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Tormented Bodies in Late Medieval Paintings

In many legends the rulers use violence as a means of suppression against individuality which embodied alternative values.[1] The torture and execution of the opponents of the ruling regime may also be staged – even as a public performance – to have an intimidating effect also on those members of society who are not directly affected. (Burschel-Distelrath-Lembke 2000, 10) However, martyrs triumph over their torturers precisely by not being broken, but by remaining true to what is meaningful to them and to what lies behind the horizon of the ruler's power, simultaneously.

The depiction of the torture of saints reflects several of the artist's ideas on the psychological experience of suffering – from spiritual superiority to the transitory terrors of this world to the picture of natural human suffering. Apart from this, the frequent repetition of scenes of torture also raises the question of the motivation of the patrons. What did they wish to achieve through portraying such barbarity? Consideration of the surviving visual sources and texts that inform us about the meaning of the pictures provides a partial answer.

Torture on the wooden frame

Torture scenes are already displayed in the Rotunda of St. Margaret at Šivetice where Olibrius strives to break the saint's will and faith. Initially she was the object of his erotic desires but when Olibrius found that his private emotions and needs were unsatisfied, Margaret's body became an object for torture, subject to

1 The text of the article is based on Chapter 6 of my book *Legendary Scenes: An Essay on Medieval Pictorial Hagiography* (Gerát 2014).

the public authority of the secular power. Sexual desire changed into desire to control religious faith and practice. (Fromer 2005, 96, 97)

In one of the scenes in the cycle, a saint is fastened to a wooden frame consisting of two verticals and a crossbeam. Her hands nailed to the vertical beams at the sides are blood stained bearing a resemblance to those of Christ. The features of the Šivetice picture emphasizing Margaret's *Christoformitas* are combined with a reference to her femininity. The saint's long brown hair twisted around the upper beam is arguably the only poetic feature of the scene which has no subsequent occurence. However, the basic arrangement of this torture scene was to appear regularly in later works.

The extraordinary popularity of this pictorial composition can be attributed to the fact that it expressed the essence of torture so well. The tortured person is bound, thus it is clear that there is no chance for resistance. Her body has ceased to be an expression of her own will or decisions, because she has become the victim of other people who have power over her. From an earthly point of view, this is tantamount to total humiliation and defeat for the person tortured. The Christian interpretation emphasizes the latent meanings of the situation, in which defeat is interpreted as victory. Since the viewers within the picture are sometimes torturers themselves, their representation does not provide the models of reaction or testimony which are often found in the cases of other so-called assistant or accompanying figures. Their depiction also allowed painters to express sceptical views of human nature.

The composition of a body tied up for torture first appeared in Central Europe around the year 900 in the Life of St. Barulas. (Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 264. 137; see Hahn 2001, Plate I.) Saint Margaret herself is subjected to a similar treatment in a picture produced at Fulda around 970. (Hanover, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek MS I 189, fol. 28v., see Hahn 1988) Similar compositions are found in illuminations in the Stuttgart Passionale from the 12th century (see Boeckler 1923, ill. 12; Caviness 2001, 103–104). Stained glass windows at Ard agger in Lower Austria show the survival of this tradition in the 13th century. Saint Margaret's bound body is shredded by two torturers with hooks.

Details could substantially influence the meanings of the depiction of torture. One of St. Margaret's torturers at Šivetice is wearing a pointed hat, which in medieval paintings usually indicated Jews. This detail of the picture is of particular significance if one considers an idea expressed by St. Augustine, according to which "cruelty is a natural feature of those, who have not yet received grace" (*De*

civitate Dei 2:18; 3:15) – in this instance, pagans and Jews. Details that recall the discourse of medieval anti-Semitism, could sometimes add real political significance to a picture. The possible social significance of this statement in the wider culture was not lost even after the 13th century when Thomas Aquinas shifted the meaning of the word 'cruelty' to a psychological level and proposed using the term "injustice" to designate similar external expressions. It was in the Late Middle Ages precisely that the image of cruelty began to be used for political, social and religious manipulation in order to delegitimize those who differed from devout Christians. (Baraz 2003, 20–23, 179)

