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The Reformation of a Plague Saint: Sebastian in Early Modern Europe
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Throughout the late medieval and early modern periods of European history, the cult of saints was a prominent aspect of European Christianity. According to the late medieval view of the divine, there existed a gulf between the heavens and earth that the laity could not breach on their own accord. One of the functions of the medieval church was to help the laity connect with the divine; thus, the cult of saints was devised as one way through which common Christians could reach God. Saints were individuals, now deceased, who could intermediate between heaven and earth on the basis of their special status they had achieved through their actions while on earth. Medieval Christians believed that “saint[s], on the basis of his or her holiness…[could] command the power to meet the needs of people who encountered signs of their own helplessness and impotence at every turn.”

Medieval Christianity taught that while direct contact with God was unattainable for the common Christian, the aid of saints who could in turn communicate the concerns of the laity was readily available.

The cult of saints is considered to have originated in the fourth century following the fall of the Roman Empire, and found wide appeal with the masses as means for the laity to connect with a distant deity. An individual could come to be regarded as a saint by a number of different means; one manner through which many individuals achieved sainthood was by dying for their profession of their Christian beliefs, that is, by becoming martyrs. Martyr saints held a particularly special place within the celestial hierarchy of the late medieval period; Peter Brown explains that “their intimacy with God was the sine qua non of their ability to intercede for, and, so, to protect their fellow mortals.” Because of the elevated status martyr saints held in the late medieval celestial hierarchy, there exist many artistic representations of martyred saints that offer insight into the manner in which their stories were interpreted throughout the late medieval and early modern periods.

This paper will use the example of one martyr saint—Sebastian—to illustrate one manner in which martyr saints were interpreted by the art of European Christianity throughout the late medieval and early modern periods. This study will also show how these interpretations reflect the innovations of the Church just prior to and within the different factions of Christianity that developed during the Age of Reform. Relying heavily on paintings and official church publications from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, it will be demonstrated that Saint Sebastian’s changing roles serve as a window into the larger transition from the late medieval Latin Church to various manifestations of Protestant Christianity and the Tridentine Catholic Church. While many of these transitions resulted in different interpretations of Saint Sebastian’s role as a plague saint, later innovations in Catholicism separated Saint Sebastian’s image from that of exclusively a plague saint, and used his image to create educational images about female piety in the early modern Church.

Saint Sebastian was martyred in the third century within the context of Diocletian’s Rome, and he became commonly known and depicted as a plague saint following the outbreak of the Black Death in continental Europe around 1348. Patron saints were different

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2 Ibid., 6.
from the major saints in the medieval church; while divine figures such as the Virgin Mary could be called upon for aid in all situations, the aid of patron saints was usually reserved for cases in which they were believed to have a special influence before God. Despite the fact that neither his martyrdom nor his death was related to pandemic disease of any kind, the Black Death emphasized the idea that Saint Sebastian was believed to hold special influence with God concerning matters of pandemic disease.

When the Black Death struck Europe around 1348, it was not the first time that the continent had been faced with a deadly pestilence; however, more than six centuries had passed since the sixth-century Justinianian plague. Over the course of those six hundred years that separated the two plagues, Christianity had not only come to Europe but had become the dominant influence upon the worldview of contemporaries—this fundamentally changed the manner in which the late medieval population dealt with the onslaught of the disease.

In medieval Europe, the Black Death was viewed as a form of divine retribution for the sins of mankind, much akin to the Genesis flood; this idea was supported by the humanist view of the celestial hierarchy as distant and oftentimes wrathful. Medieval Christians worshipped a God who “was not really a father at all, not a paterfamilias, but absolute power”3 and who was punishing humankind by means of a terrible pestilence. Due to this view of the divine, medieval Christians sought the help of intercessors such as Mary or Saint Sebastian when they took steps to appease a deity who they believed was punishing them with widespread plague; these efforts were documented in paintings created in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Much scholarship has been devoted to determining how he came to be associated with disease; this paper will assume that Saint Sebastian was regarded as a patron saint of the plague due to the iconography of the arrows with which he was depicted in art, which have long been iconographical metaphors for plague.4 In the years following the initial outbreak of plague in continental Europe, Saint Sebastian’s role in the religious lives of medieval Christians expanded to fit the needs of a suffering laity; during the age of reform, Saint Sebastian’s image was again altered so as to be acceptable to non-iconoclastic Protestants and to reflect the goals and realities of the Catholic reform movements.

