



"Grateful Fréjus."

Evelyn M. Jones

To cite this article: Evelyn M. Jones (1901) "Grateful Fréjus.", *Folklore*, 12:3, 307-315, DOI: [10.1080/0015587X.1901.9719637](https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1901.9719637)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1901.9719637>



Published online: 06 Feb 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1



View related articles [↗](#)

(1700) says it was "become a decayed Farm and now annexed to Beaches." Among the endowments of the church is a parcel of woodland called "Beches and Shonks."

The only other person of the name in the neighbourhood of whom we have any record is Gilbert Sank, who in the sixteenth year of Edward I. was distrained upon by Simon de Furneaux, Lord of the Pelhams, for his "Homage and service and forty shillings and sixpence rent by the year, Fealty and Suit at Court at Pelham Arsa, from three weeks to three weeks."¹ Salmon suggests that he might be the father of Peter or Piers Shonks.

As to the dragon, fossil remains of extinct animals have often been found in the clay-pits of Hertfordshire, none of which, however, are of so recent a date as the mediæval period. But the story may be very much older, dating possibly even from prehistoric times, and thus handed down from father to son it has become connected in the usual materialistic way with the monumental slab, assisted during the past two centuries, as Mr Cussans says, by the epitaph.

W. B. GERISH.

"GRATEFUL FRÉJUS."

(Quoted by permission from the "Guardian," 22nd August, 1900.)

It is not often, even in Provence, which has kept much simplicity and the beauty born of simplicity, that we have the opportunity of taking part in a festivity entirely popular in its character, which has been celebrated for several centuries with the same details as it is to-day.

But on this sunny May morning the high road to Fréjus is gay with bright faces, and many a family group of gaily dressed girls, white-capped mothers, and red-sashed, blue-trousered fathers, goes chattering along the boulevard under its young-leaved plane-trees, their French greetings seeming almost out of keeping with their dark, handsome Italian faces. French greetings for us only,

¹ Chauncy, *Hist. Herts* (1700), vol. i., p. 278.

however, for we find it hard to follow their pretty Provençal tongue, with its soft diminutives and drawn-out vowels. Fréjus, the sleeping city that dreams alternately of Roman Empire and mediæval ecclesiasticism, is half awake this morning, and has hung her steep streets and old-world houses with flags.

Down a side-street, where the interest seems gathering, a little crowd of women is watching the assembling of some strange little figures. Little boys, from about twelve years old down to mites of three or four, trot up one after the other *inside* cardboard horses, adorned with long lace frills, that do not quite hide the little running legs of the rider. These hobby-horses have the small heads of their kind, above which are the tiny round serious faces of the younger and the laughing mischievous faces of the elder boys, all dressed in gay coats and caps with flowers and ribbons.

Anxiously careering round them on, or rather we must say *in*, a hobby-horse of a larger growth, is a "Capitano" of so humorous and yet earnest an aspect that one can but wonder what other part in life he could ever play. Dressed like the boys in ribbons and laces, he wears on his head a large white hat, with long coloured feathers, rosettes on each ear, and an elastic under the chin, which gives a peculiarly innocent look to his wrinkled old face. Flourishing right and left with his sword, encouraging here and urging there, he gets them at last into procession, and they set off for the "Chapelle de St. Roche"—a small, dilapidated building just outside Fréjus.

There a larger crowd is assembled outside the door, by which stand two barefooted monks and a charming old lady in a large straw capeline, or Provençal hat, black tippet, and distaff in her hand. These three wait patiently, their eyes on the ground, till the music is heard and the procession of hobby-horses, headed by a few young soldiers and sailors and a band, comes winding between the high white walls over which the fresh young fig-trees are peeping. The door of the chapel then opens, and there is carried out a small boat, which is placed on wheels, and by which the monks and the old lady take their places and head the procession, which moves gaily up into the town and into the big square in front of the cathedral.

