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## The Trials of the Martyrs –

Legal and Cosmic Aspects of Late Mediaeval Visual *Topoi*

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Many mediaeval legends contain a sequence, devoted to the process, in which the saint was sentenced, tortured and executed. Some scenes in this sequence can be found in similar or even identical form in different legends. What were the reasons for the repetition of similar compositions? What ideas, narratives and practices have influenced the creation and perception of such images?

Answers to such questions can only be found by means of interdisciplinary historical research transcending the basic problems of iconography in a search for the contexts of images in the history of ideas.<sup>1</sup> The historical development of the images was influenced at least on two different levels by at least two different systems of thought: 1, by legal considerations, standing behind the processes depicted in the images; 2, by theological reasoning, explaining the sense of narratives for Christian viewers.

The first level belongs to the historical background of the legends. The legal framework of the processes, in which the martyrs had been sentenced, was not of great interest for the authors of the legends. In the majority of the cases, this legal context belonged mostly to the old pagan world, which the Christian writers saw as an illegitimate realm, governed by evil forces. In this context, the narratives were not preserving a real memory of the older legal heritage. The new Christian attitude has evaluated its meanings from a new, negative perspective.

For the hagiographers, all the martyrs were by definition witnesses of Christian faith, who sealed their testimonies by their own blood. They were heroes, who offered their earthly lives in the name of what they understood as eternal life (see e.g. Schockenhoff 1999, Grabar 1946).

This paper describes an attempt to explain some examples of such hagiographical narratives from the region in northern Carpathians, a former part of the Hungarian kingdom, today Slovakia. The regional examples were connected with the general history of European civilisation through their visual prototypes, which is an obvious problem of art history. Besides, the history of visual culture should take into account the most important structural elements of the ideological contexts, which were essential for historical functions of the images not created in the region. The real or legendary heroes depicted in the images had lived outside the region on the vast territory of Roman Empire. The repeated historical situations, standing behind the prototypes of this imagery, were influenced by the legal framework of the Empire and by their Christian belief. This is why the roots of the images go back to some principles of Roman law as well as to the most important ideas of early Christian thinkers, not to mention the obvious influence of the Judaic tradition and biblical law. The heterogeneity of this ideological heritage, which was constantly influencing the organisation and practical functioning of the church hierarchy with its centre in Rome, stands behind some contradictory or paradoxical ideas, embodied in the images and propagated by the “hagiographic discourse” around them (more about the concept Uhlir 2006).

From the methodological point of view, this paper respects the tradition of iconology trying to integrate a research on various levels as a means to illuminate some complex historical connections. That is why it begins with a basic description of typical scenes and their versions, taking into

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account the trials of the martyrs as well as a contrasting sequence, in which the saints are presented as patrons of justice. This set of material offers an opportunity to demonstrate the effects of some paradoxical ways of thinking, typical for mediaeval anthropology (see Zimmermann 2003, 167–188 and Belting 2001). The links between ideas and imaginations were important for influencing the thinking and shaping the sensibility of the viewer. In the social context, they were a necessary presupposition for the historical meanings and functions of the images.

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Images of the trial of a saint were usually modelled on the trial of Jesus as described in the gospels and depicted in the pictorial cycles. The writers and the painters used similar words, phrases and schemata to describe and evaluate the event. As far as they were interested mainly in the issue of sanctity, the legal aspects of the trial remained mostly without any consideration at all. In the most frequent version of the visual representation of these trials, the male or female saint stands before a man of earthly power, who is judging him, sitting on a throne. The legal power and authority (*auctoritas*) of the ruler is challenged by the seriousness and dignity (*gravitas or dignitas*) of the saint (these Latin concepts were frequently synonymous – see Baldson 1960). The basic difference between these two characters rests in their explication of true devotion (*pietas*). Similarly to Jesus, the martyr represents a moral authority based on his or her intimate contact with heavenly powers and eternity in Christian understanding, based on the biblical use of the term “martyr”, including its legal meanings (see Trites 2004). The martyrs follow the apostolic advice to obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). The earthly ruler is a contrasting figure – from a Christian perspective, his power is only temporary, because he does not understand the most important secrets of the universe as defined by the teaching of the Church. In his own eyes, he was loyal to other gods and values, which were respected neither by the saint nor by the authors of legends and pictures, working for Christian patrons and audiences.

