

## *Icon Symposium*

*The Book of Saints* compiled by the Benedictine monks of St. Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate, 1939. *St Demetrius: Born and educated at Thessalonica where he exercised the profession of Rhetor or Public Speaker, he made many converts to Christianity. Some say that he became a high Officer of State and even a Proconsul, but this is hardly probable. Arrested as a Christian and brought before Diocletian's colleague, Galerius Maximianus, he appears to have been stabbed to death without the formality attending a legal execution. This was in one of the first years of the fourth century. His relics are in great veneration in the East.*

He is young and pretty-faced, beardless, with thick hair tucked behind his ears. He wears the green tunic and red cloak of a Byzantine army officer and holds a round shield and long-armed cross. He died young, speared through his right breast, in the basement of the Roman baths in the Macedonian city of Thessalonika, for the crime of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This was the year 304, his name was Demetrius, and he was going to become a saint. .

As Demetrius of Thessalonika, he would be one of the most powerful saints in all of Christendom. I found him in a book. I hadn't been looking for him - I scarcely had heard of him - when I went reading in the stacks of the library of the University of Toronto. I was reading books about Byzantium, trying to find a subject for a book of my own, a focus, or at least a passageway into the history of the civilization that had radiated for a thousand years around the eastern Mediterranean world from its home in Constantinople, the city of Roman emperor Constantine, founded in 324.

In the vast panorama that is Byzantium, from the mosaics of San Marco in Venice to the chivalric epics of the border guards of Anatolia, from the scriptoria of Macedonia to the rock monasteries of Cappadocia, where to set down?

In Thessalonika, as it turned out. Demetrius had been martyred and hastily buried in the red earth of the baths, then the little shrine marking the spot fell into ruin, the relics disappeared and, after a time, the details of his life and death vanished from living memory. But several hundred years later, during the period of Thessalonika's and Byzantium's greatest peril, when the fate of European civilization hung in the balance, Demetrius reappeared.

Rome had long since been sacked by Visigoths and Vandals, then overrun by Lombards, when, in the early seventh century, Greece and the Balkans were in turn invaded by wave upon wave of barbarians who didn't stop until they got all the way through to the Peloponnese. But there was one prize they never did take, though they tried over and over again, besieging and assaulting its walls and gates to no avail: the city of Thessalonika, second only to Constantinople, the jewel on the northern Aegean, fabulously wealthy and infinitely desirable. But the city was impregnable. For the Great Martyr and Holy Warrior Demetrius had come back, riding his red horse on the

ramparts, performing the miracle of the defense of the city. He is still there, now at rest in a magnificent silver casket, in the nave of a grand basilica, on one of the busiest avenues of the city, still performing his miracles for the faithful.

Intrigued, I looked more closely at the iconography: his slender figure astride a red horse, his green cloak billowing in a heavenly breeze, posed triumphantly on the battlements of Thessalonika while the squat little figures of the bedeviled barbarians mill about uselessly at the gates and bury their dead. I look more closely still: the barbarians are Slavs.

I knew that Demetrius is venerated throughout the Orthodox world. What I hadn't counted on was the perplexing, not to say perverse, veneration by Slavs of a patron saint of a Greek city who had risen to sanctity in triumph over their ancestral bones. I went back to the books. I read travel books, art books, Lives of the Saints and specialized encyclopedias and dictionaries, I studied church floor plans and historical maps. The plot thickened. It turned out that there was more than this version of Great Martyr Demetrius. There was a Bulgarian version. There was a Serbian version. There was even a version that said he never existed at all. And another that said he is a compilation of martyred Demetriuses. There was a Demetrius who had preached and one who had simply served in the Roman army. There was the Demetrius who had a friend called Nestor who fought a gladiator, and the Demetrius who hadn't. There were no relics, but there were bones that exuded miraculous, sweet-smelling oil. There were several iconographic representations with various interpretations. There were Canons and Triparions and Trisagions, and even some websites. And there was ethnographic speculation that Demetrius is really Demeter in Christian garb.