Here all Fréjus is collected round the barrier that rails in the square, and all the windows of the four or five-storied old houses

are full of faces looking on. The little hobby-horses manifest a disposition to prance round and show themselves off, but are soon recalled by the Capitano, who wildly waves his sword and forms them again into line preparatory to leading them round the square with a dancing step in time to the music. Suddenly all the chattering and laughing is hushed, every one presses forward round the railings, the little hobby-horses retire into a large circle, and in the centre of the square three figures stand alone—the two monks and the old lady, whose name, we are told, is Santa Brigitá. The elder monk, reverent and serious of face, and dignified in bearing, now comes forward, and, addressing the old lady, who stands with her hands clasped round her distaff, asks her in Provençal why he, a stranger, just arrived by sea in Fréjus, finds the city empty and forsaken, doors and windows shut, silence in the streets, and no children at play.

She answers him in the same soft tongue, and in a clear, pathetic voice, that Fréjus is ravaged by the plague, that many of the inhabitants are dead, others sick unto death, and that those who are still in health have fled to the country and carried off all the children in fear of their lives. On hearing this he bows his head in silence, then, turning to her again, he requests her to lead him to the cathedral. Amid perfect silence around, the two cross the square and disappear within the great doors, and only the splashing of the stone fountain at the corner disturbs the hush of expectation until the two quiet figures reappear and take up their position again in the middle of the square.

Stretching out his hand to her, the monk then cries in a loud, clear voice, "I am François de Paule. God has sent me to Fréjus to stay the plague and heal this suffering people." Stooping down he then draws a circle on the ground with his staff and kneels down to kiss the centre of the circle. Then, laying down his staff, he lifts his hands to heaven and cries aloud upon God to look down on this poor Fréjus and to have mercy on her. This cry he repeats three times, each time in a louder voice, more and more thrilled with passionate supplication. Rising to his feet he then takes up his staff and turns again to the over-awed woman. "Go," he cries, "and tell the inhabitants of Fréjus that God has stayed the plague and healed their sickness." He continues with a solemn command that in all ages to come Fréjus should remember this great mercy, and that each year a solemn remembrance

and rehearsal of his coming by sea to Fréjus and this miracle that God has wrought by him be enacted. Nor must Fréjus ever cease to carry out this custom, for, should it ever fall into neglect, the plague would surely return to the city.

After the solemn adjuration he turns and leads the way to the cathedral, followed by old Santa Brigitá, the procession of boys, and the crowd of onlookers, who soon fill the dark old church, where the priest is waiting to say mass at the side altar of St. François, which blazes with lights. The mass is long, the crowd pass silently in and out of the great doors, and the little hobby-horse boys sit down for very weariness in rows on the steps of the high altar, the little brown heads of their horses appearing through the gloom, at that distance, quaint appendages to the solemn service. We stay to see no more, but feasting and frolic fill up the two following days till the third evening, when St. François de Paule and his boat are conducted back to the little chapel of St. Roche, and grateful Fréjus subsides into its calm life of every day.

Valescure.

E. M. J.

The following further notes have been kindly sent us by the writer of the above article, Lady Jones :

The fête is an entirely popular one, and has no connection with the Church, though sanctioned by the celebration of mass at the altar of St. François de Paule. The priests do not seem at all interested in the ceremonies ; they evidently treat them as amusements for the people. The correct date of the fête is said in the local history to be the third Sunday after Easter ; hence it is a moveable feast. But it is changed to suit the convenience of the people. I saw it on the 27th May, 1900, in which year it was not held on the right day, as there were municipal elections going on. This year (1901) it was perpetually being put off on account of the extraordinarily bad weather. The following extracts from *L'Histoire de Fréjus*, by J. A. Aubenas, Honorary Curator of the Museum of Antiquities at Fréjus, published at Fréjus in 1881, give the local tradition as to the origin of the festival (pp 276-279) :

La Peste et St. François de Paule.

