

# The Legend of Saint Barbara, Patron Saint of Mines

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Barbara lived in the 3rd Century AD in Nicromedia, the capital of the Roman province of Bithnia (Asia Minor). She was the only child of Dioscuros, a high ranking and wealthy man. Her father adored her, had her tutored in the best schools of arts and sciences, and set out to reinforce her faith in the Roman-Greek Gods.

To protect her from foreign influences, he provided sumptuous living quarters for her in a tower. But her very loneliness caused Barbara to think seriously; as a result, she became more and more convinced that the old gods were but a hollow imitation.

Without her father's knowledge, she became familiar with the teachings of Christ, and had herself baptized. At that time, Christians were being persecuted nearly everywhere, and considered as enemies of the state. Adherence to Christianity was subject to the severest punishment.

Dioscuros planned to marry Barbara to a very prosperous man, with a view to increasing the family fortunes. At first Barbara asked for time to reflect. Following his return from a long journey, Barbara explained to her father that she was a Christian and did not wish to marry. She had already removed the different images of Pagan gods from her living room quarters and had replaced them with crucifixes.

Dioscuros, seeing that his only child had turned to the new religion and that he himself had been placed at a disadvantage, was overcome with rage. He handed over his daughter, as a Christian, to the Roman pro-consul Martianus, a Supreme Court judge, for the assessment of punishment.

Martianus tried at first by kind persuasion, to make her break with her faith; but when this failed, he had her thrashed and cast into jail. Due to the strength of her faith, her wounds healed immediately.

On the following day, she was ordered by Martianus to pay sacrifice to the pagan gods. When she refused, she was mutilated in a dreadful way. When she continued to proclaim her Christian faith, she was sentenced to die by the sword.

Barbara went to her place of execution in cheerful ecstasy: with her enthusiasm for her true faith. Her last wish was that God through her experience help all those confronted with and unprepared for a sudden untimely death.

The Barbarous father was so outraged that he himself severed his daughter's head! Immediately following Barbara's death, a terrible thunderstorm arose. As punishment for his monstrous crime, Dioscuros was killed by lightning. This is the story of Santa Barbara in its oldest form.

Later when Christianity had become firmly established, St. Barbara was invoked as a protectress against the perils of lightning. Barbara Day was used as a holiday in the very earliest festival calendar of the city of Cologne. The belief became widespread that Barbara could control lightning and other manifestations of flame and fire. Barbara was adopted as the patron saint of miners most probably because the mining profession had to cope with many hazards to life in those days. Also, the miners formed a large part of those for whom she prayed in the hours of her own death.

Miners later developed the use of gunpowder for disintegrating rock, involving manifestations similar to thunder claps and lightning flashes. This led to their need for special protection against accidents from the use of explosives, thereby strengthening the reputation of Saint Barbara as their adopted patron saint.

Saint Barbara was also a protectress of the plague which further strengthened her veneration, mothers would pray for healthy children and miners would mirror that by praying for plentiful blessings in their mining operations: both seeking a bountiful production and an enhanced degree of well being.

There are many churches, mines and works of art named after or produced in remembrance of Saint Barbara. A few examples of note:

Barbara Cathedral in Kuttenberg (Bohemia) built between 1388 and 1518 in the old silver city. This was thought to be the most likely source of the Barbara adoration. The cathedral was built around an already existing Barbara altar in an area with many Barbara altars present. Kuttenberg has for centuries had on its coat of arms St. Barbara above the crossed hammer and gad. [Schlaegel und Eisen-the classical symbol of mining]

Mine names frequently indicated wishes and hopes, in both Freiberg and Marienberg there was a mine named "St. Barbara Bonanza". There is also the "St. Barbara Good Hope Vein" in the Harz Mountains on the German-Austrian border.

Around 200 depictions of Barbara exist today ranging from Gothic to Renaissance into the Baroque. There are woodcuts, copper etchings, stained glass, brush drawings, statues and paintings. One of the most famous pictures of St. Barbara is on wood and was painted by Hans Holbein The Elder (pictured).

Around the world and especially in large historically rich mining areas the legend of Saint Barbara is alive but slowly dying out.