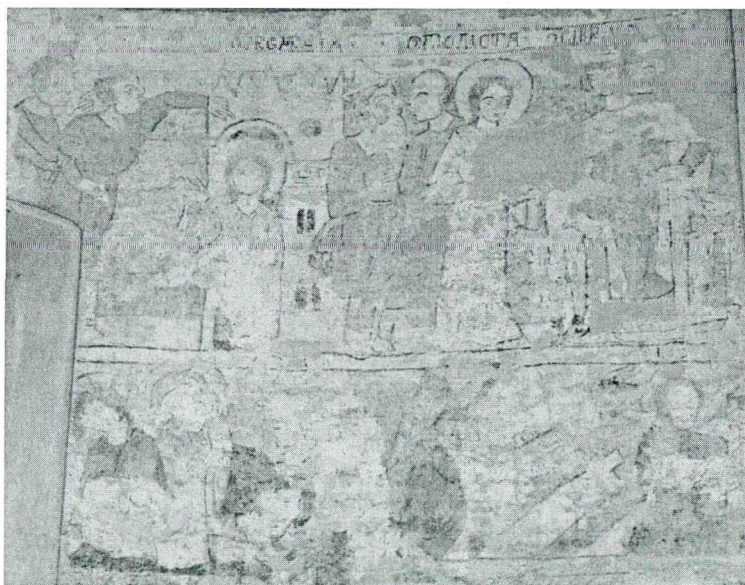


Figure 1: Scenes from the life of Saint Margaret and Christ, Šivetice / Šivete (13. c.)

Frequently, a scene similar to the trial describes a dialogue between a Christian virgin and a heathen man, who would like to marry her. The oldest example of such a scene from the region is preserved in Šivetice / Sűvete, where it was integrated into a pictorial vita of Saint Margaret of Antiochia (Gerát 2002, Prokopp 2002, 12–14, SNMS 1978, 151–153 (Dvořáková), Togner 1989, 185–186, Tóth 1974, 85–88, 238–239. In this specific case, the similarity of the virgin saint to Christ, her *christiformitas*, one of the leading ideals of mediaeval hagiographers, was made explicitly visible by a direct visual parallel (Figure 1). The life of Christ was painted very closely to the trial of the virgin, in the register below. In the narrative of the legend, Margaret stood several times before Olibrius, who was trying to convert her to pagan religion and to marry her. That is why the scene very similar to the trial is repeated in the pictorial legend, too. In the meantime, Olibrius tried to break the will and belief of Margaret by violence. In one of these scenes, Saint Margaret was tormented on scaffolding. Through its similarity with the Crucifixion, the scene reinforced the basic idea of parallelism between the legend and the passion of Christ. In this pictorial legend, the idea is combined with a visual reference to the feminine character of the martyr – her long brown hair, coiled around the horizontal beam of the scaffolding. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, such a pictorial solution was not rare in the Central Europe. Similar motif, based on the text of the legend, is to be found in the stained glass window in Ardagger, Lower Austria (Frodl–Kraft, 1954). Older parallels to this scene of hanging are to be found in the German book illuminations, e.g. in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the Stuttgart *passionale* (Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Cods. bibl., see Boeckler 1923). This artwork seems to be based on the older tradition of similar iconographical scheme, which existed in Germany some centuries ago. Saint Margaret was tortured in a similar way in the passions of Kilian of Würzburg and Margaret of Antioch, produced in Fulda around 970 (Hannover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek MS I 189, fol. 28v., see Hahn 1988). Even this composition could be founded on an older visual prototype – torturing of Barulas, as depicted in Reichenau around 900 (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 264, 137, see Hahn 2001, Plate I.).

One of the tormentors in Šivetice has a pointed hat on his head – a usual visual hint identifying the person as a Jew. This detail of the image might gain some importance in connection with the idea of Saint Augustin according to which the “cruelty is the natural state of those who do not enjoy grace – pagans, Manicheans and Jews” (Baraz 1998, 202). Thus, a single sign in the picture could refer to the whole discourse of mediaeval anti-Semitism and intolerance. This discourse was very important for explaining the pictorial narratives. In this context, the small detail in the clothing of one figure could gain real political importance for some practical decisions. Nevertheless, the structure of pictorial narrative about the sentencing of a heroic saint as such could well exist without it. Nevertheless, the intolerant confrontation of different religious perspectives was a necessary condition for establishing the narratives about sentencing martyrs in the form known from the European Middle Ages. The majority of the martyrs lived in the time, when they represented a minority, fighting the norms of temporarily stronger culture around them (see Klausner 1998). Some topical scenes illustrate the confrontation of different ideologies very clearly.