La ville se vit plus cruellement éprouvée encore par un fléau qui s'était abattu sur la Provence en 1480, en même temps que

mourait le roi René,¹ et dont les ravages n'ont été dépassés que par ceux de la peste de 1720. . . . C'est dans ces circonstances, qu'au commencement de l'année 1483 la tempête jeta sur la plage voisine un homme, un Saint, le célèbre François de Paule, appelé du fond de la Calabre par le roi Louis XI. agonisant, pour lui rendre, par un miracle, la santé que la science humaine ne pouvait plus lui donner. Cette guérison d'un vieillard cruel, en même temps habile et profond politique, n'était pas dans les desseins de Dieu; mais la tradition et la foi contemporaine attestent le miracle non moins grand, accompli, à cette occasion, par le saint anachorète en faveur de Fréjus. Girardin² est le plus ancien historien qui ait recueilli par écrit cette tradition, unanimement proclamée jusqu'à lui: il convient de le laisser parler.

"Le serviteur de Dieu," dit-il, "ne sachant pas que notre ville fût infectée, s'approche de nos murs, accompagné de plusieurs personnes, et s'avance dans les rues sans trouver qui que ce soit. Enfin, une femme âgée se trouve par hasard sur ses pas; il lui demande pourquoi on ne voyoit personne dans la ville: 'Hé! mon Père,' dit-elle, 'c'est parceque la peste est ici. La moitié des habitants a péri, et la plupart des autres se sont enfuis, ou se tiennent enfermés chez eux.'

"À cette nouvelle, Saint François de Paule, plein de charité et de confiance en Dieu, se jeta à genoux pour se recommander avec sa troupe au Seigneur, et pour le prier qu'il voulût bien éloigner ce terrible fléau d'une ville où sa providence l'avoit conduit. La prière de ce juste eut un effet singulier, car, depuis ce moment, le mal contagieux cessa, non seulement de faire des progrès, mais encore on vit ceux qui en étaient attaqués recouvrer la santé. Bien plus, depuis cet heureux jour, la peste n'a jamais osé approcher de cette ville, et semble encore aujourd'hui respecter un lieu d'où ce grand saint l'a chassée une fois.

"Notre tradition nous apprend que le saint entra par la porte de

¹ [René of Anjou, Count of Provence, titular King of the Two Sicilies and Jerusalem. It should be noticed that the independence of Provence expired with the death of King René, and that Louis XI. was the first French sovereign ever acknowledged there.—ED.]

² [M. le Curé Girardin wrote about 1750, but his works, *Histoire de la Ville et de l'Eglise de Fréjus* and *Description historique du Diocèse de Fréjus*, were only printed in 1872, when they were edited by M. l'Abbé J. B. Disdier and published at Draguignan.—ED.]

Méons, et que, prenant d'abord à droite, il venoit à l'église par ces petites rues qui, après quelques détours, aboutissent à la Place—que c'est dans ces quartiers-là qu'il rencontra cette femme, et qu'il pria à genoux pour la prospérité de notre ville. Elle nous apprend encore que le serviteur de Dieu logea dans la maison canoniale de M. le Prévôt Antelmi, aujourd'hui évêque de Grasse, et qu'on lui donna une chambre vers le coin qui répond à la porte du cloître de l'Eglise.

“Une preuve évidente de la brusque cessation du fléau, de la coïncidence de ce fait avec le passage de Saint François de Paule, et en même temps, de la croyance des contemporains en sa miraculeuse intervention, c'est la construction presque immédiate de l'église et du couvent élevés à Fréjus pour perpétuer la mémoire de ce grand bienfait. Quelque temps après la mort du roi Louis XI., et grâce aux libéralités de son fils Charles VIII. le saint Calabrais venait de fonder, à Plessis-les-Tours, le premier monastère, en France, de son ordre, que, dans son humilité, il avait voulu appeler l'Ordre des Minimes (les plus petits de tous). Commencé dès 1490, sept ans seulement après les faits accomplis, le couvent des Minimes de Fréjus, aujourd'hui disparu, et sa remarquable église qu'on voit encore, étaient complètement achevés en 1509. Cette maison prit, dès l'abord, une grande importance, et trois chapitres généraux, ayant mission d'élire le chef de l'Ordre y furent tenus, en 1547, en 1556, et en 1565.