A picture of the Altar of St. Sophia from Sásová (today in the Museum of Central Slovakia in Banská Bystrica) represents the basic composition of torture on the frame in an adapted form. (Figure 1) St. Agatha, who can be recognized by the large bleeding wounds after the removal of her breasts, was hung upside down on the wooden frame. Two torturers are cutting her exposed legs. The saint bears the barbaric torture with a peaceful expression, hands folded in a gesture of prayer and trust. Many tortured martyrs in pictures maintain a calm expression, driven as they were by their deep faith in definitive victory over death. In his famous address to the martyrs, Tertullian promised that if the soul was going to heaven, the body would not suffer during torture (*Ad martyras* II, 10: "*Nihil crus sentit in nervo, cum animus in caelo est*."). According to Thomas Aquinas, saints can bear pain because the comforting *visio beatifica* flows into their bodies. (see Bynum 1995, 310)

The deepening of the pictorial space and the multiplication of the number of depicted motifs are characteristic of the further development of compositions during the course of the 15th century. On a wing of the Altar of St. Catherine in Levoča (1469), an interest in the articulation of space is evident. (Figure 2) This can be seen in the overlapping of the figures of the torturers and the imperial retinue, too. An unusual motif of the scene is the angel which has come down from heaven to release the saint's hands from the wooden frame. The faces of the torturers, who threaten with whips, are deformed almost into caricatures. The expressions of these primitive men betray a perverted predilection for torture. It is noteworthy that the negative physiognomic stylization does not include the stern face of the Emperor who is in discussion with two other men in the left part of the picture. It seems that there was an increasing preoccupation with ideas about people's social status being reflected in their personal appearance even in such an extraordinary situation.

The body, tortured on the wooden frame, is clearly visible, displayed at the centre of the composition so that it immediately attracts the viewer's attention. It addresses the beholder with a many-faceted emotional message containing an appeal to personal sacrifice, provoking sympathy and possibly erotic associations as well. Clearly, when considering viewers' reactions to the picture of a tortured body, various possible explanations should be considered: perhaps only a distanced approach to the body as an object, or a kind of a dialogue and sometimes even self-identification. (Carlson 2002, 15) Modern notions aside, the concept of catharsis can be meaningfully applied to the interpretation of these pictures. (Caviness 2001, 93)

The visual analysis of the picture, especially its comparison with other works in which similar problems are dealt with, helps us understand the prevailing perception and interpretation of the tortured body at the time. The carefully calculated staging of the nakedness of female martyrs with the help of veils and loin cloths appears to be a characteristic feature of the art of the 15th century. Various authors have expressed the view that in the minds of the viewers, the Christian interpretation of the story of the tortured naked body was combined with other approaches. To be sure, the torture scenes did not serve only to present uncovered *female* bodies. Male bodies are depicted in the paintings of the Hrabušice Altar of St. Lawrence and Spišská Sobota Altar of St. George. Both saints have naked torsos and limbs. Some authors have emphasized erotic associations of a different sort in connection with such images. The more radical versions even speak of "sado-erotic spectacles." (Caviness 2001, 84–124) Such terms belong to modern sensibilities. The perception of nakedness is culturally coded; it depends on the situations in which nakedness occurs. (Jütte 1992, 120) It is questionable how far erotic associations were of relevance when looking at paintings situated in contexts which deliberately steered viewers towards substantially different mental images. It is probable that under the pressure of the situation, at least the conscious components of their imagination took other directions. If, in some viewers, a picture still aroused desires that were evaluated and sanctioned as inappropriate in their culture, they had good reason to hide these desires, perhaps even from themselves. Therefore, the lack of historical testimony of such perceptions of images by medieval viewers may be evidence that such an approach did not exist in this period, or it may only indicate censorship or self-censorship.

The representation of witnesses of torture can also serve as a source of information about the perception of the essence of the depicted event in the period.

Social differences were sometimes inherent in the level of active participation or in the way the witnesses of the tormenting reacted. Personal physical involvement in the torture is absent from the Spišská Sobota picture of the torturing of St. George where a man in ostentatious burgher' dress and another man wearing fashionable knightly armour are depicted. The clawing of the martyr's body with metal rakes or burning with torches is left to hirelings.