Around 1400, similar case of a holy virgin was painted in the life of Saint Dorothea in Levoča/ Lőcse/ Leutschau (Buran 2002; Krása 1965). Here, the legal reason for sentencing the saint were even more explicitly linked with the problem of idolatry. This happened in a scene, where Dorothea causes a destruction of an idol – a statue of heathen god, depicted in a devil-like form (Figure 2). For Fabricius, the statue represented the religion he had to defend; for Dorothea, it was a simple object of superstitious worship, which deserved to be disrespected or even destroyed. Intolerance in the questions of faith is the prerequisite for the confrontation of the main characters of this sequence. Dorothea and her sisters have lost their lives, but ultimately depicted as stronger and more trustworthy side of the confrontation, because they were supported by cosmic powers. The angels destroying the statue of pagan deity are illustrating the general





Figure 2: The dispute of Saint Dorothea and the sentencing of her sisters, Levoča / Lőcse / Leutschau, around 1400

Christian view, according to which the idol should be destroyed, because worshipping him means offense to the single God, Jesus Christ, the creator of the universe. In this pictorial and ideological context, the judged saint represents the eternal transcendental power confronted with the temporary, earthly power. From this perspective, she was the real winner of the confrontation, even if she was sentenced, jailed, tortured and decapitated.

For all these reasons, the scene with a saint destroying an idol became quite popular in context of similar trials. The legal and ideological base of the action against idols reaches back to biblical law, to the second commandment banning the “graven images or any likeness of anything”, which were later explained by Maimonides and taken into Christian context by Tertullian, evaluating the idolatry as “the principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world” (according to Douzinas 2000, 814). From this perspective, the destruction of an idol in the context of a trial of the martyr means a paradoxical reversal of the legal situation: in the eyes of the Christians, the real criminal is the judge, prosecuting the martyr because of the refusal of idolatry.

Another, more humanistic variation of the same structure can be found in the painting from the early 16<sup>th</sup> c. retable in Banská Bystrica (Besztercebánya / Neusohl, see Šugár 2005). Saint Barbara discusses with the Roman authority and the idol stands on the column, as usual, too. Nevertheless, the heavenly powers destroying the idol are not visualised. The heroism of her individual action (as well as the educational level of the altar patron) is being stressed also by a small image in the image, where the prototype of female heroism from the Old Testament can be seen – Judith, decapitating Holofernes. The purpose of her heroism was to defend her nation which refused the polytheistic religions of the enemies in the name of one true God. The murder of the pagan leader in the situation of war was seen as excused, but this female hero was hardly a prototype of tolerance.

Otherwise, the case of Saint Barbara represented the intolerant approach of defenders of non-Christian beliefs as the real cause of her martyrdom. In the Central Europe, it was well known at least since the famous retable in Wrocław (Breslau, see Labuda 1984). The legal consequences of a difference in belief lead to real family tragedy. The dispute of Saint Barbara with



Figure 3: Saint Agatha whipped before Emperor Decius. From the retable of Saint Sophia in Sásová/ Zólyomszászfalva/ Sachsenorf (around 1440)

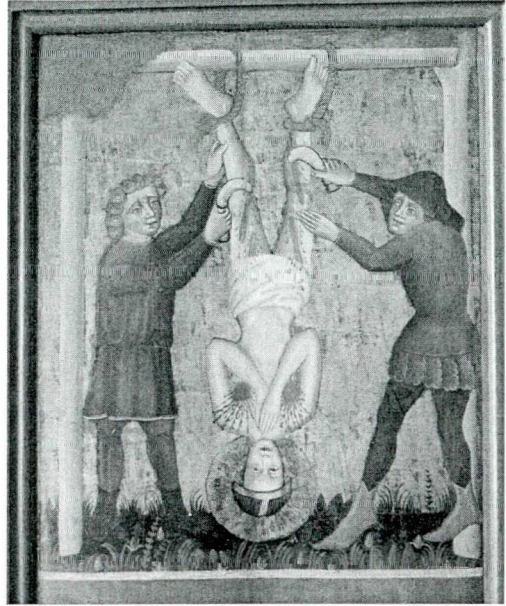


Figure 4: Saint Agatha tormented on the scaffolding. From the retable of Saint Sophia in Sásová/ Zólyomszászfalva/ Sachsenorf (around 1440)