“Depuis, la population de Fréjus, dans une fête annuelle, n'a cessé de renouveler l'expression de ses actions de grâces envers celui qui fut son protecteur et qu'elle a choisi pour son second patron.”¹ [St. Leonce, Bishop of Fréjus in the fifth century, is the original patron.]

¹ La fête commémorative de Saint François de Paule se célèbre le 3me dimanche après Pâques et dure plusieurs jours. L'espace nous manque, à notre grand regret, pour décrire ces manifestations touchantes de la reconnaissance populaire, et nous ne pouvons que renvoyer le lecteur à la relation si complète et si heureusement réussie que vient d'en publier M. l'Abbé Paul Terriss, Secrétaire de Mgr. l'Evêque et Chanoine honoraire de Fréjus, *La fête de Saint François de Paule à Fréjus* (typ. L. Leydet, imprimeur de l'Evêché).

I have been unable either to buy or borrow a copy of the last mentioned work, and the following version of the dialogue recited on the occasion is translated from the Provençal notes given me

by one of the Curés. The dialogue, however, is far more dramatic than it is possible to convey.

DIALOGUE DE S. FRANÇOIS DE PAULE ET LA FEMME DE FRÉJUS.

St. François : Femme, d'où vient qu'en arrivant dans cette grande ville, je ne rencontre personne? D'où vient que portes et fenêtres sont fermées, que l'herbe croît entre les pierres? D'où vient une si grande solitude?

La Femme : Comment! vous ne savez pas que la peste désole notre pauvre ville depuis très longues années! Vous ne savez pas que presque tous les habitants sont morts et que les rares survivants sont dans leurs maisons de campagne ou cachés au fond de leurs maisons de ville?

St. François : Femme, par la charité de Dieu, enseigne-moi l'église!

La vieille femme mène St. François à l'église, etc. . . . Revenant à la Grande Place de Fréjus. St. François se prosterne, et s'écrit par trois fois :—

St. François : Miséricorde, Seigneur, pardonne au peuple de Fréjus! (Puis il s'adresse à la Femme, et, obéissant à une voix intérieure qui lui dit que sa prière est exaucée, lui dit) : Femme, vas annoncer au peuple de Fréjus que la colère de Dieu s'est apaisé, que la peste ne reviendra plus jamais à Fréjus—et qu'ils se souviennent de St. François de Paule!

There is something left out at the end, for I distinctly heard the St. François say that if ever the fête were forgotten the plague would return.

I was certainly told at the time of the fête last year that the woman represented St. Brigitá, who has a chapel near Fréjus, at which an interesting ceremony takes place every May, which I attended this year, namely, the blessing of the *bétail*, who are brought to the chapel early in the morning for the purpose. But the priest who officiated told me that the woman of the dialogue is simply "une vieille de Fréjus."

EVELYN M. JONES.

[The harbour of Fréjus, which in the time of Augustus sheltered 300 galleys after the battle of Actium, was still in use in the tenth century, but during the Middle Ages it gradually silted up, owing to the soil washed down by the River Saint Argent, so that by 1555 it had become useless, and the stagnant pools and marshes which formed around the city in consequence of the loss of the outlet for the water rendered it exceedingly unhealthy. The Chapel of St. Roch, whence the festival procession starts, is situated on the quay of the old harbour. (D'Aubenas, *op. cit.*, map 3.) The visit of St. Francesco di Paola to France during a

time of plague, at the request of the dying Louis XI., is an actual historical event, but the saint landed not at Fréjus, but at Bormio, (*Acta Sanctorum*, April 2nd, ed. 1675). Here, so say the Bollandists, he visited the church of St. Roch, the first to be reached on arriving, the doors of which opened to him of their own accord; and by his prayers caused an intractable beam in the new roof to fit into its place. Here also he caused the plague to cease. The next day he went on to Fréjus, where took place the circumstances commemorated in the festival. The house of his order of Minimes, built by the city in honour of the event, was finished in 1509, but was handed over to the order of Cordeliers in 1571.

