plague as far as Constantinople. There people managed to block her up in a bottle (Popov 2008: 157, Kirova 1970: 689).

On icons, St. Haralambos is depicted beating and torturing the plague. Work is forbidden on his day and women particularly observe the prohibition. Early in the morning, every homemaker kneads and bakes a bread. She carries honey in the church and spreads from it on the bread; then it is incensed, broken to pieces and is handed out in three houses for the health of the 'aunt' (the plague). In some places they prepare three small loafs or *tutmanik* (sort of a cheesecake). They keep throughout the whole year part of the honey, which was consecrated in the church, for healing (Marinov 1994: 492–493).

Customs and Rituals, Connected with Beekeeping

Investigations carried out in Central Western Bulgaria indicate that beekeeping was an additional occupation in the first decades of the 20th century. The number of beehives in a village was not high but was enough to meet its inhabitants' need of sugar. Usually in a village, there were about 20 beekeepers and many of them were women. In most cases, it was women who took care of the beehives.

Among the many customs for health and abundance, there are some, which focus special attention to the bees. On Christmas Eve, a particular ritual bread is kneaded for them with small dough balls on it representing bee swarms. The bread should be left on one of the beehives before supper. On Christmas Eve as well, women in the house spin a woolen or hemp thread, make a hoop from it and consecutively put it on every beehive saying: 'Here you are, Mato, a shirt'. Actually this is a way to symbolically dress the beehives (Manova 1986: 61). Among the incantations on Shrovetide, there are some for the bees as well. On Annunciation (25th March) all the members of the family ritually eat honey when they visit the bee garden dressed in holiday clothes. On St. George's Day, a wreath is made for the bees as well and is left on one of the beehives.

In 1981 in the region of Pernik, an interesting custom related to the swarming of bees is documented. When the time comes for a beehive to swarm, the owner beekeeper leaves for a day or two the fieldwork and waits to catch the new swarm in order to increase his beehives. He entices and captures it with a hive coated from the inside with common balm. After capturing the swarm, the beekeeper turns the hive upside down on the place where he caught it, dresses it in a clean white men's or women's shirt, and binds a bunch of flowers on its top. It stays like that the whole day long without being moved until the

evening or the next morning when the swarm is carried in the bee garden and the shirt is stored eventually for the next swarm. When taking the hive, they also take from the place several lumps of soil, grass and little stones, which they leave on the new place. In some villages, the hive is dressed not only with a shirt, but with a whole bride's costume. This custom was still living until mid-20th century. Later the practice of dressing with a clean men's or women's shirt or with a whole costume gradually dies out and the beekeepers wrap the hives with a new white cloth or a sheet (Manova 1986: 60).

The people explain that the new swarm is dressed in a white shirt so that the bees who are gone to look for pollen know where to return and to easily get used to their new place, because the bees like the white colour. This folk knowledge originated the still active practice, when dealing with bees, the owner to dress in white or light in colour clothes. In some villages, they assume the dressing of the hive as an endowment. In the villages where the hive is dressed in a whole bride's costume, when explaining this habitual practice, people relate the new bee family to a new human family, pointing out that they both have a bride who should be dressed. In the village of Uglyartsi the explanation is different – the new hive is like a new child and they dress it in new clothes gifted by the people around. Giving a shirt for the beehives in the winter on Christmas Eve essentially does not differ from the custom at the time of bee swarming in the summer. Obviously, the two practices have a common root. In the summer case of bee swarming, the dressing in a shirt is real, while in the winter it is a symbolic one. In both cases, however, the essence is in bringing a shirt in the bee garden and dressing the beehive (Manova 1986: 60).

Contemporary Manifestations of the Feast

Today honey is still taken to the church for consecration and is kept as a remedy in the houses. Beekeepers started to observe the feast as they accepted the saint as their protector. Thus, the winter feast of the beekeepers is established on 10 February (along with the summer one, St. Procopius, celebrated on 8th July³). In more recent days the beekeepers' associations in various Bulgarian towns also accept 10th February as their patron feast and observe it with lectures, ceremonies and merriments. On the most outstanding beekeepers the titles 'Queen-bee'⁴, 'Queen of Beekeepers'⁵ and 'Queen or King of Honey'⁶ are conferred.



Figure 2. 'Presentation of the Virgin' Cathedral in Blagoevgrad (FtAIF No. 1581, arch. unit 18).