her own father Dioscurus, standing at the very beginning of her martyrdom, sometimes seems to be different from the above described type of a trial. The retable picture from Jazernica (Márk falva, 1517) shows a seemingly innocent, calm conversation of the both in the proximity of a tower with three windows, symbolizing the Holy Trinity. The content of this dispute – the father refuses his daughter in the name of his belief – can be seen as a paradoxical consequence of the sentence in which Jesus instructed his followers to hate their parents and even their life (“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” – Luke 14, 26). In the end, the picture of a confrontation between the father and the daughter, a kind of family trial, served as a support for radical religious claims of some Christians.

The scene with a female virgin standing before the rulers offered also many possibilities to stress some details with a hidden meaning. The painting of half naked Saint Agatha being whipped before Emperor Decius, from Sásová (Zólyomszászfalva / Sachsenorf, retable of Saint Sophia, around 1440), features her half naked body with traces of torture, similar to Christ after flagellation (Figure 3).<sup>2</sup> In the same picture, there is a man approaching the saint from behind, entering under her clothes in a way, which might bear ambiguous associations. Considering the specific forms of torture, used in the case of Agatha – her breasts were torn with pliers, burned with a torch, and finally cut off – the female aspect of her existence was underlined enough to understand the sexual element of intense psychological tension in the scene.

<sup>2</sup> Radocsay 1955, p. 66. His catalogue on p. 461 identifies the saint as Dorothea. This identification does not falsify our interpretation as far as Agatha with her breast cut off was depicted on the same altarpiece, offering the viewer similar associations even if this would be other virgin saint.



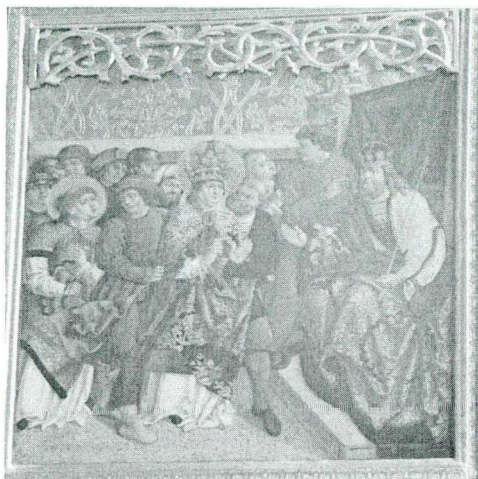


Figure 5: Saint Lawrence advised by pope Sixtus II to distribute the endangered church property during the trial. From the retable in Hrabušice/ Káposztafalva (around 1510-1520)



Figure 6: The charity of Saint Lawrence. From the retable in Hrabušice/ Káposztafalva (around 1510-1520)

The tense dialogue between a female virgin and an earthly ruler has been made especially strong in the vita of Saint Catherine from Alexandria. The young princess was able to persuade the philosophers, hired by emperor Maxentius to oppose her ideas. After their conversion to Christianity they were sentenced to death and burned, too. This event was depicted rarely, e.g. on the retable from Bardejov (Bártfa / Bartfeld, 1510). The dispute between Catherine and Maxentius was represented more frequently (e.g. on the retables from Levoča/ Lőcse/ Leutschau, 1469 and Turany, before 1500). These compositions follow in some respects the prototype of the learned conversation of twelve years old Christ with Jewish scholars in the temple, as depicted e.g. in Spišské Podhradie (Szepesváralja, 1480-90).

In their confrontation with the powers of evil, the saints were sometimes helped by a miracle. Nevertheless, this help could become a source for their future problems, including the subsequent trial. Such a story of Saint Peter and Paul was depicted on their altar retable in Levoča (Lőcse/ Leutschau, before 1500). The kneeling apostles pray to prevent a magician Simon from the flying with the help of demons. Their prayer caused a deadly fall of the magician, who was favoured by the emperor Nero. The Emperor was allegedly so sorry about the loss of his beloved magician that he sentenced the apostles to death penalty.