St. Roch of Montpellier (1295-1327) is related to have healed plague-stricken folk in North Italy, and to have died in prison in his native town after five years' unjust detention. When the plague broke out at Constance during the sitting of the Council (1414), processions and prayers in honour of St. Roch were ordered, and the plague was stayed; hence a great increase of devotion to him. His relics were translated, part to Arles, 1399, part to Venice, 1485. While living as a hermit in the forest near Piacenza, the wild beasts, plague-stricken, came to him for healing, and were cured by his blessing. "Hence the habit in certain places of blessing domestic animals and flocks on the Feast of St. Roch, and of having recourse to his intercession in time of murrain." (*Lives of the Saints of the Order of St. Francis* [of Assisi], Franciscan Convent, Taunton, 1886, vol. ii., pp. 17, 18.)

It may be noted that St. Raphael, the name-patron of the port at the mouth of the river, four miles from Fréjus, is the Angel of Healing.

There were two St. Bridgets; the famous early Irish saint, and St. Bridget of Sweden (1302-1373), foundress of the Brigittine Nuns, who in her widowhood made a pilgrimage to Rome, took up her abode there, and eventually died at Avignon. She is the Santa Brigitá usually honoured in Italy and Southern France, but her legend has no reference to cattle, while of the first St. Bridget it is related that the cattle stolen from worshippers at her convent at Kildare ran to the convent with the thieves in pursuit of them. But the blessing of cattle on the feast of a patron saint seems to have been a common mediæval custom.

St. Francesco de Paolo had a sister Brigitá, who was married to Antonius de Alesso (Alassio?), and their son Nicholas is said

(*Acta Sanctorum, loc. cit.*) to have been the young man whom the saint miraculously restored to life, and whose parents then consented that he should "enter religion." Can the silent younger monk in the festival ceremony be meant for him? And can some confusion between his mother and her patron saint account for the vague association of St. Bridget with the festival? We do not know; and it seems impossible, with the information at present at our disposal, to carry the fête beyond the fifteenth century. But the boat and the hobby-horses suggest a far earlier date than the dialogue, and we must hope that some of our French or Provençal brethren will be induced to undertake a search in the municipal archives of Fréjus in order to ascertain if possible what annual ceremonies were customary there before 1483.

Festival processions with ships or boats are known at Brussels and Mannheim and probably other Continental towns; as well as at Luxor. Detailed descriptions by recent eye-witnesses of any of these would be welcome.—ED.]

MIDSUMMER IN THE PYRENEES.

On Midsummer Eve, some ten or eleven years ago, I was present at the ceremony of the *Brandon*, at Bagnères de Luchon, in the department of Haute Garonne, in France. The town stands in the heart of the mountains, close to the highest point of the Pyrenees, and almost in the country of that rather mysterious people, the Basques. The custom is so ancient that no Luchonnais questions it. They tell you that it has always been so, and that appears to them to be a perfectly satisfactory explanation.

I watched the building of the *Brandon* from the first. It was erected on the *Quinconce*, that shady plantation of trees in rows forming a square, which is a special feature in most provincial towns in France. The *Quinconce* at Luchon is unusually fine; the trees are grand, and many of them are trees that blossom. The *Brandon* was placed in the centre of a wide gravelled area which extends from the outer row of the *Quinconce* to the *Établissement* at the base of the beautiful wooded hill. It was composed of thin laths of wood, nailed in network fashion, and it was stuffed