The fact that the saint's name was well known among the Bulgarians in many parts of the country is an evidence for the worship of the saint. Today there are also men with that name, even if already rather rarely. Some settlements accept St. Haralambos for their patron – they name the local church after him and celebrate his feast as the settlement's fair.

Today the cult of the saint is typical for Blagoevgrad region (southwestern Bulgaria), where beekeeping was practiced in the past, as is also in our days. On 10th February the ritual of consecrating honey in the Blagoevgrad 'Presentation of the Virgin' Cathedral is accomplished, and along with it, some contemporary manifestations of the feast may be observed in the last few years on St. Haralambos's Day. In 2017, we carried out a field research in Blagoevgrad.⁷ We observed the ritual in the 'Presentation of the Virgin' temple, and carried out interviews with the priest and with some church attendants, as well as with some people present on the holiday liturgy. We photo and video documented the feast.



Figure 3. The jars of honey in the church (FtAIF No. 1581, arch. unit 107).

According to our respondents' words, on that day people from the town and from the neighbouring settlements have always carried small jars with the healing bee honey to be consecrated in the church. Priest Petar Stefanov told us: *there has always been a service on that day*⁸. During socialism, local people visited the church on the feast as well. In the last 10–15 years however that tradition becomes more and more popular. The jars of honey, brought to the church, increase in number and exceed 2000. Adelina Stefanova, an administrator in the church, says: *From 20 jars they became 2000*⁹. A new practice has become popular in the last years – they arrange the honey-jars on tables in the form of a cross. In the morning of the feast, a Divine Liturgy is performed and they light the candles on the jars while the honey is consecrated. In that way, a great fiery cross starts shining in the centre of the church.

According to our interlocutor's information, there are many beekeepers in the region and the succession is typical – the practice is transmitted from

generation to generation. The celebration of St. Haralambos's feast is traditional as well. In our days, people already carry jars of honey the day before the feast, so that they may stay overnight in the temple, and they take them home after the liturgy. Some people believe that the longer the honey stays in the church, the greater healing power it acquires. Others carry the honey-jars earlier for practical reasons, as they are not able to attend the Divine Liturgy, when the feast coincides with a workday. There are even cases when people carry their honey for consecration after the liturgy is fulfilled, if they did not have the opportunity to visit the church in time. Thus, nowadays the ritual of consecrating honey sometimes happens in the frames of the whole week around 10th February. People do believe in the healing properties of the honey, carried to the church, and preserve it for a remedy during the whole year. According to some hereditary beekeepers, this honey, besides for a remedy for humans, is used for ritual feeding of the bees in the beehives¹⁰.



Figure 4. The consecration of honey on the day of St. Haralambos (FtAIF No. 1581, arch. unit 96).



Figure 5. The consecration of honey on the day of St. Haralambos (FtAIF No. 1581, arch. unit 80).

The field research observations lead to the conclusion that St. Haralambos's feast is observed not only in Blagoevgrad, but in the neighbouring region as well. As the respondents point out that the holiday liturgy is performed in all the churches in the town and in the villages of the region. In the village of Zheleznitsa, ten kilometres from Blagoevgrad, almost all of the villagers deal with beekeeping and a new temple named after St. Haralambos is built there.

Our field interviews indicate that the honey, which people bring in the church for consecration, in most of the cases is a self-production. Quite indicative in that respect is also the absence of numerous traders selling honey on the holiday and on its eve; we registered only two people selling honey near the church.

A characteristic peculiarity of St. Haralambos's feast in Blagoevgrad during the recent years is its great popularity in the media – on local and national TV channels, in printed papers and on the internet. This popularity is mainly due to the introduced new element of the feast, connected with the consecration of the honey, namely the lighting of the candles, as a result of which the so called 'fiery cross' is obtained¹¹. Such element proves to be very attractive for journalists and their mass attendance in 2017, too, was rather indicative.

When asked how they reached the idea to arrange the honey-jars in the form of a cross, the priest explained, that it happened spontaneously, as the jars increased in number during the recent years, and respectively increased the tables where they ordered them. In the beginning they arranged them in a straight line, but when there was no place any more, the cross arms were formed, first the one, then the other. *It happened in a natural way. [...] No one aimed at making this cross*¹². And in the last years it is exactly the cross, which popularises St. Haralambos's feast in Blagoevgrad not just in the local media, but also in the national ones. On the other hand, our field research proved that in spite of its great media popularity, the celebration of the feast has only local dimensions. Only local people attended the Divine Liturgy. We did not come across people from places outside the Blagoevgrad region, except for the mass presence of journalists and reporters, reflecting the ritual in the church.

