

# On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 480

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The Legends of  
SAINT BARBARA



*Patron Saint of Artillerymen*

## *Foreword*

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IN 1955 a pamphlet on the Legends of Saint Barbara was produced in response to a number of enquires from Artillerymen, and more particularly for the information of Clergy who conduct Services on or about St. Barbara's Day.

Acknowledgment was then made, and is now repeated, to all who assisted in providing material for the pamphlet, and particularly to Brigadier J. H. Frowen, D.S.O., O.B.E., then Secretary, Royal Artillery Institution.

Thanks are also accorded to the Royal Artillery Association for gathering information for its production. The original pamphlet being out of print, this new edition has been produced by the Royal Artillery Institution.

*Copies of this pamphlet, at 1/- (5 new pence) each, can be obtained from The Secretary, R.A. Institution, 65 The Common, Woolwich, S.E.18, or The General Secretary, Royal Artillery Association, Artillery House, 58 The Common, Woolwich, S.E. 18*

# SAINT BARBARA

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## Legend one

*This beautiful legend shows us how appropriate was the choice of the Virgin and Martyr St. Barbara as patroness of artillerymen.*

ALYPIUS, the Saint's father, during military service in the East, became friendly with a certain Fakir, from whom he learned the marvellous secrets as to the use of naphtha and saltpetre. From the same sources he also learned the preparation of Bengal lights.

Alypius, on his return to his native town, Hippo, devoted his life to the study of chemistry. Barbara received a liberal education, spoke several languages, and in addition became deeply interested in her father's research work. By their united efforts in the laboratory an explosive of extraordinary power was discovered.

The beauty of Barbara attracted many suitors, but she rejected them all and entered the Convent of Saint Perpetua, founded by Saint Augustine.

Africa was then a prey to invasions, and one evening in the summer of 430 the Vandals arrived under the walls of Hippo. The town closed its gates and the siege began.

The Barbarians dug wide trenches round the city walls and threw therein the dead bodies of men and animals, the slain of their recent conflict. By this means they hoped to overcome the besieged by causing death from fever and plague.

Alypius, in this hour of need, summoned his daughter 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. In an instant the substance ignited, the putrified bodies were consumed and the pestilential miasmas were dispelled.

During a siege, which lasted 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 an heroic struggle, the besiegers captured the city, and thirsting for revenge, they swarmed into the convent whither Barbara had returned when the city was forced to surrender.

The Warrior Saint was prepared for emergencies and had accumulated a quantity of explosives in one of the subterranean passages of the convent. At the crucial moment a deafening explosion was heard and both conquerors and vanquished were crushed beneath the debris of masonry. Thus did the Saint with her companions escape the outrages of a licentious soldiery.

(Extracted with acknowledgements from *The Journal of the Royal Artillery*, July, 1944.)

### Legend two

ST. BARBARA WAS THE daughter of a rich nobleman of Heliopolis in Egypt, martyred by her father about A.D. 303 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 consumed him utterly, so that not a vestige of him remained". St. Barbara then became "patron saint of armourers and gun-smiths". She is invoked against thunder and lightning and all accidents arising from explosions of gunpowder. It was thought possible that she was selected as a patron Saint for artillery because in early days cannon usually blew up on discharge and therefore artillerymen were always liable to sudden death from explosions of gunpowder.

(With acknowledgements to *The Gunner* of December 1938.)

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### Legend three

#### SAINT BARBARA

#### Saint, Virgin and Martyr

THERE IS NO REFERENCE to St. Barbara by early Christian authorities, neither does her name appear in the original of St. Herôme's Martyrology. Veneration of the Saint was common, however, from the 7th century onwards.

About this time there were in existence legends of her martyrdom which were inserted in the writings of Symeon Metaphrastes, which were used as well by such authors as Ado, Usuard, Boronius, Mombritus and others during the 9th 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. She was only allowed to have with her, her hand-maiden Juliana, 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's 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 his daughter of his intentions to part with her to Marcian, Barbara 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.

Some time after her imprisonment her father was called away, but before his departure Barbara 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 being to openly make known her conversion and this was her only way of showing it to the outside world.

On account of her open acknowledgment of Christianity she received a Spiritual Blessing. This Blessing made her even more beautiful than she had previously been; she, therefore, prayed for a bathing pool in which to disport herself and while away the tediousness of the long hours of her incarceration.

One day upon drawing her finger in the form of a cross on the floor of the Tower, the rocks were parted and in the midst of a blaze of light through the three windows a pool appeared, the cross remaining permanently furrowed in the stone at the edge of the pool.

Upon her father's return from his journey he discovered the great light streaming through the three windows on to 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 on account of Barbara's pleading, he drew his sword and rushed upon Barbara to kill her. Barbara avoided her father and miraculously escaped from the tower where she left him striking furiously on the flinty floor in an endeavour to obliterate the cross.

