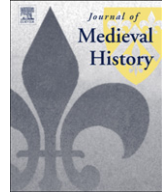




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Prison and sacrament in the cult of saints: images of St Barbara in late medieval art

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This article analyses the changing visual representation of St Barbara during the later middle ages. The article identifies a shift in St Barbara's iconography: whereas earlier medieval representations of the saint almost always show her with her prison tower, a number of fifteenth-century representations show the saint holding a chalice and host. The article traces how and why this shift occurred. In particular, the article explores the ways in which medieval thinking linking incarceration and liberation were integrated into new representations of St Barbara to stress her intercessory, sacramental functions. Overall, the article argues that the visual transformation of St Barbara's prison tower into a liturgical vessel reveals how saints like Barbara were increasingly viewed as conduits to the inclusive sort of freedom that participation in Christianity's sacramental economy invited.

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The Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne houses an altarpiece dated to about 1500, which depicts two saints well-known to medieval audiences in Europe (Figure 1). One is St Leonard of Limoges (or Noblat), the 'patron' saint of prisoners, whose following had significantly grown from the thirteenth century. Leonard is shown in the Cologne altarpiece holding a long chain with a lock on the end of it. A cruciform staff rests along his right side and his right hand holds a manacle. Leonard stands next to St Barbara of Nicomedia. To Barbara's left is a tower inside the central niche of which is a chalice and host. Barbara's association with imprisonment derives from her own incarceration at the hands of her father, while her association with the host and chalice resulted from a shift in devotional representations of the saint throughout the medieval period. It

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Figure 1. St Leonard and St Barbara, altarpiece, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne, c.1500.

is this shift which forms the focus of this article. By 1500, when the Cologne altarpiece was painted, St Barbara was known mainly for her intercessory functions: she could keep the dying alive long enough to receive the final sacraments, and her liberating qualities were eventually understood sacramentally.

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