I looked for St. Demetrius churches in Toronto and sat in them. There he was: on the right hand door of the icon screen, mild-mannered warrior in a blue robe; or astride his dainty horse at the gate of his city on an icon propped up in a corner niche; in the bottom left of a series of frescoed saints, defending us all from infidels; in a fresco all to himself, robed in peach and pink, left arm raised balletically, inviting the Roman soldiers to pierce him through the heart. Once upon a time I had never heard of him, now I seemed to be collecting him.

As a third-generation Ukrainian-Canadian in Alberta, I spent an entire childhood and youth in and out of St. John's Ukrainian Orthodox church in Edmonton. Now, in my travels, wherever there is an Orthodox church in the remnants of Byzantine Europe - Greece, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia - I find myself in it, taking a kind of rest in the homely peace that settles over me as I sniff the phantom whiffs of incense and beeswax, gaze at the icons who gaze back at me, and mumble the few lines of text I know from the hymns and prayers of the Liturgy.

So, if Demetrius is a saint venerated by Orthodox Christians, he was a saint for me too. In November 2000, I decided to look for him, first in his homeland among the Greeks.

I began in Chania, Crete. Cretans once were Byzantines, and some of their towns and villages are sites of ecclesiastical and archaeological treasures from the spread of Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean world. This much I learn at the Byzantine Museum into which I have slipped on a somnolent Sunday. There are bits and pieces of frescoes rescued from disintegrating churches, and on one panel I can make out two military figures in chainmail vests, blue cloaks clipped at the throat. St Theodore, holding a spear in his right hand, is the better preserved; all that is visible of St. Demetrius is his bare head, his brown hair curling at the neck, framed by the golden halo of his distinction.

The next day, in downtown Chania, another Demetrius “sighting:” When I peered into the window display of a religious artifacts shop, there he was, propped up among an entire stack of cheap little devotional icons. This was St Demetrius again in his warrior aspect - beardless as always, astride a red horse and rearing up over the battlements of Salonika, preparing for his wrathful descent upon the unsuspecting barbarian soldiers who are sitting around campfires, lolling on the capes spread out on the ground.

A few days later, I found myself trekking around the villages and countryside of central Crete visiting one by one a whole series of Byzantine-era churches and chapels in the area. They were all very small and dark and weathered but none was neglected, and in all of them I saw frescoes and icons of the Great Martyr himself.

From bright whiteness of the outside world you step into the cool shadow of the world of the Liturgy. There are no windows, only crude holes carved through the thick stone in the east wall and in the apse. In one, I can make out Demetrius’s cherubic little mouth upturned in a little smile and the coiffure of curls framing his face but the eyes have been torn out. I notice a cheap knock-off of a European-style painting propped up against the iconostas; looking more closely, I see that Demetrius, on his horse, is spearing something - not a dragon, however, but a noble figure who is half-reclining with bared chest, arm raised in supplication, the well-formed leg turned in a dainty boot. Who is this poor, writhing fellow at the deadly point of the saintly weapon?

From a travel agent in Paleochora, I then learned of other Demetrius churches in another direction. And so I marched over to the town’s only taxi office and hired a taxi driver, young Yiorgo, for a day’s outing. On to the church of Demetrius in the village of Agia Irini. We find it at the end of a little pathway through the most cooling grove of olives and oaks that opens up to the little white vault of St Demetrius. There are no frescoes. Perhaps it’s a modern church. But there are several representations of St Demetrius, including one I haven’t yet seen: in golden breastplate, flaring green cape, astride a pretty brown horse, serenely spearing what looks like a Cretan, with his handlebar moustaches, his arm bent back holding a useless scimitar, blood already pouring out of his throat. Who *is* this?

