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## Saint Apollonia – from martyr to patron saint of dentists

### *Święta Apolonia – od męczennicy do patronki dentystów*

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#### ABSTRACT

Saint Apollonia is a Christian martyr and patron saint of dentists and people suffering from toothache or other oral ailments. She lived in Alexandria, Egypt, in the 3rd century AD, during the intense persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire under Emperor Decius. At a time when medicine was powerless against disease, pain and suffering, turning to saints for help was an important part of religious and emotional support for many people.

**Keywords:** Saint Apollonia, patron saint of dentists, cult of martyr saints, icons and sculptures.

#### STRESZCZENIE

Święta Apolonia jest chrześcijańską męczennicą oraz patronką dentystów i osób cierpiących na ból zębów lub inne dolegliwości jamy ustnej. Żyła w Aleksandrii w Egipcie w III wieku n.e., w okresie intensywnych prześladowań chrześcijan przez Cesarstwo Rzymskie za panowania cesarza Decjusza. W czasach, gdy medycyna była bezradna wobec chorób, bólu i cierpienia, zwracanie się do świętych o pomoc stanowiło ważny element wsparcia religijnego i emocjonalnego dla wielu ludzi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Święta Apolonia, patronka dentystów, kult świętych męczenników, ikony i rzeźby.

The cult of saints, present in Christianity, played a significant role both in spiritual life and in shaping social and professional traditions.

At a time when medicine was powerless against disease, pain and suffering, turning to saints for help was an important element of religious and emotional support for many people. Saints who were patrons served both as spiritual intercessors and role models for those in the medical profession. The lives of saints were often associated with caring for the sick or personal experiences of suffering, mercy, concern for human life or selfless help [1]. This is how the phenomenon of patronage, one of the most characteristic features of Christian culture, came into being [2, 3].

The presence of patron saints in medical culture can be seen in iconography, guild traditions, prayers, and, nowadays, also in institutional symbolism, e.g. in the names of hospitals or medical centres. Although the development of biomedical sciences has significantly changed the way diseases are treated and perceived, the role of patron saints has not changed or disappeared. Today, their significance is often interpreted more broadly – as ethical inspiration, a symbol of care for humanity, and cultural heritage. This emphasises the humanistic dimension of medicine. Studies on the patrons of medical professions show how religion, culture and health practice have intertwined over the centuries, creating a lasting foundation for the

contemporary understanding of the ideal of a doctor as a person serving people in illness and suffering [4].

Apollonia of Alexandria is one of the lesser known and less described saints in literature, but nonetheless an important figure in the history of Christianity. She lived in Alexandria at the end of the 3rd century, one of the most important intellectual centres of late antiquity. She was a Catholic nun who cared for children and the sick. Throughout her life, she remained faithful to Christian values. She was also known for her great piety and mercy towards the poor. St. Apollonia was born at the end of the 2nd century in Alexandria, Egypt. She was a deaconess of the Alexandrian Church, known for her mercy towards the poor and her great piety [5, 6]. In the middle of the 3rd century, the city became the scene of violent social and religious tensions, with Christians being persecuted. During the pogrom in Alexandria around 249, organised to celebrate the millennium of the Roman Empire, Apollonia died a martyr's death for refusing to renounce her Christian faith. Her tormentors subjected her to torture, exposing her to painful torment. They broke her jaw and knocked out all her teeth. St. Apollonia, remaining courageous in the face of suffering, threw herself onto the pyre. Her cult developed in early Christianity, and she herself became the patron saint of dentists [7–10]. The fate and martyrdom of Apollonia can be learned from the letters of St. Dionysius, who wrote them to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch [11]. Dionysius' letter describing the martyrdom of St. Apollonia is the only historical document of the persecutions in Alexandria and what we really know about the saint herself, quote: "Then they also seized the most magnificent virgin, Apollonia, an old woman, and striking her in the jaw, they knocked out all her teeth. They lit a fire outside the city and threatened to burn her alive if she did not join them in their godless cries. And she, begging a little, was released when she eagerly jumped into the fire and was consumed (...)" end of quote [9]. Apollonia belongs to a group of martyrs who did not expect death, but in order to preserve their purity, when faced with the choice of renouncing their faith or suffering and death, they voluntarily and without hesitation made their decision. The cult of St. Apollonia developed from the Middle Ages onwards and gained special significance in the dental community, making her the patron saint of dentists, dental technicians and all those suffering from toothache [12]. The interest in St. Apollonia probably stems from the dramatic story of her martyrdom, as well as the rich icono-

graphic tradition, in which pliers and an extracted tooth have become characteristic elements, appearing in almost every depiction of this saint. The first evidence of prayers to St. Apollonia as an intercessor for toothache dates back to the 12th–13th centuries [6, 8].