The basic prototype of the saint standing before an earthly judge has many variations with different meanings. The individual narratives used similar compositions for specific purposes. One more variation of the scene was included in the story of saint Lawrence as depicted in Hrabušice (Káposztafalva, around 1510-1520). According to the Golden Legend, the pope Sixtus II, when arrested, instructed Saint Lawrence to give away to the poor the treasures of the church (Figure 4). The saint followed this instruction, which saved the ecclesiastic possessions from being confiscated by the state authorities (Figure 5). Thereafter, he declared that the poor and sick themselves were the real treasures of the Church. In this short story, at least two transformations took place. Firstly, the meaning of the word "treasure" has been shifted from literal to metaphorical sense, which has some obvious consequences for their exchange value. Secondly, the helper of the accused pope acted in a way, which made him a criminal from the temporary earthly perspective but – in the religious explanation aiming at eternal values – a saintly person defying authorities on a way to his own trial and martyrdom.



As we have seen in some of the previous examples (Margaret in Šivetice / Sűvete; Dorothea in Levoča/ Lőcse/ Leutschau) the martyrs were often mocked and put into prison in course of their trial. In some of such cases, the supernatural consolation in the prison was depicted – the saint was visited by Christ. Such a scene can be found in the vita of Saint Dorothea in the murals of the parish church in Levoča/ Lőcse/ Leutschau (around 1400) as well as in the legend of Saint George, painted on the closed wings of his retable in Spišská Sobota (Mons Sancti Georgii; Szepesszombat; Georgenberg, 1516. See Fajt–Suckale 2003, Gerát 2006, Riches 2000, 36–67). Somewhat surprisingly for our modern logic, Dorothea stands in the doors of the prison, which are opened and George is sitting behind the opened door, too. It is clear that the pictures did not aim at a depiction of real situations in which the door of the prison would be closed. Instead, the paintings were narrating about the spiritual consolation of the prisoner which might resemble the famous Consolation from philosophy by Boethius. Nevertheless, the consolation in the version with Jesus instead of Philosophy has more symbolical and religious and less philosophical and allegorical meanings. The saints welcome the Saviour as if he was an ordinary visitor or a pilgrim; the visual references to his extraordinary status are limited to the halo and the gesture of blessing. Similar compositions could be seen in the cycles depicting the works of mercy (see Bühren 1998).

Occasionally, a consolation of saintly prisoner was provided not by Jesus but by another saint. On the above mentioned retable of Saint Peter and Paul in Levoča (Lőcse/ Leutschau, before 1500) Paul brought some meal to his imprisoned fellow Peter. Nevertheless, Peter had been starving for so long that he was not able to open his mouth. A similar scene was depicted already in the so called Angevin legendary (Vat. Lat. 8541, fol. 9r. See Levárdy 1975, 27 and Szakács, 2006, p. 230). But the stay of the saint in the prison could be represented even more dramatically. Saint Margaret of Antioch had to fight with a demon in form of a dragon during her stay in the prison (Figure 6). On her retable in Mlynica (Malompatak/ Mühlenbach, around 1515–1520), the dragon is trying to bite her. She stands calmly with a large cross in her hand – a reference to the sign, which – according to the legend – was strong enough to overcome the supernatural beast.



Figure 7: Saint Margaret in the prison, Mlynica/ Malompatak/ Mühlenbach (around 1515–1520)

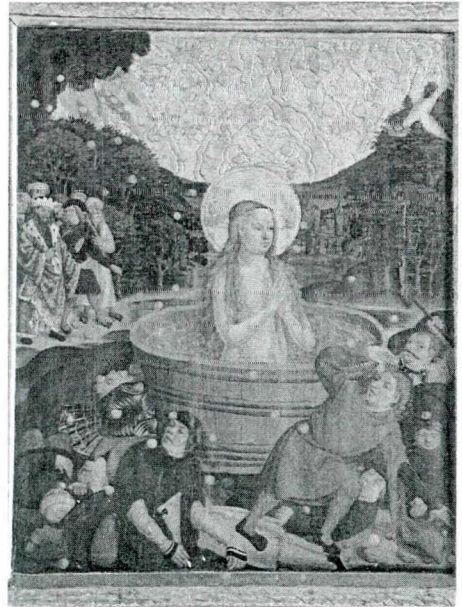


Figure 8: Saint Margaret boiled in a cauldron, Mlynica/ Malompatak/ Mühlenbach (around 1515 – 1520)

