

Serpent-Procession at Cocullo

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COLLECTANEA.

SERPENT-PROCESSION AT COCULLO.

(*Plates III. and IV.*)

COCULLO is a large and picturesque village in the Abruzzi Mountains, nearly three thousand feet above the sea level, and on the border of the old territory of the ancient Marsi. The Marsi claimed descent from Marsia, son of Circe, and were renowned of old for their magic arts and their power over serpents, and their descendants at Cocullo to this day claim power over serpents, and hereditary immunity from serpent-bites.

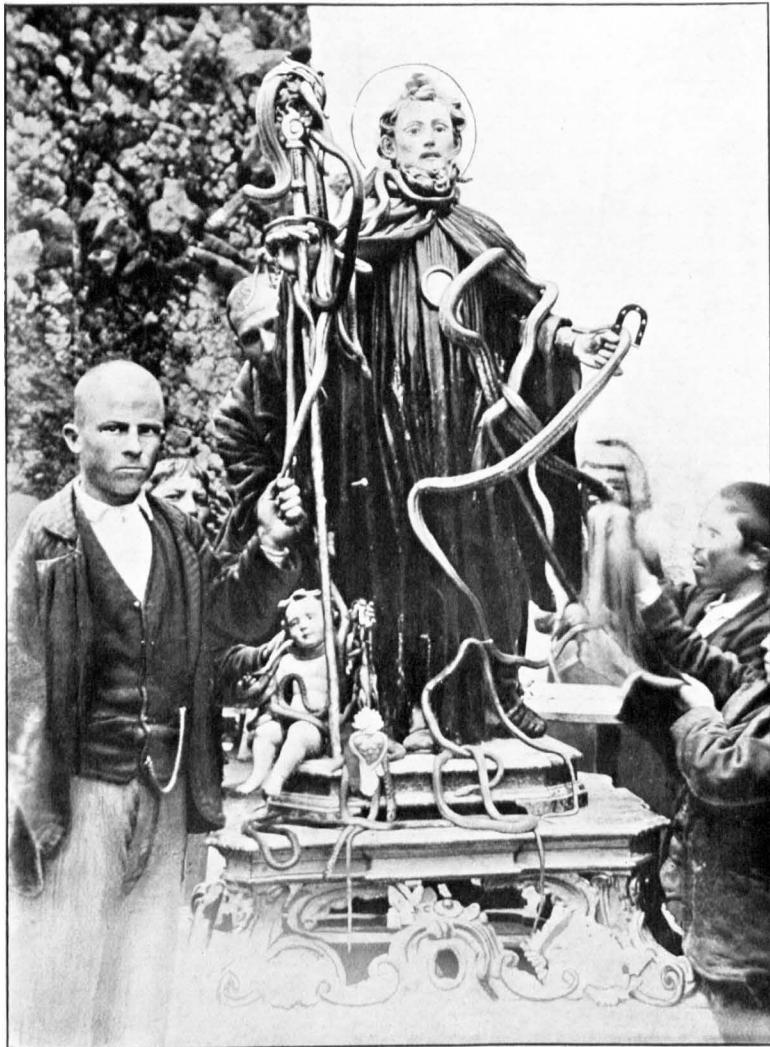
S. Domenico of Foligno is now Patron of Cocullo, and is credited with miraculous powers of healing the bites of dogs and serpents, and even hydrophobia—and toothache!—and persons are brought from all parts of South Italy, and even Sicily, to be cured at the Feast of Serpents, or Feast of S. Domenico, which is held at Cocullo on the first Thursday in May. Persons suffering from hydrophobia, it is said, either die or are cured on entering the bounds of Cocullo, and so vivid is the popular faith in this treatment that more than one southern commune has of late years voted a sum of money to defray the cost of sending a patient attacked by this terrible disease to Cocullo for the Feast of S. Domenico. In the year 1906 the festival was to be on the third of May, and I arrived there on the first. For many days beforehand the Serpari, or snake-men of the village, collect numbers of live serpents from the surrounding hills and valleys, and keep them till the morning

of the procession in large receptacles or holes in the ground, feeding them with bran or semolina, and sometimes milk. On the eve of the festival bands of pilgrims began to arrive; each band of peasants, wearing the distinctive costume of their village or district, walked in procession, wallet on shoulder and rosary in hand, singing "Viva Maria," through the large open square where stands the little fourteenth-century church of S. Pamphilo, and then up the long, steep, and stony village street, close set with irregular old stone houses.

On arriving at the Sanctuary Church, which stands at the southern extremity of the village, and appears to have been cut from the solid rock, the pilgrims entered and passed up the church—many of them on their knees—some, I am told, on bare knees on the rough, rock floor. The shrine of S. Domenico, once Abbot of Foligno, stands to the right of the high altar. The statue of the saint appeared to be of wood, and is fairly life-like. It represents him in his monastic robe, with a reliquary, containing a mule's shoe which the Saint once dropped in Cocullo, on his breast. A small slit in front of the figure allows the faithful an opportunity of dropping in their money offerings, and a few silver hearts have been placed by others near the statue, while on the sides of the shrine are hung some long plaits of hair. After praying at this shrine each pilgrim reached up to touch the figure of the Saint, then kissed the hat or hand, or other object with which he had touched the saint or the relic. Then each in turn rang the Sanctuary bell with his teeth, thus ensuring freedom from the toothache.¹

Next, each filled a handkerchief with "S. Domenico's Earth" from a heap in one of the recesses in the church. It looked as if it came out of a chalk-pit. It is supposed to be the sweepings of the sanctuary floor, and is taken home to be sprinkled on gardens and fields as a preventive against

¹ The Archpriest of Cocullo informed me that in an account of the miracles at this festival, written by a monk of Monte Cassino about 1640, mention is made of a tooth of S. Domenico preserved at Cocullo. I heard of no tooth now in existence, but was told that the mule-shoe was used to touch aching teeth. See Note just received from him, p. 216.