In Platanes an icon on the iconostas shows St Demetrius in splendid military attire, blissfully spearing another soldier. *Who is this enemy?* Yiorgo tried to explain: The enemy is the “same” as St Demetrius but has refused Orthodoxy. This made little sense

to me. Similarly, small prints lined up in frames along the base of the icon screen showed the same killing taking place but now the victim appeared more barbarian - he wore long hair, a beard and a deep frown. Not the "same" at all. Typically, the frescoes were all gouged and deeply pitted. "The Turks," explained Yiorgo.

I travelled to Athens and one evening visited the St Demetrius church on Filopappou Hill where Paschali the caretaker was pleased to answer my questions. "Why is there a church of Demetrius built here?" I began. "The rationale for building a church is that it has some physical or spiritual links with a saint," he answered. "For example, a person has many dreams of the saint and decides to build a church, or an icon is found in the ground." "But what exactly happened here at this St Demetrius church?" He didn't know, but a woman visitor who overheard our conversation approached us: "It's quite common to find icons in the ground," she asserted. We all stood at the icon of Demetrius near the front door. Finally, I had the chance to ask someone: "Who is he killing with his spear?" "It's a thief," said the woman. I objected mildly that the fallen soldier didn't look like a thief, he looked like a Roman centurion. "No, no, the story has always been that he's a thief!"

From a guidebook to the Basilica of St Demetrius in Thessalonica: *Christ's Great Martyr, Demetrius, a very handsome person, whose soul was even more beautiful, whose words were sweet but whose behavior was sweeter, was the most fragrant blossom of Thessaloniki. St Demetrius is a significant part of the spiritual history of Thessaloniki, a city which has always experienced the presence of the Great Myrrh-Giving Martyr. St Demetrius and Thessaloniki express the unity of the Greek Orthodox magnificence as it is conveyed through the simplicity of Christ's presence*

I sat for the first time in the Basilica of St Demetrius in Thessalonica, inside the burnished gold shedding light from the domes and the thick stumps of candles dying in front of the Mother of God, just to sit and look around the vast interior, noting the countless number of representations of Demetrius. They were on icons and in mosaics, modern and medieval, on frescoes and in picture frames. (Inside the Basilica's gift shop, they were also on key chains, fridge magnets and pins.) High up above my head he stood in seventh century glory, draped in white and gold, his boyish head glowing in a nimbus of gold, his arms around a bishop and an eparch. There was an inscription in Greek: "You are looking at the builders of this famous house from where the martyr Demetrius is the one who turns back the barbarian wave of barbarian ships and redeems the city." He has protected them for 1600 years with the power of his miracles - nothing less than the eternal defense of the city from the barbarians, which is to say the Slavs, which is to say me.

The interior of this 7<sup>th</sup> century Basilica - rebuilt after a catastrophic fire in 1917 - is a treasure-house of the iconography of its patron saint, no less splendid for being now remnant. I wandered around the immense interior, looking into every nook and cranny with my notebook, to jot down details of his representation away from the brilliance of the original wall mosaics and frescoes. In a side chapel, in a new wall mosaic, he

stands full-length in the *orans* posture, his arms half-lifted in prayer, praying for all mankind, draped in a long, silver and blue cloak. This image is repeated in a triptych held inside an elaborately-carved wooden frame in a corner of the porch but with a cartoonish face, not the serene, unblinking gaze of the Byzantine original. In a niche mosaic, he is holding a spear and a Roman shield and is in silver breastplate and circlet crown. Behind the table where candles are for sale, he is represented iconographically in full military regalia, seated on an ornate throne that I will learn later is the Martyr's Throne. And, yes, he is also here in the basilica spearing a hapless fellow soldier who is trying desperately to crawl away from the Saint's tormenting weapon, his own knife flung uselessly away.

Struck by the overwhelming preponderance of his medieval representation as a warrior saint as opposed to the earlier - fifth to ninth centuries - representations of him as a martyr, I approached. Anastasia Tourta, acting director of the Museum of Byzantine Civilization, who informed me that "there is no specific iconographical program" in the Basilica of St Demetrius, and that the panels are "votive ones. That means that St Demetrius was not only the protector of the city, he was also the protector of each one of his citizens. And he was a healing saint. So there is a representation of St Demetrius with young children or there is a very moving representation where the mother brings the child to the saint. Or other representations where St Demetrius is embracing the eparch and the archbishop of Thessaloniki. So we have representations of the saint that show him as a protector of the city when he embraces the political and ecclesiastical leaders of the city, or the protector of every citizen when he is embracing the children.