The enraged parent, accompanied by soldiers, scoured the mountainside for his daughter, who had taken refuge in a leafy glade some distance from the Tower. Encountering two Shepherds during his search, he asked them if they had seen his daughter. The first one, being a godly man and fearing for Barbara's safety, to shield her told an untruth to Dioscorus and said she was not in the forest; the other shepherd being of evil mind told him where she was hiding. Her Father found her, beat her unmercifully and dragged her by the hair before the Magistrate, Marcian.

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

Next day she was again taken before the Magistrate, Marcian. She still refused his entreaties; he then ordered her to be torn with iron combs and her saintly head to be hammered. Her hand-maiden, Juliana, on witnessing these barbarities, burst into tears, and was promptly arrested and treated in the same cruel manner.

Marcian was 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 round the town accompanied by her hand-maiden Juliana.

Notwithstanding the beating on her "Venerable Head" Barbara preserved her faculties and was able to address an eloquent prayer to Heaven, which was answered and a mantle was cast about her body. This enabled her to lift herself and preach to the people whom she implored to embrace Christianity. So thoroughly enraged was her father at this, that in a fit of temper he struck off her head together with that of her hand-maiden Juliana. At this moment a vivid flash of lightning fell which completely consumed Dioscorus; a moment later a second flash appeared which reduced Marcian to a heap of smoking ashes.

For this reason Barbara is held to be the patroness of Fire, Cannon and Firearms, she is also invoked against thunder and lightnings of Heaven, for just previous to her death Barbara prayed that whosoever should invoke her aid might receive protection against implements of war and lightning.

A pious man named Valentinus buried the bodies of the virgins. At this grave sick were healed and the pilgrims who came to pray received aid and consolation.

It is certain that before the 9th century she was publicly venerated both in the East and 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 A.D. 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 St. Barbara to whom he had always shown great devotion. 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 "*Legenda Aurea*".

The Emperor in whose reign the martyrdom is placed is sometimes called Maximinus and sometimes Maximianus, but there is not sufficient evidence to ascertain whether Maximinus Thrax (A.D. 235-238) or Maximianus Daza is meant.

Traditions vary as to the place of martyrdom. Symeon Mataphrastes and Mombritus, the Latin scholars, make Heliopolis in Egypt the site. Usuardus and Ado in their martyrologies mention Tuscany; and Boronius, whose account might be considered the most reliable, in his "*Martyrologium Romanum Paruum*" (about A.D. 700) quotes "*In Tusia Barbarae Virginis et Martyris*" Saint Herome and Bede say "*Roame Barbarae Virginis*" or "*Apud Antiochiam Passio Saint Barbarae Virg*" whilst others give the place as Nicomedia. These various statements prove, however, only the local adaption of the veneration of the saintly martyr.

In the Greek and Roman Calendars the Feasts of St. Barbara fall 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.

It is quite possible to suppose, however, that the period from the 4th December to the 16th December was the time of her escape from the Tower until her death on 16th December.

Saint Barbara has often been depicted in art, always carrying the palm of a martyr in her hand and often with the chalice and sacramental water.

She has been represented standing by a tower with three windows and sometimes fire, cannon, firearms and lightning are displayed near her.

(With acknowledgements to the *Journal of the Royal Artillery*, July, 1944, and to the Vicar of the New Church of St. Barbara, Earlsdon, Coventry.)

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#### Two excerpts

*The following article deals with Old Cairo and proceeds:-*

THERE IS A CHURCH of Sitt Burbarah, or St. Barbara, a huge dark place where the stiff figures of Saints look down from the screens. St. Barbara, the patron Saint of gunsmiths, artillerymen, and strangely enough, architects, was a Greek of Heliopolis who was martyred in the year 235, and I wondered how much these Egyptians knew about her life. When I asked them, a scene of the utmost confusion took place. First one man started to tell me, then another interrupted, three or four joined in, and very soon arguments were going on in various parts of the church. Eventually someone produced an old man who was I think the sacristan. He was suspicious and confused, but, given time, and with repeated interruptions from the crowd managed to tell an accurate story of the Saint's life, although I was surprised that he did not know that St. Barbara had been born within a few miles of the place in which he was standing.

She was a great lady, the "daughter of a Roman General" he said, and her father loving her very much and disliking the thought that some man would wish to marry her, locked her in a high tower where she was allowed to see no one. But she had heard of Christianity, and a missionary was taken to her disguised as a

doctor, with the result that she was converted to the true Faith. Her father decided to build for her a beautiful hammam—a bathroom—and one day, when it was being built, she went to see it and gave orders that three windows instead of two, should be placed in the walls. Her father was angry when he learned that she had altered his plans, and came in a towering rage to ask for an explanation. St. Barbara told him that the light of the soul came through three windows, one called the Son, a second called the Father, and third called the Holy Ghost. The father horrified to discover that his daughter had joined the new Faith, denounced her to the authorities and she was beheaded. On the day of her martyrdom a sudden storm broke when the father was returning from the execution, and he was killed by lightning; and that is the reason why St. Barbara is the patron saint of soldiers and gunsmiths, who deal in sudden death.

