

SAINT BARBARA

Saint Barbara is the patron saint of most gunners throughout the world, however, like all mythology and traditions over time, the origins of the legend have become blurred between fact, fiction and rumour.

Gunners celebrate Saint Barbara's Day annually on the 4th December, the day set aside by the Christian churches' Calendar of Saints; however, the method of celebration varies significantly depending on the environment and situation, or circumstances in which the relevant artillery unit or association is placed-in at the time.

In May of 1969 newspapers throughout the world reported accounts of thirty saints being deleted from the Liturgical Calendar by Pope Paul VI, in the belief that they may never have existed. Whilst Saint Barbara was included in the group she was not banned; the deletion simply meant that she was displaced from the Catholic Universal Calendar of Saints and relegated to local devotion, but the reform of the Calendar was not intended to kill-off devotion to the many popular saints familiar to the Christian world over past centuries. Even though Saint Barbara's name no longer appears in the newer Catholic calendars she is still commemorated on definite days in Roman Martyrology, a liturgical book in its own right.

Saint Barbara is often depicted in art, and she always carries the palm of a martyr in her hand and, in most cases, she also carries a chalice and sacramental water. She has been represented standing by a tower with three widows; she is also often seen with fire, firearms and lightning beside her.

Listed here are the three most accepted versions of Saint Barbara and how she came to be the Patron Saint of Artillery.

Legend One

During military service in the East, Alypius, the father of Saint Barbara, became friendly with a certain Fakir from whom he learnt the marvellous secrets for the use of naphtha and saltpetre. From the same sources he also learnt the preparations for Bengal lights.

On his return to his native town of Hippo, Alypius devoted his life to the study of chemistry. Barbara received a liberal education, spoke several languages and she became deeply interested in her father's research work and by their united efforts in the laboratory they discovered an explosive of extraordinary power. The beauty of Barbara attracted many suitors, but she rejected them all and instead entered the Convent of Saint Perpetua, which had been founded by Saint Augustine.

Africa was then a prey to invasion and one evening in the summer of 430 AD the Vandals arrived under the walls of Hippo; the town closed its gates and a siege was begun. The Barbarians dug wide trenches around the city walls and they threw into them the bodies of both men and animals slain in the conflict. In doing this they hoped to overcome the besieged city by causing death from fever and a plague.

Alypius, in this hour of need, summoned his daughter, Barbara, from the Convent to assist in the defence of the city. While they were placing large jars, full of a mysterious substance in position, Alypius was killed by an arrow. Barbara, the sole possessor of her father's secrets, was called upon to continue the heroic combat. She ordered the contents of the urns to be poured into the enemy's trenches and, in an instant, the substance ignited; the putrefied bodies were consumed and the pestilential miasmas were dispelled.

During the siege, which lasted for fourteen months, all the surprise attacks of the enemy were frustrated by the frequent use of Bengal lights, and at intervals incandescent globes of fire were hurled from catapults at the enemy. After a heroic struggle, the besiegers captured the city and, thirsting for revenge, they swarmed into the Convent where Barbara had returned to when the city was forced to surrender.

Barbara was prepared for emergencies and had accumulated a quantity of explosives in one of the subterranean passages within the Convent. At the crucial moment a deafening explosion was heard and both the conquerors and the vanquished were crushed beneath the debris of the masonry. By this action Barbara, along with her companions, escaped the outrages of a licentious soldiery.

Legend Two

Saint Barbara was the daughter of a rich nobleman of Heliopolis in Egypt and was martyred by her father, in about 303 AD, for becoming a Christian. As he descended the mountain where he had cut-off her head with his own hands a 'fearful tempest arose with thunder and lightning, and fire fell upon this cruel father and utterly consumed him, so that not a vestige of him remained'.

Barbara is invoked against thunder and lightning, and all accidents arising from explosions of gunpowder. It is thought possible that she was selected as a patron saint for artillery because in early days cannon usually blew-up on discharge and therefore gunners were always liable to sudden death from explosions of gunpowder.

Legend Three (the most accepted legend)

There is no reference to Saint Barbara by early Christian authorities; neither does her name appear in the original of Saint Jerome's Martyrology. Veneration of the Saint was common, however, from the seventh century onwards. About this time there were in existence legends of her martyrdom which were inserted in the writings of Symeon Metaphrastes, which were also used by such authors as Ado, Usordye, Boronius, Mombritus and others during the ninth century.

According to these narratives, which are essentially the same, Barbara was the beautiful daughter of a wealthy, bad tempered and heathen Greek named Dioscorus. Dioscorus, in his wicked and pagan mind, conceived the idea of using his beautiful daughter to increase his worldly wealth. For this purpose he allowed her very little liberty, so that she might grow-up free from worldly contamination. Barbara was only allowed to

have her handmaiden, Juliana, with her, and to receive, at stated intervals, her tutors who were selected from old and repulsive looking men.