Boiling in a Cauldron

The pictorial Legend of St. George at Spišská Sobota includes another scene which is repeated in many cycles. (Figure 3) According to the legend, being boiled in a cauldron of molten lead was as refreshing as a pleasant bath to the saint. A similarly conceived torture of St. John the Evangelist is depicted on the wing of the main altar in Levoča. In both cases, the elderly bearded man in charge of orchestrating the execution is wearing a turban instead of the traditional imperial crown, a detail allowing us a topical reference to the Turkish threat. A disparity can be seen in the background. The torture of St. George occurs in natural surroundings, while the Levoča picture of St. John being boiled in oil includes an up-to-date motif, namely the gate of a medieval town. The familiar element brings the event closer to the medieval viewer's experience. It is also an indirect reference to the Latin Gate, mentioned in the legend as the place where the Emperor Domitian ordered that the Apostle should be put in a barrel of boiling oil. Thanks to a miracle, John survived this torture, and this led to his exile to the isle of Patmos. Inspired by 15th-century Netherlandish painting, the painter of the Košice picture of the torture of St. John created a natural scenery, which enabled him to place John's vision on Patmos in middle distance. The inclusion of the vision of the Apocalyptic woman in the upper part of the vertical axis of the picture is extraordinarily inventive. The structure of the picture uses later visionary experiences of the saint to express the spiritual escape he experienced during his torture.

Boiling of saints also appears in the stories of the saintly virgins. On the Altar of St. Margaret in Mlynica (around 1515), the uncovered body of the long-haired saint appears at the centre of the composition. Folded hands express immersion in prayer. A white dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, swoops down to place the crown on Margaret's head. This picture is a synthetic scene not only because of

the emphasis placed on the spiritual escape, but also because it includes the motif of stones falling from heaven as a punishment upon the torturers. The stones fall from a dark cloud in the upper-left corner of the image, while the dove swoops down from the right. There is no support for this punitive miracle from the text of the Golden Legend. The scene of the punishment of St. George's torturers at Spišská Sobota could be the visual source.

Other Forms of Torture

Other types of torture were depicted more rarely. The pictorial legend of St. George being dragged behind a horse in Slovakia appears only on his altar at Spišská Sobota. (Figure 4) In spite of his halo, the saint's long blond curls are pulled along the ground behind the noble countenance with an open mouth resembling that of a Greek tragic mask. While being dragged, his white robe with a red cross on the chest is drawn inwards, and his bound hands are held over his abdomen. A similar form of torture is depicted on the Altar of St. Barbara (1447) from Wrocław (see Labuda 1984). In his analysis of a similar picture by Bernard Martorell, Lionello Puppi pointed to the precision of detail in the depiction of torture, which must have been informed by personal observation of similar punishments, involving a growing intensity of ridicule and humiliation in the ritual of public execution. The harness of the horse in Spišská Sobota is simpler than that in the Paris work while the figure of the torturer covers the precise spot where the saint's legs are bound. The torturer wielding a club shuts off from view the saint's ankles. Less detail means less evidence in favour of personal observation of a similar punishment. Of particular interest is also the motif of armed men who increase the saint's suffering with blows from clubs. Naturalistic observation of the details of movement, of brutal physiognomy, and shadows are combined with the exaggerated size of the figures which reach the second storey of a house. The physical size of the men by no means indicates their spiritual power as was customary with hierarchical perspective in the Middle Ages. It was motivated more by an effort to improve the clarity of the altar picture, which the faithful viewed at a distance of several metres.

The torture of Felix, Regula, and Exuperantius was painted around 1480 by the Viennese Master of the Apostolic Martyrdoms in the region of Košice. (Mucsi 1975, 15–17; Figure 5) This picture is an outstanding example of torture: we

see two of the saints with broken limbs tied to wheels, raised on a wooden support. The third lies almost naked, his right arm broken and attached to a sort of wall bar. He watches fearfully the torturer who is about to hurl a wheel onto him. This scene shows no trace of the elevation of the pious martyrs above the suffering of their executions: the fear of the tortured human being appears in all its existential urgency. It is highly likely that at least some martyrs experienced fear of death and suffering. This is also shown in the description of the martyrdom of St. Adalbert (Vojtech) by Bruno of Querfurt: "*nunc magnus Adelbertus timet; quasi homo amare mortis gustum exhorret, ultra quam solet consternata mens ignavia laborat, moritura caro colorem mutat, pavore vita tremula hebet.*" (Querfurtensis 1996, 116) The author was to become a martyr himself several years later.