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“*Through Lands of the Bible*” by H. V. Morton, 1938  
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ST. BARBARA WAS ONE of the most popular Saints of the Middle Ages but there is some doubt whether she ever existed but it is quite certain that her extant legend is spurious.

According to records she was set up in a Tower by her Father who eventually killed her for being a Christian; this is located at different places and at various times, the Roman Martyrology says at Nicomedia under Maximinus Thrax. St. Barbara was invoked against lightning and fire by sinners, because it was said that her Father had been consumed by fire from Heaven.

(Reproduced with acknowledgements to  
Messrs. Burns & Oates Ltd.)

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#### **St. Barbara in Art**

by Major L. R. Jones

ST. BARBARA WAS A DAUGHTER of the Pagan Dioscorus and since 303 A.D. the 4th December has been dedicated as her Feast Day. A Christian Martyr, who on account of circumstances attending her martyrdom was endowed in the public mind with power over thunder, lightning and all fiery elements.

The medieval conception of artillery as the subjugation by man of supernatural elements brought the new weapons directly under her patronage. From the 15th century St. Barbara is always represented in Art with cannon at her feet as Patroness of Artillery.

The Legend of St. Barbara was introduced by Crusaders of the 11th century with that of St. Catherine of Alexandria sometimes known as Catherine of the Wheel in reference to the torture she submitted to on her confession of Christianity (hence the reason for a rose window being sometimes called St. Catherine's Wheel). The two Saints form a direct link with the dual personality of Pallas (Minerva) of Roman and Athene of Greek mythology whom “Love” brought forth in warlike Armour drest



Golden Radiant". Pallas presided over Defensive Wars and as Minerva was the incarnation of wisdom. St. Barbara and St. Catherine then, on the embodiment of the older classical myth, are so often yet referred to by the attributes of the Christian Martyr.

It is usual in a sacred group to find St. Barbara and St. Catherine as companions particularly in German Art representing the two Powers which in the Middle Ages divided the old Christian World between them. St. Catherine appears as Patroness of Schoolmen of study and seclusion, St. Barbara as Patroness of the Knight and Man at Arms, of fortitude and courage; they represent the active and contemplative life so often contrasted in the medieval works of Art.

St. Barbara is frequently represented in Italian and German Art, sometimes as Martyr sometimes as Pallas and Patroness of Guns, and is frequently introduced into pictures of the throned Madonna, the most celebrated being the Madonna Di San Sisto of Raphael.

**The Vecchio Picture.** The most beautiful of the single figures is the Chef D'Oeuvre of Palma Vecchio over the Altar of St. Barbara in the Church of Santa Maries Formosa at Venice. She is standing in a majestic attitude looking upwards with the inspired eyes and an expression like Pallas. It is really a Portrait of the most celebrated Violante Palma, Titian's first love. She wears a tunic or robe of rich warm brown with a mantle of crimson and a white veil twisted in her diadem and tresses of pale golden hair. The whole Picture is one glow of colour combined with an expression at once sober and splendid.

**The Maximilian Armour.** A Patroness of Artillery, the effigy of St. Barbara is a frequent ornament on Shields and Armour particularly Guns. Her history in this capacity and her association with her fellow martyrs and contemporary St. George are represented on a suit of armour which the Emperor Maximilian sent as a present to Henry VIII in 1509 and which is now preserved in the Tower. On the breast plate is St. George as Patron of England vanquishing the Dragon. On the back plate is St. Barbara with her Tower, her Cup and her Book. On the Horse armour we have the history of the two saints disposed in a regular series, each scene from the life of St. George being accompanied by a corresponding scene of the life of St. Barbara.

1. St. George mounted on horseback like a Knight of Romance riding forth in search of adventure. St. Barbara attended by two maidens directing the building of a tower.

2. St. George is accused before the Emperor. St. Barbara is pursued by her Father.

3. St. George is tortured by the wheels. St. Barbara is scourged.

4. St. George is beheaded by an executioner. St. Barbara is beheaded by her father in a raging tempest.

The designs are in the manner of Hans Burgmans "Triumph of Maximilian" and probably by the same hand elaborately engraved on the plate of the armour. The figures about 6 inches in height.

The Arabesque ornaments which surround the subjects are of singular elegance intermingled with the rose and pomegranate, the Badge of Henry and Catherine of Aragon.

Apart from this suit of Armour there are but few representations of St. Barbara found in this country. There is a small sketch by Rubens in Dulwich Gallery. She is depicted fleeing from her Father to the top of a Tower and he in the likeness of a turbaned Turk is seen pursuing her sword in hand.

There is one Church dedicated to her at Ashton under Hill in Gloucestershire.

(With acknowledgements to *The Gunner* of May 1952.)