In her youth Barbara embraced Christianity, the teachings of which she no doubt obtained from the tutors who were provided for her. Amongst Dioscorus' many friends was a magistrate named Marcian, a wealthy and wicked man like Dioscorus. One day, Dioscorus, for the purpose of evading punishment for his many misdeeds, offered his beautiful daughter, Barbara, to Marcian.

Upon informing Barbara of his intentions to part with her to Marcian, she told her father that she had embraced Christianity and therefore could not consent to the arrangement, having devoted her virginity to God. This so enraged Dioscorus that he imprisoned her in a very high tower which concealed her from the view of the outside world.

Sometime after her imprisonment Barbara's father was called away, but before his departure she persuaded him to gratify her wish for three windows to be constructed in the tower in order to admit light. In reality, Barbara's intentions were that the windows should be a symbol of the Trinity and the admission of light, the emblem of Christianity. Barbara's desire was to make known her conversion and this was her only way of showing it to the outside world.

On account of her open acknowledgement of Christianity Barbara received a Spiritual Blessing and this Blessing made her even more beautiful. She then prayed for a bathing pool in which to disport herself, and to while-away the tediousness of the long hours of her incarceration.

One day when Barbara was drawing her finger in the form of a cross on the floor of the tower, the rocks, that made-up the floor, parted and in the midst of a blaze of light through the three windows, a pool appeared and the cross remained permanently furrowed in the stone at the pool's edge. Upon returning from his journey her father discovered the great light coming through the windows onto the cross; this greatly angered him and he remonstrated with her.

Barbara took this occasion to preach to her father; she told him of the mystery of the Trinity and used her persuasion with a view to converting him to Christianity. Dioscorus became furious and on account of Barbara's pleading, he drew his sword and rushed upon her to kill her. Barbara avoided the attack and miraculously escaped from the tower, leaving him striking furiously on the flinty floor in an endeavour to obliterate the cross.

The enraged father, accompanied by his soldiers, scoured the near-by mountain side for his daughter; however, Barbara had taken refuge in a leafy glade some distance from the tower. Encountering two shepherds during his search Dioscorus asked them if they had seen his daughter; the first shepherd, being a godly man and fearing for Barbara's safety, answered with a lie and said that she was not in the forest. However, the second shepherd, being an evil man, told Dioscorus where his daughter was hiding. Dioscorus found Barbara and beat her unmercifully and then dragged her by her hair before the Magistrate Marcian.

When Marcian saw Barbara he was captivated by her beauty and did his utmost to persuade her to give-up Christianity and marry him. Barbara steadfastly refused and repulsed all his advances, whereupon Marcian ordered her to be stripped and beaten in front of him. Still resisting his entreaties Barbara was taken to prison, where a blaze of light streamed upon her and healed her wounds.

The next day Barbara was again taken before the Magistrate Marcian; she still refused his entreaties so he then ordered her to be torn with iron combs and her saintly head to be hammered. Barbara's handmaiden, Juliana, on witnessing the ordeal burst into tears and was promptly arrested, and treated in the same cruel manner. Marcian was now at a loss for further tortures to exercise on Barbara without destroying her beauty so, in revenge for having all his advances refused, he ordered her to be led naked around the town, accompanied by her handmaiden, Juliana.

Notwithstanding the beating on her 'Venerable Head' Barbara preserved her faculties and was able to address an eloquent prayer to Heaven. The prayer was answered and a mantle was cast around her body; this enabled her to lift herself and preach to the people, imploring them to embrace Christianity. Her father, so thoroughly enraged and in a fit of temper, then struck-off the heads of both his daughter and her handmaiden; at this moment a vivid flash of lightning fell upon Dioscorus, completely consuming him. A moment later a second flash appeared, reducing Marcian into a heap of smoking ashes. A pious man named Valentinus then buried the bodies of the two virgins.

In time the sick were brought to Barbara's grave site and to be healed, and pilgrims who came to pray received aid and consolation.

A Summary of the Legends

It is certain that before the 9th century Saint Barbara was publicly venerated both in the East and the West, and that she was very popular with the Christian populace, being called upon as intercessor to assure the receiving of the sacraments and the Holy Eucharist at the hour of death.

An occurrence in the year 1448 did much to spread the veneration of the Saint. A man named Henry Kock was nearly burnt to death in a fire at Gorkum; he called on Saint Barbara, to whom he had always shown great devotion, and she aided him to escape from the burning building and kept him alive until he could receive the last sacrament. A similar occurrence is related in the 'Legend Aurea'.

In the Greek and Roman Calendars the Fest of Saint Barbara falls upon the 4th December, while martyrologies of the 9th century, with the exception of Robanus Maurus, place it on the 16th December, which is now the modern date for the festival. However, it is quite possible to suppose that the period from the 4th to the 16th December was the time of her escape from the tower until her death at the hand of her father, Dioscorus (Legend Three); hence the modern accepted date for Saint Barbara's Day of 4th December.