In Sabinov, a drastic scene of the dismemberment of a saint is depicted. (Figure 6) A woman in the background is holding his severed hands, while the executioner is hacking a foot off. The picture bears a close resemblance to an illustration of the story of St. Adrian in the *Lives of the Saints* from 1488. (*Heiligenleben* 1488, 152) Saint Adrian of Nicomedia, whose limbs were chopped off, was originally a well-to-do pagan and an officer in the Roman army. (Varazze 2007, 1640) He was converted to Christianity after being impressed by the testimony of the Christians who were executed for refusing to worship pagan gods during the visit of the Emperor Maximianus to Nicomedia. The woman, who devotes her attention to the severed hand or hands, is Adrian's wife, the zealous Christian Natalia. After her husband's martyrdom, she succeeded in saving one, or in some versions, both, of his hands. Natalia's slightly bowed head is surrounded by blue sky visible through a window in the background. Pain prevails in the expression with which she looks at her husband's severed hands or at Adrian, although according to the text of the legend, she accepted his suffering as something that would increase his merits.

The Sabinov painting gains even greater importance if we consider that this dramatic theme was depicted almost exclusively in book miniatures (for details, see Gerát 2013). It is likely that the Sabinov picture is the only extant document we have of the daring attempt to portray the brutal image of Adrian's martyrdom in a format and space accessible to the wider community of the faithful.

The originality of the Sabinov work becomes clear when we compare it with other existing representations of the theme. It seems to be the only picture in which a vision of the Crucified Christ gives comfort to the mutilated Adrian. The martyr's face, his relaxed mouth, the weariness evident in the expression

around the eyes with partially lowered lids, and the carefully painted, light curly hair do not conspire to make a tragic impression. The picture does not exclude the possibility that the saint is looking at Natalia as well as at the Crucifix, because his unfocused look is redolent with contemplation or reflection. The way the painter presents the Crucified Christ, with a light cloth around the hips and a large blood stain on the forehead, appears more like a timeless reference to the sacrifice bringing salvation than a depiction of a sculptural artwork in the torture chamber. It is possible that the picture was enriched with this motif under the influence of the mystical meditations on the meaning of the Crucifixion, in keeping with the mentality of the Late Middle Ages. The inclusion of Christ's sacrifice in the Sabinov picture provides both a model and support during humble endurance in extreme situations. In the context of the programme of the Sabinov altar, this scene can be understood as a storyteller's interpretation of the central motif of the altar shrine – the Crucifixion.

The Emperor ordered the scholars who turned to the faith of St. Catherine to be put to death by burning. This theme appears in the legends from her earliest *Passio* up to the four sermons written by the Hungarian Franciscan Pelbartus Ladislaus de Temesvar (present day Timişoara in Romania), active before 1504. His output exerted a considerable influence on his successors, including the author of the verse legend in the Nové Zámky Codex. (Rajhona 2003; see also Mészáros 1996, 187) Thus, in this case, we also have the contemporary preacher's interpretation of the legend, which can be compared with the pictures. On the Lent side of the *Vir Dolorum* Altar in Bardejov, the burning of the scholars was placed immediately next to the picture of the disputation, in which the saint persuaded them by force of argument to convert to Christianity. The painter concentrated on the essentials, and depicted the scene against a plain dusky background, although the legend says that the burning happened in a town centre "*tyrannus nimio furore succensus omnes in mediu ciuitatis cremari iussit*". (Varazze 2007, 1354) In the left part of the composition, the scholars, licked by flames, are portrayed kneeling calmly while an angel bears their souls aloft in a cloth. The suffering caused by the fire is depicted indirectly in the picture, by means of two witnesses, who stand in the right part of the picture and cover their faces against the radiating heat.

Roasting on a gridiron, which later became the attribute of St. Lawrence, was a special variant of burning. In the Hrabušice picture, the naked body (apart from the loin cloth) of the saint lies parallel to the lower edge of the picture.

(Figure 7) Two torturers are rolling him into the fire with two-pronged forks. The Hrabušice painter may have drawn inspiration from older wall paintings portraying the same theme: a similar motif also occurs in the wall painting of the burning of the sisters of St. Dorothy in the Parish Church of St. James in Levoča (see Buran 2002, 77). The figure of the Emperor covering his face with his cloak is another noteworthy detail in the Hrabušice painting. He differs significantly from older pictures in which he is shown confidently enthroned and issuing orders. (cf. Swarzenski 1913, 87) The torturers with forks do not appear on the burning of St. Lawrence scene on the Altar of the Virgin Mary and St. Erasmus in Bardejov. As a result, the picture gives the strange impression of St. Lawrence being burnt without direct physical violence.