In the contemporary epoch of globalisation increases the popularity and the influence of some particular local cults, which attract more and more pilgrims from outside the respective communities, and the mass media play a decisive role in that process (Baeva 2017: 226). Many holy places (monasteries, churches, chapels) acquire popularity in the media space and as a result the stream of pilgrims from other regions and of tourists increases. In our time the mass media and frequently some other external agents play an important role for the meaningful evaluation of the local cultural heritage. In some cases, the media have an active role in constructing the communities' collective memory as well¹³.

Time will show whether St. Haralambos's Day in Blagoevgrad will remain one of the important feasts for the local community only or its media popularity will also attract people from outside the region in the future; it will show if some other dynamic processes will be catalysed to influence the local ritual practices.

Notes

1 According to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Charalambos, St. Haralambos was an early Christian bishop in Magnesia on the Maeander, a region of Asia Minor (note of the translator – A. G.), last accessed on 12.03.2018.

2 Sv. sveshtenomachenik Haralampiy Chudotvorets, episkop v Magneziya [St. Martyr Haralambos Wonderworker, Bishop in Magnesia]. *Pravoslavie*. Available at http://www.pravoslavieto.com/life/02.10_sv_Haralampij.htm; Baeva, V. *Za sveti Haralampi, chumata i meda* [About Saint Haralambos, the Plague and Honey]. *RBP*. Available at <http://bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/post/100794558/za-sveti-haralampi-chumata-i-meda>, last accessed on 12.03.2018.

3 St. Procopius – patron of the beekeepers and also called a beekeeper (Marinov 1994: 678).

4 Baeva, V. *Za sveti Haralampi, chumata i meda* [About Saint Haralambos, the Plague and Honey]. Available at <http://bnr.bg/radiobulgaria/post/100794558/za-sveti-haralampi-chumata-i-meda>, last accessed on 12.03.2018.

5 Mariya Nedelcheva stana “Tsaritsa na pchelarite” [Maria Nedelcheva Became ‘The Queen of Beekeepers’]. *Dariknews*. Available at <https://dariknews.bg/regioni/blagoevgrad/mariq-nedelcheva-stana-carica-na-pchelarite-901302>, last accessed on 30.03.2018.

6 Vladimir Marinov e tazgodishniyat “Tsar na meda” [Vladimir Marinov is This Year’s ‘King of Honey’]. *Balkanec.bg*. Available at <http://balkanec.bg/vnukyt-na-nikolai-cvetanov-vladimir-marinov-e-tazgodishniqt-%E2%80%9Ecar-na-meda%E2%80%9D-3276.html>, last accessed on 30.03.2018.

7 The field research was realized together with Daniel Fokas in the framework of the project ‘Safeguarding the Cultural Heritage – Analyses, Documents, Practices’, financially supported by ‘Scientific Research’ Fund, agreement No. DN 09/17.

8 FnAIF No. 2972.

9 FnAIF No. 2972.

10 FnAIF No. 2972.

11 Tsvetanova, K. Ognen krast ogrya v hram v Blagoevgrad na Sveti Haralampiy [A Fiery Cross Shone in a Temple in Blagoevgrad on Saint Haralambos]. *Dnes.Bg*. Available at <https://www.dnes.bg/stranata/2017/02/10/ognen-kryst-ogria-hram-v-blagoevgrad-na-sveti-haralampii.331586>; Ivanova, A. S ognen krast pocheto ha Sv. Haralampiy v Blagoevgrad [With a Fiery Cross they Worshiped Saint Haralambos in Blagoevgrad]. Available at <https://www.dnes.bg/obshtestvo/2018/02/09/s-ognen-kryst-pocheto-ha-sv-haralampii-v-blagoevgrad.367597>, last accessed on 30.03.2018.

12 FnAIF No. 2972.

13 On those topics see: Baeva 2012: 44–45; Baeva 2017: 226–227; Georgieva 2012: 187–199; Karamihova 2014; Markov 2015: 28–46; Petkova 2013: 118–129; Troeva 2015: 7–26.

Illustrations

2017. Photographer: Milena Lyubenova. IEFSEM – BAS. Archival number: FtAIF No. 1581.

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Milena Lyubanova

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