"For people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it's not the same as for the people in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup>. I mean people now don't expect St Demetrius will protect them from invasions because fortunately there are no invasions. But they have the feeling about him as someone who is in the family, a venerated ancestor."

A week later, in Sofia, with my notebook again in hand, I sat in the lovely stillness of the National Library of Bulgaria named for Saints Cyril and Methodius and pored over a small stack of books delivered to me from the bowels of this institution after I'd filled out documents in tedious triplicate. A numbered disk handed over in the cloakroom had assigned me to this precise spot at the table where I peered very closely at smudgy black and white photographs of icons of Saint Demetrius - or Sveti Dimiter. I made notes, hoping someday to be enlightened. This icon relief on wood, for example, with scenes of lives of Saints George and Demetrius, 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century: who is who here? Around the border of the plaque I could make out one or the other saint being roasted in a furnace, tied to a stake and flogged, prostrated at the chopping block, tormented on a wheel, slung upside down on a pillar. But other little scenes showed the two saints preaching before a king, embracing each other before the wheel, and standing side by side, calm and radiant within their haloes on what seemed to be a balcony of a palace...or was it heaven?

An icon from Veliko Trnovo, 1617: Here is Demetrius in his aspect of warrior saint,

protector and defender, slaying the enemy - that enigmatic figure again, this time disproportionately small compared to the enormous fiery-red horse bearing down on him. Demetrius is huge on his horse, handling reins in one hand, the spear in the other, and looking off into the distance, imperturbable as ever. *Who is he killing?*

I saw the two figures again, in a book modestly entitled, *Bulgarian Contributors to European Civilization*. An icon of 1866 in the Church of the Holy Trinity in a village near Romania showed the blade of Demetrius's spear embedded in the forehead of a serene if somewhat downcast armour-plated soldier. Did it help to know that these are Sveti Dimiter and the Antichrist?

I looked up from my reading as the winter light seeped into the silent, commodious chamber of readers. I was finally appalled that this image of a murderer should be venerated in this Orthodox world I was travelling through, with only my inattentive girlhood learning as a guide.

I breathed deeply and returned to the books. André Grabar, *La Peinture religieuse en Bulgarie*, Paris, 1928. I knew that Grabar was a founding father of modern Byzantine studies and my curiosity doubled to know what if anything he said about representations of Saint Demetrius. In this book he described methodically the icons on view in Byzantine-era Bulgarian churches and monasteries, and so here was Demetrius in the monastery of Dragalevci, under the inscription, "Great Demetrius, the General": [my translation] "He is galloping to the right, all the while striking with a lance at a Roman soldier curled under the hooves of his horse. From an iconographical point of view, this figure laid out under the horse is as old as images of the hero-knight." I straightened up from my slump. "This is how victorious Roman emperors were depicted [and] the Balkan saints such as Demetrius of Salonika merely inherited the ancient tradition." So perhaps we are to understand this bloody little scene as merely an echo of late Roman imperial iconography? "Nevertheless, in the past people have wanted to name the vanquished figure and they have seized on the Bulgarian king, Kaloyan." I let go of my breath: so, finally, the writhing victim of St Demetrius's murderous militancy has a name, and it is Bulgarian.

The Bulgars had arrived on the doorstep of the Byzantine Empire in the seventh century. Even after their conversion to Eastern Christianity in the ninth century, the Bulgarians posed a military threat to the emperors in Constantinople and, as the so-called First Empire, even entertained imperial pretensions of their own, frequently menacing Byzantine strongholds, including Thessalonica. In 1014 their armies were overwhelmed by those of Basil II the Bulgar-Slayer; in 1186, dissident Bulgarian princes who chafed at Byzantine rule, proclaimed a Second Bulgarian Empire in the Church of St Demetrius in the city of Trnovo. It lasted two hundred years. From 1197 to 1207 it was ruled by one Tsar Kaloyan. Thessalonica was once again vulnerable: Kaloyan besieged it.