Beheading

In the final stage, martyrs were most frequently beheaded. This method also worked in cases when other methods failed thanks to miracles, as discussed above. From the ancient Roman point of view, beheading was a privileged method of execution, especially in comparison with the much more painful crucifixion.

The basic motif of the scene is the image of the executioner swinging his sword above the martyr who, in turn, kneels in an attitude of resigned prayer. Thus, painters most frequently chose to depict the psychologically dramatic moment just before the definitive completion of the execution. The images are too numerous to be analysed here in detail. The earliest pictures of such executions are enacted against a plain backdrop and include relatively few secondary motifs. In a wall painting in the parish church at Levoča, a boy carrying a basket of flowers from the garden of paradise can be seen in front of the kneeling St. Dorothy even though the legend says that the event took place in February. The miraculous escape at the moment of death is also confirmed by an accompanying flying angel in the upper right-hand corner. A picture of miracles accompanying an execution also provided a promise of some protection in situations of extraordinary difficulty for the individual believer. This positive aspect was crucial in disseminating the influence of the Church in the eyes of observers. (Hahn 2001, 79)

Around the middle of the 15th century, delight in depicting details of figures and the background begins to appear even in pictures of beheading. Pictures usually show greater elaboration with an increased number of secondary motifs and

additional meanings. On the Altar of St. Catherine in Levoča, the saint is waiting patiently with her hands crossed on her chest, while the executioner with a demonic-looking face is brandishing his sword before the final strike. The noble lady behind the saint is standing with a gesture similar to the orant figure, even if she witnesses the atrocity with a malicious smile. An angel in the upper right-hand corner is waiting to bear the saint's soul aloft.

The beheading of martyrs from Zlaté Moravce shows John the Baptist, identifiable by his typical garment made of camel's hair. Salome stands watching the execution and holding a dish. The second martyr is traditionally regarded as James the Greater, although the apostle is not dressed in his traditional clothing and salient attributes. (Kakucs 2003, 347) A noteworthy detail in this picture is the demonization of the figure of the ruler who has claws instead of feet. The turbans of the ruler and the executioner may be a reference to the impending Turkish threat. This motif makes an appearance in later pictures, too.

The majority of the pictures of beheading show the culmination of the event – either the actual execution, or the moment of tension immediately before it, but specific motifs in an individual story may justify shifting the chosen moment to the final phase. If Salome has to stand holding a dish bearing the saint's severed head, the moment after the culmination of the execution of John the Baptist must be depicted.

In the case of St. Paul, the artists chose the already completed execution to justify the motif of the three miraculous springs which appeared at the places where the saint's head fell. In the Levoča Beheading of St. Paul, the apostle's head is already severed, the body with clasped hands falls to the ground, blood pours from the arteries of the neck, and the executioner is putting his sword back into its scabbard The oldest legends of the martyrdom of St. Paul say that the soldier, who beheaded the saint, splashed his clothes with milk. The miracle with the springs appears later.

In the picture of the execution of Sts. Felix, Regula, and Exuperantius, the third saint is actually being beheaded (see Mucsi 1975, 15–17; Figure 8). The other two saints are kneeling and confronting the viewer with their severed heads. This may capture the attention of the audience less that St. Denis carrying his own severed head, but it is essentially the same miracle. Even physical execution did not entirely deprive the martyrs of life.