SAINT DOMENICO OF COCULLO
(with Serpenti and serpents).

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locusts and other noxious insects. One of the peasant women who saw me looking at the heap of "earth" on one side of the church asked for my handkerchief and filled it with the earth, knotting up the corners safely, and making the sign of the cross upon it with holy water from the stoup at hand. She then handed it to me, telling me to take it home and sprinkle the "earth" on my field, and there would be no locusts and no hurtful insects in it, so that my crops would be good. She added that I might also sprinkle a little on the floor of my house, and I should thus keep it free from unpleasant insects!

The little square space before the church door was surrounded by stalls, where rosaries, coloured woodcuts of S. Domenico with the serpents looking up at him, reliquaries and medals bearing his image, small gilt keys—"Keys of S. Domenico"—and small metal mule-shoes, with one point prolonged to a spike, were sold as charms against toothache; fillets of braided white cotton, with coloured flecks at intervals, were sold as a protection against serpent-bites. They are worn twisted round the wrist or hat, or tied to the women's shoulder straps. To be efficacious these charms must first touch the relic worn by the Saint.

In the street, just beyond the Piazza of the Sanctuary, we heard a continually-repeated cry of "Per la Gettatura!" and saw a small stall where a man was driving a brisk trade in charms against the Evil Eye—coral, mother-of-pearl, or silver horns, nickel hands, mother-of-pearl or nickel hunchbacks, skulls, fish, flasks, keys, rings with the device of a skull, boars' tusks, bunches of badger's hair—in fact, nearly all the charms used against the Evil Eye in South Italy.

On the morning of the festival more troops of peasants came in early from the nearer villages, and every variety of costume was seen in the street, all the women wearing on their heads either the white *tovaglia* or linen head-covering, or a white or brightly-coloured kerchief; except the women of Scanno, whose dark, refined features, and curious turban head-dress with the plaits of hair closely wound with wool, were remarkable even in that crowd of picturesque and beautiful figures. From time to time

we met men or lads, each carrying a large coiled serpent in his hands to the Piazza, whence at mid-day the great procession starts. We had already made the acquaintance of the Arch-priest, Don Loreto Marchione, a courteous and cultivated gentleman, and a native of Cocullo, who promised every facility for taking photographs of the procession. It was well to ask leave for this, as, a few years ago, a distinguished Italian artist attended this festival in company with Don Antonio De Nino, the collector of Abruzzi folk-lore (who was here again this year without the artist), and had taken one or two snapshots of the procession, when a shower of rain came on, and the unlucky artist had to run for his life, the enraged peasants asserting that he had insulted the Saint, who had shown his wrath by sending the rain.

This year, however, there was no sign of rain. A blazing sun overhead lit up the bright new costumes of the women, the picturesque cloaks and sashes of the men and the uniforms of the soldiers, against the background of grey old houses, with the snow-tipped hills above; and all the folk were in the best and friendliest of tempers.

The procession started from the Piazza Santa Maria. First came some peasant women of Cocullo, rosary in hand, each carrying a gigantic candle, gaily painted, before the life-sized statue of the Redeemer, borne on the shoulders of four men. Then more women with candles, followed by the statues of S. Anthony the Hermit, the Madonna, S. Roch with his dog, each followed by a double line of candle-bearing women. Next, after a longer procession of pilgrims, walked the band of musicians—musical genius is innate in the Abruzzi folk, and especially in the district round Cocullo—playing their best for S. Domenico. Then came the Serpari carrying the coils of live serpents round neck and arm and in their bare hands, before the statue of S. Domenico, who with pastoral staff in one hand and his mule-shoe in the other, was borne, like the preceding saints, shoulder high by four men, who much prize this coveted honour. On each carrying-pole is hung a large ring-shaped bread loaf, which afterwards becomes the property of the bearer.



1. *The Madonna delle Grazie.*



2. *Saint Roch.*

PROCESSION OF SAINT DOMENICO, COCULLO.

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Serpents, great and small, are hung about the Saint and coiled on his stand, and if a serpent wriggles away, and escapes to the ground, he is speedily caught and replaced by the bystanders. After S. Domenico and the snakes, came the Archpriest with several other clergy, the Host under a canopy, the soldiers, and yet more peasants. After making the round of the village the procession entered the Sanctuary. The statue of S. Domenico was replaced in his shrine near the high altar, and all the serpents were thrown upon the statue, twisting and wriggling all over the figure. Any that got away were promptly thrown back upon the Saint by anyone who could catch them.

After mass was over the serpents were carried out and counted, a fixed price per head being paid to the Serpari, after which they were taken to a field some way beyond the village and killed.

The procession was over. The pilgrims brought out their store of food—not forgetting the wine flask. Every house, every street, was full of feasting, and merry groups of country folk were seen on every side picnicking on the grassy slopes outside the village, before starting on their homeward journey.

We adjourned to a coffee party at the picturesque old house of the Archpriest, where we were hospitably entertained with every variety of wines, liqueurs, and cakes, besides the most delicious coffee, while we discussed the details of the procession with our host and his party of priests from the neighbourhood, till we were at last reluctantly obliged to say farewell to our new friends and to Cocullo.

MARIAN C. HARRISON.

CINDERELLA.

SINCE the publication of *Cinderella* in 1893 a number of additional variants have presented themselves—‘like Dian’s kiss, unasked, unsought’—and have been noted. To the untiring kindness of Dr. H. F. Feilberg, who had already contributed so largely to my collection, I am indebted for the abridged