As Grabar elaborated: "According to the legend, the city of Salonika was delivered from a Bulgarian siege by the miraculous intervention of Saint Demetrius when Kaloyan

suddenly fell dead at the walls of the city in the year 1207.” I knew from my visit to the Basilica in Thessalonika that the city had indeed been besieged by barbarians, usually but not always Bulgarians, but what I failed to understand was why an icon painter in Dragolevci would depict for the veneration of his own people the death of one of their own kings at the hands of a Greek saint.

It was time I called on Mme. Vasilka Tapkova-Zaimova, doyenne of Bulgarian Byzantinists.

I brought flowers - remembering that there must always be an odd number of them in the bouquet - from one of the flower sellers in the kiosks lining the road near the library. Madame rather unceremoniously received them, pitching out a similar bunch, beribboned and now desiccated, from a vase standing on the imposing sideboard in the hallway. I was directed straight into a little sitting room off the entry hall, with chairs and carpet that had once been quite elegant but now seemed in great need of vacuuming. Everything was faded as though, once moved in and situated, had never been given another moment's thought. Madame is very widely published: Bibliographies in several languages and Festschriften attest to her long and international career. I asked her about King Kaloyan and the miracle of Saint Demetrius [we spoke in French]:

“The story is really quite simple. It begins with St Demetrius as a martyr. Having become a martyr, he performs miracles and from this fact becomes the protector of Thessalonika. People visit his tomb to collect his myron or holy oil. He is protecting the city from whom? From the Slavs who are coming into the Balkans. Very simple. Even the Slavs, who were settled all around, little by little forgot that they were once enemies of the city. Having been baptized and become Christians, they accepted the church's version of events.

“As for Kaloyan, the story goes like this. Kaloyan moves to take the city of Salonika and finds himself beneath its ramparts. He looks around, sees the Basilica [of St Demetrius] and says: “St Demetrius” - this is in quotation marks - “if you grant me victory, I will build you an even more beautiful church.” Then, during the night, he is assassinated, that is, someone stabs him in the heart. He shouts, a crowd arrives, and accuses a man named Manastras, one of his bodyguards. Manastras replies: “No, it wasn't me who stabbed him, it was St Demetrius!” From that [legend] a whole iconography spread through the Balkans including Bulgaria: St Demetrius knifing Kaloyan at his feet.”

And, like me, Mme Tapkova has often asked herself, where did the Bulgarian iconographer get the courage to have his prince speared by St Demetrius? How? Because, she said, national or ethnic consciousness had little relevance in the Balkans of the Middle Ages where the spirit of Orthodoxy dominated all ideas. There is an ecumenical - a universal - side to this, “and that's the church, the faith, which continued down through the centuries on all the icons, even in Bulgaria.”

Andre Grabar is one of the founding fathers of the history of Byzantine art in Bulgaria; he spent several years in Bulgaria after the revolution in Russia. His thesis that the

iconography represents Tsar Kaloyan, she concluded, “can be understood as an argument that national or ethnic consciousness had little relevance in the Balkans of the Middle Ages where the spirit of Orthodoxy dominated all ideas.”

On a visit to legendary Veliko Trnovo itself, I pursued this issue with Yordan Andreev, professor of medieval Bulgarian history. Wrapped up in our winter coats, we spoke in the unheated university cafeteria while the morning fog hung mournfully outside the windows.

From the Bulgarian historian’s perspective, St Demetrius or Sveti Dimiter had had a relationship with Veliko Trnovo from the moment when, in 1185 his beloved city, Thessalonica, came under Norman occupation. Indeed, Thessalonians themselves came to believe that the only plausible reason for their city having been conquered was that the saint had abandoned it. “Note,” said Prof. Andreev, “that this was considered a calamity for the Byzantine people as a whole.” The Basilica of St Demetrius had been profaned by Norman horsemen entering in full armour who scooped up the *myron* and used it to flavour their fish at mealtimes and to polish their boots.