Crucifixion

A picture of an execution usually evokes horror. However, for the medieval believer, martyrdom was also the culmination of Christian life. Therefore, the *Golden Legend* also cites a testimony, according to which St. Peter "rejoiced greatly" at the sight of his wife being led to execution: "*cum uxor Petri ad passionem duceretur, Petrus ingenti gaudiu exultauit*". (Varazze 2007, 628) The apostle himself did not consider himself worthy of a death like that of Jesus, allegedly because of modesty. When he as a foreigner in Rome was condemned to this humiliating method of execution, he asked to be crucified with his head upside down. Leaving aside the difference between him and Christ, by turning the cross upside down he wanted to indicate that he was called from earth to heaven: "*Petrus* (...) *dum uenisset ad crucem ait: «Quoniam dominus meus de celo ad terram descendit, recta cruce sublimatus est; me autem quem de terra ad celum reuocare dignatur, crux mea caput meum in terra debet ostendere et pedes ad celum dirigere»*." (Varazze 2007, 636) In this simplified explanation, the apostle's request to have the cross turned upside down seems almost banal. However, the earliest source has Peter, immediately before his crucifixion, present a complex theological consideration, directed towards the interpretation of the cross and its position. (Zwierlein 2009, 415–421) Peter was attempting to express the deepest mystery of human existence, which he himself describes as ineffable, or at least expressible only by an imperceptible voice from the innermost depths of the human interior: silence. The cross itself is a paradox, and the cross turned upside down further accentuates the profundity of this paradox by emphasizing the need to overturn all hierarchies: "If you do not turn right into left, bottom into top and front into back ... you will not enter the Kingdom of God." (Zwierlein 2009, 419) In the light of these sources, the picture of Peter's crucifixion with head downwards appears to be an invitation to contemplation, beyond words.

Saint Peter crucified in an upside-down position was painted on the Altar of Sts. Peter and Paul in Levoča (before 1500). The presence of the Emperor in this scene is at variance with the sources, according to which Nero was enraged when the Prefect Agrippa had Peter executed, because he had wanted to torture Peter in a more savage way. The same applies to the relief wings of the Altar of St. Barbara in Banská Bystrica (1509), although in this case, the ruler's crown does not have the transverse arch spanning the width of the crown which was characteristic of the imperial crown. Dressed in a long tunic, Peter is attached to the cross

with a rope on his hands and feet. Such a picture corresponds to the iconographic tradition, as does the placing of the cross at the centre of the composition parallel to the surface of the picture. (Andergassen 2002, 54–55)

The background of both pictures shows a symbolic landscape and a townscape. Although these are not realistic pictures, it is clear that very little attempt has been made to depict Rome. In Banská Bystrica, there is a small building which might be seen as a vague reference to the Coloseum, and even the form of the city wall can be interpreted in several ways. In Levoča the episode seems to be located in a kind of typical Central European environment.

The crucifixion of St. Andrew is also individually typical.

A painting on a wing of an altar from Liptovský Ondrej (1512) shows the placing of the apostle on an X-shaped cross (now in Budapest, Hungarian National Gallery 53.569). The shrine of the same altar contains one of the results of this method of execution with a relevance for art history, namely a special form of cross which became the saint's salient attribute in art. It allows the scene to be identified, even when – as in the cycle of martyrdoms of apostles in the chancel of the Church of St. Giles at Poprad – only a fragment survives. However, the picture of the crucifixion of St. Philip from the Mošovce altar (1518) shows that a change in the form of the crucifixion compared to that of Christ does not need to be so substantial. (Glatz 1985, 56–58, ill. 37)

Conclusion

From a theological point of view, original sin is the cause of unjust violence and also of the martyrs' physical suffering. Jesus broke the power of sin, but he did not renew the lost paradise. (Schreiner 1992, 46) Justice will be fulfilled only at the end of the world.

The voluntary death of the martyrs followed the example set by Jesus. The sentence in the Gospel, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13), was also valid in the late Middle Ages. Thomas Aquinas emphasized martyrdom as the most perfect of virtuous acts, because it best showed the perfection of love: "Martyrium autem inter omnes actus virtuosos maxime demonstrat perfectionem charitatis." (*Summa Theologiæ* II-IIq. 124a 3c) Martyrdom served as the orienting point of Christian existence. (Gemeinhardt 2009, 322) The authors of legends regarded martyrs mainly as witnesses to

their faith who had sealed their testimony with their blood. They were writing at a time when the Greek word martus (μάρτυς, witness) and the derived word marturuon (μαρτύρυον, testimony) had not yet acquired their specific Christian meaning (see Campenhausen 1964, 20–55). Martyrs were described as heroes who sacrificed their earthly lives in the name of the Christian faith in eternal life. (Schockenhoff 1999) However, the story of martyrdom is not only about honouring a heroic death. Providing hope of victory over death, or escaping dissolution played an equally important role. (Halbfas 2002, 141) To Christians, a cruel act acquires a higher meaning. The tortured person remains faithful to his or her truth. The ruler may destroy his victim physically, but he has no effect on the cultural system within which the martyr's action has meaning. As far as popular piety was concerned, martyrdom remained the decisive criterion for sanctity.

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