Obviously, imprisonment was neither a typical nor a final punishment for the martyrs – more important was torture and execution. Some scenes of torture were repeated in several legends of different saints. The typical example is tormenting of the saint on scaffolding, which we have seen in the pictorial life of St. Margaret in Šivetice (Süvete, 13<sup>th</sup> c.). The extraordinary relevance of this scene in the ideological framework of hagiography, based on the idea of emulating Christ (*imitatio Christi*) might be a reason why this scene became a part of several pictorial legends of holy virgins, who were tortured in similar way – burned, cut or torn by special instruments. The examples can be found in the vitae of Saint Dorothea and Saint Catherine in Levoča (Lőcse/Leutschau, 1469) and on the retable of Saint Catherine in Turany (before 1500). Such scenes were not gender specific – they can be found in the legends of some male martyrs, too. In our region, the male saints tormented on scaffolding are represented by Saint George in Spišská Sobota (Mons Sancti Georgii / Szepesszombat/ Georgenberg, 1516) or by Saint Lawrence in Hrabušice (Káposztafalva, around 1510 – 1520).

Occasionally – as in the tormenting of Saint Agatha from Sásová (Zólyomszászfalva/ Sachsendorf (around 1440) – the original form of the scene was substantially changed to stress the individual form of martyrdom. The shearing of Agatha's breasts is extremely cruel example (Figure 7). The unusual upside-down position of her body might slightly remember the crucifixion of St. Peter in our region visualized on the retable in Levoča (Lőcse / Leutschau, before 1500).

The scene where Saint Lawrence was roasted on gridiron (on the retable from Hrabušice / Káposztafalva, around 1510 – 1520) is one more example of very individualized form of torment. Since the gridiron as the instrument of torture was used only in the connection with this saint, it acquired a specific function as a sign and became an individual attribute in many iconic images of the saint.

One more popular, not individual way of torture was boiling in a cauldron. The basic visual structure of the scene with a saint in the middle, praying calmly in a pot over a fire was independent from the kind of liquids in which the saint was boiled; oil, lead or water, the scene was always similar. There are two such scenes to be found in the church of Saint James Levoča / Lőcse/ Leutschau: the painting in the vita of Saint Dorothea (around 1400) and the carving on the main altar retable of the martyrdom of Saint John the Evangelist, who according to legend was cooked in boiling hot oil and survived (1508–1517). One of the central points of such scenes was the manifestation of the ability of the saint to preserve the piece of mind in spite of the cruel attack on his body. Typically, the legends explain this not by the heroism of the saintly character, but by Divine grace, causing a miracle. This extraordinary event either prevented any pain or at least saved the body from injury or destruction. The idea was developed by Tertullian, promising that the body will not suffer during the torture, if the mind is in Heaven (*Ad martyras* II, 10).

In the image of Saint Margaret from Mlynica (Malompatak/ Mühlenbach, around 1515–1520), a supernatural consolation was symbolized by a dove of the Holy Spirit flying down to the saint (Figure 8). One more miracle of a different type is represented in the same image – the stones are falling down on her tormentors. This is a punitive miracle aimed at the persecutors of the saint. Similar miraculous punishment was depicted in the life of Saint George in Spišská Sobota (Mons Sancti Georgii / Szepesszombat/ Georgenberg, 1516). The scene marks the triumphal end of the cycle as a manifestation of the final victory of heavenly justice over the temporary earthly justice or rather injustice.

One more type of miracle has helped a saint by the destruction of the torture instruments. This is the case of wheels, on which Saint Catharine ought to be tormented (depicted on the retable from Levoča/ Lőcse/ Leutschau, 1469, and the one from Turany, before 1500). Again, similar scene occurs in the life of Saint George, e.g. on his retable in Spišská Sobota (Mons Sancti Georgii / Georgenberg / Szepesszombat, 1516).



These corrections of the human “justice” by a miraculous intervention manifested higher, divine, universal or cosmic dimensions of justice. This phenomenon leads to more substantial questions about the theory of justice, on which the legends were based. To open such questions, one more group of iconographical evidence should be briefly considered: the scenes, in which the saints successfully intervened in the name of justice. These scenes sharply contrast with the ones, in which a saint became a victim of injustice.