But a rumour spread among Bulgarians resident in Thessalonica that Saint Demetrius had fled Thessalonica for a very good reason: to move to Trnovo to protect *that* town. And why would the saint do something so radically at odds with his patronage of Thessalonica? Here is how a children's storybook tells it (unaccountably available in English in a Trnovo bookshop): *"Life under the Greek yoke was becoming harder with every passing day. People moaned with exhaustion, the number of the disgruntled was steadily increasing. They said that even St. Demetrius, the patron of the Greeks, had turned away from them because of their cruelty and perfidiousness. The saint left the city, took away his blessing and sided with the Bulgarian people. Even a song appeared. Sweet-voiced singers sang it all over the lands of Bulgaria. It was God's free will to send from the blue skies above Demetrius, the holy martyr, to bring good news to our people."*

The “proof” substantiating this rumour was an icon of Saint Demetrius transported miraculously from Thessalonika to Veliko Trnovo. Its appearance in their midst gave heart to the Bulgarian people in their grievance with the Byzantines whose yoke they successfully threw off. So intimate were they with the presence of the saint that they used his *myron* for unction in baptism. Unaccounted for in this version of Sveti Dimiter’s allegiance with the Bulgarians is the fact that, within a hundred years he was back in Thessalonica. And swooping down on his red horse from the battlements onto hapless Tsar Kaloyan, spearing him to the ground like an avenging Greek Fury, scattering the dying Bulgarian’s knife and shield away from his failing hand. I still had my question: Why would a Bulgarian Orthodox believer venerate such an icon?

I was to have had an interview with the Bishop of Veliko Trnovo but he had left for Sofia that morning and I was offered a monk instead, a *Ierodiakon*, who served in the Bishopric. And so, whisked inside, I was introduced to Brother Petar Grammatikov, a young man of singularly imposing presence, tall and broad-shouldered, almost huge in



his cassock and eiderdown vest. We sat in a large boardroom in the wan afternoon light, overseen by looming wall-paintings of Bulgarian and Romanian saints, and talked of St Demetrius.

“Our people have venerated him for a very long time,” he began.” St Demetrius is one of our treasures. There are about 300 of our churches which have him as patron, throughout Bulgaria. Canonically he is always represented as the martyr but there is a very popular hagiographic representation which shows him as the mounted warrior saint.”

He rifled through a vest pocket and handed over to me a small paper copy of just such an image: Sveti Dimitar on a rearing roan horse, preparing to plunge his spear into the breast of the fallen soldier at his feet. I asked him if this was a real man, Tsar Kaloyan, or a symbol, of our egoism, for instance, or of our pride?

“I too have heard the version that the man on the ground must be understood only symbolically, that St Demetrius is not a killer. And nowadays, here, after the fall of Communism, there are those Bulgarians who see this fallen figure as a Communist. But this is a kind of heresy, and this image should not be interpreted nationalistically.

“Kaloyan was a historical figure who was seen historically as the Antichrist by his own soldiers who assassinated him in a coup d’etat, at the gates of Thessalonika, assisted by St Demetrius.”

Antichrist! This was very strong language for a Bulgarian monk to use about a Bulgarian tsar. “Kaloyan was planning to sign a union with the Vatican and is speared by St Demetrius not because he’s a Bulgarian but because he is anti-Orthodox.

“I try to explain to all the Bulgarian nationalists who don’t like the icon that this image is a good lesson for our politicians not to betray Orthodoxy.”

Nowhere in the standard historical and hagiographical accounts had I read of this Bulgarian version of my saint, let alone that Demetrius is fervently believed to have quit the Greek camp in disgust and made common cause with what had once been the barbarian enemy at the gates - the Bulgarians – nor that he had supported the Bulgarians not as freedom-loving Slavs but as Orthodox Christian adherents of the patriarch of Constantinople. Kaloyan died as a schismatic, not as a Bulgarian.