In Poland, the cult of Apollonia appeared around the 13th–14th centuries, and this was contributed to by the development of medieval hagiography. One of the most interesting pieces of information, according to the 15th-century Pontifical of Krakow, is that St. Apollonia was referred to as the patron saint of Regni Poloniae ('the Kingdom of Poland') and was venerated as the patron saint of Regni Poloniae. Hagiographic sources indicate that this title appeared in liturgical/Orthodox documents in medieval Poland. However, the term 'patron saint of the Kingdom of Poland' in this context is more of a symbolic liturgical title than a formal state patronage in the sense we understand it today (e.g. the main patron saint of Poland) [13].

Contemporary lists of Polish patron saints do not mention St. Apollonia as one of the main national patron saints. Moreover, historical literature on the Church also suggests that St. Apollonia was venerated liturgically in the local church in Krakow.

Images of the saint can be found, among others, in churches in Małopolska, Silesia and Wielkopolska. The iconography of St. Apollonia is very rich, symbolic and deeply rooted in the story of her martyrdom. To this day, it continues to inspire both artists and representatives of the medical world [9].

Her figure remains an important element of both spiritual and professional cultural heritage. The authors of the study present reproductions of two depictions of St. Apollonia representing different styles. Particularly noteworthy is the Baroque sculpture located in the Benedictine abbey in Krzeszów. The local Sanctuary of Our Lady of Grace houses a large collection of sacred art, sculptures and paintings, and the figure of St. Apollonia fits into this context of rich Baroque furnishings [15–17]. The statue was made together with the main altar of the basilica before 1779. It was mentioned in the visitation records from 1832, which confirms that it already existed in the first half of the 19th century. All the figures from the main altar of the Shrine of Our Lady of Grace are characterised by their slender silhouettes, lightness and freedom, and the soft arrangement of their robes, reflecting the movement of the figures. The faces are carved in a very distinctive manner, especially in the female figures, where great attention to detail can be seen

in the precise rendering of the elements of the costume, as well as its decorations and details. This is also how St. Apollonia was carved – **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** The sculpture of St. Apollonia from the church in Krzeszów is hollowed out and placed on a square base. St. Apollonia is shown frontally, with a bent silhouette, her head tilted to her right shoulder, her right hand on her chest, holding a pair of pliers with a tooth in her hand, her left hand bent to the side. Her face is oval, with a prominent chin, almond-shaped eyes, deeply carved corners of the eyes, a straight nose and full lips. Her hair is curly, curled above her forehead. She is dressed in a dress tied at the waist, with a cloak thrown over her left shoulder. Own source

A different style is represented by a contemporary icon made in Bielsk Podlaski. The depiction of St. Apollonia is in the style of a traditional Christian icon. Against a golden background, symbolising divinity and eternity, the figure of the saint appears with a bright halo around her head. She is dressed in a green cloak and pink tunic, and her head is covered with a white veil with a red element. In her right hand, she holds a cross and a green palm as a sign of martyrdom and victory over death. In her left hand, she holds tongs with a tooth, a characteristic attribute referring to the suffering she endured. The painting features Greek letters spelling out the saint's name: 'Apolonia'. The composition is simple and harmonious, and the colours are intense and contrasting, emphasising the spiritual dimension of the representation. The icon exudes

calm and deep symbolism, reminding us of the saint's faith, courage and sacrifice – **Figure 2**.



**Figure 2.** A contemporary icon of St. Apollonia made in Bielsk Podlaski. It depicts St. Apollonia against a golden background, with a bright halo around her head, emphasising her holiness. She is dressed in a green cloak and a pink tunic, and her head is covered with a white veil with a red element. In her right hand, she holds a cross and a green palm – a sign of martyrdom. In her left hand, she holds pliers with a tooth, an attribute of her martyrdom. The painting features Greek letters with the saint's name. The composition is simple, harmonious and full of Christian symbolism. Own source

The Diocese of Płock has the only church in Poland dedicated to Saint Apollonia, where her relics are kept. In 2021, the Brotherhood of Saint Apollonia was established, which brings together dentists and healthcare professionals and promotes the cult of the saint in Poland. The most common attributes of Apollonia include: pliers holding a tooth, which refers to torture and fortitude, the palm of martyrdom, which symbolises victory over death, a cross or a book, which are signs of holiness and teaching, and fire, which refers to her death in flames [18].

In iconography, Saint Apollonia is depicted as a young woman, often in rich attire, although it is known that at the time of her martyrdom she was already an elderly woman. However, St. Apollonia

remains one of the most recognisable saints in the context of the history of medicine and dentistry. Little is known about the life of St. Apollonia due to the limited sources available, but her memory is preserved in the form of relics, paintings, statues, prayers and traditions. Her feast day is celebrated on 9th February [7].

Saints were seen as people who, thanks to their faith and heroic attitude, achieved complete union with God and thus could intercede for people in their daily needs. Over time, this developed into a tradition of entrusting them with specific areas of life, specific illnesses or suffering.

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