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The earthly life of many saints was brought to its end by a decapitation. Historically, Saint Paul was among the first followers of Christ executed in this way, reserved for citizens of Roman Empire. In the classical Roman perspective, the beheading as privileged way of execution contrasted with a crucifixion, which was more painful and perceived as humiliating, too. The example of Saint Paul was followed by many other martyrs in the centuries to come. The paintings from our region depicted not only the beheading of Saint Paul (Levoča/ Lőcse/ Leutschau, before 1500), but the decapitation of Saint Catherine (Turany, before 1500), Saint Barbara, (Banská Bystrica / Besztercebánya / Neusohl, after 1500; Jazernica / Márkfalva, 1517), Saint James (Jakub / Szentjakabfalva, around 1500, today in Ostrihom/ Esztergom, Christian Museum).

In case of Saint Dorothea (Levoča/ Lőcse/ Leutschau, around 1400), a miracle happened during such an execution. The saint was mocked on her way by a scribe Theophilus, who asked her to send him roses from the garden of her heavenly bridegroom. After the execution, a boy appeared, bringing a basket with roses, in February 303. Subsequently, Theophilus was converted to Christianity and executed, too. The miracle was used to persuade one more person, not to save the young saint for a life on this planet.

It is strange that the miracles caused by saints could sometimes prevent precisely beheading. The story about Saint Nicolaus saving the three innocent soldiers or boys from decapitation was very popular in the later Middle Ages. It was featured on the altar retable from Kremnica (Körmöczbánya / Kremnitz, around 1476, today in Budapest, Hungarian National Gallery) and the one in Veľká Lomnica (Kakaslomnic / Lomnitz, after 1500). It is a paradox, that a bishop saint was able to prevent the decapitation of not saintly persons, while God “allowed” a similar execution of his saintly fellows. This paradox is only explainable by the Christian explanation of martyrdom as the best end to earthly life.

The pictorial propaganda of extraordinary abilities of the saintly bishop served other purposes. One story narrated how Saint Nicolaus restituted stolen property, which had previously been put under the patronage of his statue (the retables of Saint Nicholas from Kremnica/ Körmöczbánya/ Kremnitz, around 1476, today in Budapest, MNG; Veľká Lomnica/ Kakaslomnic/ Gross-Lomnitz, around 1500; Prešov/ Eperjes/ Preschau, around 1500). In Kremnica, he was even shown as intervening after a trial, where a cheater won by seemingly returning the borrowed money.

The restitution of justice was not something exclusive to this 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop, who was not martyred. Even James the Greater, apostle of Christ and martyr, sentenced and executed for his belief was believed to have corrected the deformed human justice in the case of a pilgrim unjustly executed on his way to the grave of James in Santiago da Compostella. But he was – similar to Christ, who felt abandoned by his Father several times during the passion – not able to help himself in his trial. These events were depicted on the retable of Saint James from Jakub (Szentjakabfalva, around 1500, today in Ostrihom/ Esztergom, Christian Museum). The contrasting way of intervening into the execution of justice is understandable only when taking into account the religious explanation.

One more answer to the hard question of why the miracles functioned in the stories of martyrs in such a paradoxical way is based on the theory of narration (see Lewis 2006). The torture and execution could not be prevented, because this would negate the very substance and the

most important historical functions of the whole story. The narratives about suffering heroes of faith were deeply needed in mediaeval society. The saints were not able to help themselves in their own case, because they had to suffer and to die to become saints. They had to lose their earthly life for in eternal life. That is why the day of their martyrdom was celebrated as their birthday (*dies natalis*). The belief in the extremely unpleasant price paid for an eternal life offered an effective psychological help for people whose medical, social and economical problems were not solvable by secular methods of that time.

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The functions of the stories of martyrs in mediaeval society were very complex. At least since the researches of Michel Foucault, deep links between the martyrdom and rituals of penance in Christian society are known. Martyrdom manifested the will of an individual to accept his or her own death, to reject his or her self, to leave his or her past identity. The man chooses death rather than offending or leaving the belief. This radical, even paradoxical example of self-manipulation is unthinkable without a radical understanding of reality, in which the spiritual world possesses greater authority and influence than the physical reality of the world, including the physical reality of human body. In the trials of the martyrs, the human body was sentenced and declared unimportant not only by the judge, but by the martyr, prepared to give up the physical life of their own body in favour of a supernatural perspective. This radical structure of thinking, reflected in the images of the martyrs, played very important role not only for the self-reflection of a mediaeval individual, but also for the ways in which the social order was organized. The cruelty of the images indirectly supported mediaeval ways of executing human justice in this world, too.

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