The tragedy is that, ten years after the fall of Communism, we still cannot enter our churches or receive our lands and properties. How can we compete with the new religions? During the Communist period most of the churches were open even though zealots in villages turned some of them into barns and stables. Bu only eight priests were killed. The church had no property under the totalitarian regime but the government paid for the reconstruction and renovation of churches. But now the church is discriminated against and isolated. Sveti Dimitar church, for example - there where the brothers Assen and Petar called together the noblemen in 1185 to revolt against the

Byzantines, and where St Demetrius had joined them in encouragement - is a museum.

“As for the Saint’s Day, October 26, we don’t celebrate there *because it is not a church.*”

He was right. I stood outside the reconstruction just long enough to have my picture taken. St Demetrius’s church is closed to visitors and worshippers. It’s a museum piece under reconstruction, and can only be rebuilt according to speculation and fantasy, there being nothing of the original except a bit of the foundation. I did not feel St Demetrius’s presence there at all. Whatever had inspired him once to linger among the Bulgarians has attenuated completely in that wintry town of faded light and glory and I could feel the wrath of Brother Petar, and his loneliness.

Back in Thessalonica, I secured an interview with a roly-poly but Very Reverend Demetrius Vakaros, general vicar of the Holy See, Holy Metropolis of Thessaloniki and a priest of the Basilica of St Demetrius. He is also the author of a small book I had seen in all the very numerous religious bookstores in the city. It is about the life of St Demetrius, “known as *Megalomartis*, the great martyr,” he explained, “and *myrovlitis*, flow perfume from his relics, from his tomb, his larynx, and so on. And also as protector of the city. In Greek it is *Megalomartis Agios Demetrius o Mirovlitis.*” There is in fact a legend that Thessalonians would rub themselves all over with the *myron* before joining battle with the Bulgarians at their gates.

As in the Middle Ages, so now: thousands of faithful converge on Thessalonica for the Feast Day of Demetrius on October 26. “The people that come and visit Thessaloniki especially around the feast of St Demetrius, they come with faith, with love. And in my estimation, because I have spoken as a preacher of St Demetrius church - 23 years now I am preacher right there - also there’s a radio and tv broadcast around the world, people believe in St Demetrius, in his miracles, in his personality, and many of them they speak of miracles that happened to their personal life, and they come here and give us a description or written way or spoke to us about what happened to them with St Demetrius. It’s a large spread faith to the people around the world that St Demetrius who was born in Thessaloniki and was martyred there, in the same place where today is the nave....not only believers, Orthodox and non-Orthodox.”

And what about the story the Bulgarians tell? How Demetrius - Dimiter – in fact once abandoned Thessaloniki to go join the Bulgarians in Veliko Tarnovo?

“No, no. They have spread in Bulgaria an error. They have *miracles* of St Demetrius in Bulgaria but he never left. He says always “I never go out of Thessaloniki. I never leave Thessaloniki.” There’s a hymn that says: *O patris mou Thessaloniki*. Never is he going to leave.”

Indeed, there is a late sixth-century miracle attributed to Demetrius in which the saint categorically refuses to leave the besieged city once again under Avaro-Slav attack,

even when ordered to do so by the angels, God's own messengers. "What life can there be for me," he asks rhetorically and posthumously, "if my citizens are destroyed?...if they must perish, I shall perish also." [an already dead saint can die again?]

So, whose saint is he?

In asking myself the question, I thought again of my meeting in Sofia with Dr. Ivan Biliarsky, young professor of Byzantine History at the Institute of History. His Institute, for whose poverty he apologized, stands in a derelict wasteland of a yard outside the city centre where mangy dogs patrol the entrance. I reached his woebegone office, which 15 scholars share, each for 2 hours a week, down cheerless corridors unrelieved by anything so pleasant as a poster or a bright light bulb. A desktop computer took up one desk, several piles of journals another. There was a quantity of battered chairs pushed against the hospital green walls and a row of plastic cups drained of coffee assembled on the window sill. I could not see through the window: its panes were opaque with grime. But Ivan Biliarsky was cheerful with all the fresh thoughts and arguments of a new generation of Byzantine scholarship. [We spoke in French.]

Who is St Demetrius killing?

"There are many variations on the question of who is represented in the icon of St Demetrius as the foe on the ground. How are we to understand this figure? Is it correct, as Grabar writes, to see some contradiction between this representation and the Bulgarian artist who has to suppress his national feeling in order to represent St Demetrius as the patron of the Greek enemy?

"I believe that we have to interpret this figure, of a man groveling at the feet of St Demetrius, as a symbol of the enemy of the city and the country. He could be the Bulgarian king Kaloyan. There is a story told in one of the Miracles of St Demetrius of Kaloyan who was killed by the saint in front of the walls of Thessalonika which he had attacked. In Bulgarian historiography there is no unanimity on who killed Kaloyan. Some even say that he died at the walls of Salonika of a disease of the lungs, a sort of pneumonia."

Whose saint is he?

"Generally, Bulgarian historiography argues for a kind of nationalization of the cult of St Demetrius, that is, that the Bulgarians claim him as their saint because he abandoned the city of Thessalonika and the Byzantines. It's the modern mind that has produced this. It's the idea of the nation that sets up the border. I argue differently: that it's not a question of Bulgarians, Greeks, Byzantines, but of *Christians* who created a structure that was not a national state but a sacral one - a state of ecclesiastical character.

"Modern Bulgarians also draw a line of demarcation between themselves and the

Byzantines. It's true that there were invasions of Slavs who almost destroyed Byzantine power in the Balkan peninsula. But they were pagans, barbarians. The Byzantine Empire's grand achievement in the ninth and tenth centuries was the spiritual conquest of the Slavic world and the creation of the community known as the Byzantine Commonwealth. It is clear that the Byzantine Empire was neither a national nor an ethnic state. It was the heir of the Roman Empire, and universal, in the sense of claiming empire over the entire Christian world.

"And this is the heritage that must be defended and not cut up along national lines of demarcation.

I look again, more closely, at the icons I have been collecting along the way, from shops and churches and museums, through Greece and Bulgaria. The saint's slender figure astride a red horse, his green cloak billowing in a heavenly breeze, posed triumphantly on the battlements of Thessalonica, while the squat little figures of the bedeviled barbarians mill about uselessly at the gates and bury their dead. I look more closely still: the barbarians are Slavs. Yes, but I have missed the point. They are milling about uselessly not because they are Slavs but because they are barbarians. They are not Christians, yet. Or, in the case of Kaloyan, they have forgotten they were Christians in the eastern Church. They are infidels, outside salvation, carrying on their swords the impurity of their pagan faith. Of course they must be resisted, repelled and even slain, by all right-thinking Christians, including St Demetrius.

So, Demetrius does not live in Thessalonica or Veliko Trnovo or Edmonton, Alberta, for that matter. He does not live in this or that monastery or church. He lives in the Byzantine house of God.

I am packing up my bags and wrapping him in his blue velvet case the icon painter, Marianna Savaryn, made for this journey. I look again at his face, the long, straight nose and small lips, the elegance of his elongated form. I look at his ears flat against his head. It's important that his ears are showing, Marianna had told me, for these icons are hearing our prayers. At least the ear lobe must be showing. The whole purpose is for them to hear our prayers and take them to heaven.

There is a prayer that Marianna recites before beginning to paint an icon. It has been recited for generations of icon-painters before her. It was written in Greek but is now prayed in a hundred languages.

"Enlighten and direct my soul, my heart and my spirit. Guide the hands of thine unworthy servant so that I may worthily and perfectly portray thine icon, that of thy Mother and all the saints, for the glory, joy and adornment of thy Holy Church. Amen."