When speaking to the explosion of plague-themed art which featured figures such as Saint Sebastian in the two centuries following the Black Death of 1348-1352 as opposed to the lack of artistic sources that came out of the sixth-century Justinian plague, Christine Boeckl comments that “illness was not of universal interest before the advent of humanism.”5 This sentiment of the universal nature of the plague and the suffering it caused was evident in art through the iconography of the pestilence that was commonly used in art created in the

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4 The beginnings of Saint Sebastian’s cult can be traced back to his martyrdom c. 288 CE; the end of the fourteenth century marked the beginning of his strong presence in art. As this paper is concerned with the interpretation of Saint Sebastian in response to the Black Death and the reform movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a discussion of the early development of his cult is largely outside the scope of this paper.
5 Many scholars have, however, attempted to provide answers to this question. Henry Sigerist suggests that the plague cult was simply transferred to Saint Sebastian from the pagan god Apollo in his book Civilization and Disease (Manchester, Ayer Publishing, 1970). Sheila Barker’s article “The Making of a Plague Saint: Saint Sebastian’s Imagery and Cult before the Counter-Reformation” in Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque, ed. Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2007), 90-131, credits the need for political alliances for the rise of Saint Sebastian’s cult, while Louise Marshall’s ideas pertaining to a combination of arrow imagery with Christian views of martyrs as laid out in her article “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy” (Renaissance Quarterly 47, #3 1994): 485-532 will be referenced throughout this paper.
centuries following the fourteenth-century Black Death. According to Boeckl, plague iconography was unique because “although the topos pestilence was well established in Western literature, beginning with Homer and the Bible, there was no counterpart in the visual arts until the middle of the fourteenth century.” The iconography most commonly associated with the plague in late medieval art consisted of arrows, clouds, and buboes.

The iconography of the arrow is most important for the purposes of this paper because of its close association with Saint Sebastian. While its origins are disputed, the iconography of the arrow is important in identifying the different roles Saint Sebastian played in the lives of late medieval Christians. Boeckl argues that “the plague arrow in God’s hand exemplifies the oldest and most commonly used symbol signifying pestilence.” Additionally, Louise Marshall points out that “in the Old Testament, as in Graeco-Roman myth, the arrow is a potent weapon in God’s armory, the instrument of suddenly, divinely-inflicted misfortune, disease, and death.” Medieval Christians who were seeking Saint Sebastian’s aid in deferring the effects of the pestilence would have recognized arrow imagery as being symbolic of plague.

Saint Sebastian was always depicted with arrows in some form; these arrows could have pierced his body, been flung at him by archers or an absent power, or he could have been simply holding them as an attribute. While analyzing the different roles of Saint Sebastian in the lives of late medieval and early modern Christians, this paper will treat the iconography of the arrow as the reason for Saint Sebastian’s designation as a patron saint of the plague, while recognizing that some scholars feel that accrediting his cult entirely to his association with arrows is too simplistic.

Throughout the periods with which this paper is concerned, Saint Sebastian was often depicted as a nearly nude young man. It would be easy to dismiss the plethora of works portraying his story simply as a means for early and high Renaissance artists to flaunt their capabilities in representing an idealized human form; while true to some extent, that explanation is far too simplistic to account for his strong presence in art all the way from the late middle ages through the early modern period. It is interesting that many major artists such as Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431-1506), and Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445-1510) chose to represent Saint Sebastian at least once over the course of their careers, and that they all chose to represent Saint Sebastian in an idealized manner emphasizing his physical qualities.

Another possibility for the idealized manner in which Saint Sebastian was depicted throughout the Renaissance is the idea that Saint Sebastian was an offering to God and should therefore be shown as the best offering possible. Sheila Barker acknowledges this idea by arguing that as “it was a widely accepted principle that the more precious the offering, the more God would be placated, [therefore] the attractiveness of Sebastian’s imagery may have been regarded as a factor in attaining divine mercy.” It is interesting to note that Saint Sebastian continued to be portrayed in somewhat of an idealized manner even in paintings

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7 Arrows have been used in art to signify divinely-sent pestilence in sources that date as far back as Greek mythology (i.e. Apollo and Diana using arrows charged with disease to punish humans); the Christianization of this form of iconography is both disputed and also outside the scope of this paper.
10 Sheila Barker argues that Saint Sebastian’s association with the plague had nothing whatsoever to do with arrows, while Louise Marshall insists that arrow iconography must be considered alongside the Christian view of martyrs as heavenly beings who enjoy special favor with God as an explanation for the rise of Saint Sebastian’s cult.
11 Barker, 114.
that would have been theologically acceptable to both early modern Protestants and Catholics. These paintings and many others like them will be further discussed throughout this paper, but will be evaluated based upon the level to which they exemplify the contemporary ideals of religious factions, rather than simply the skill of the artist in depicting the human form.

It is the ultimate goal of this paper to shed light upon the overall manner in which Saint Sebastian’s role in late medieval and early modern Christianity was interpreted in light of the Black Death and the Age of Reform.\(^\text{12}\) By demonstrating that Saint Sebastian was depicted in many different ways from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, it will be established that the late medieval Roman Church, its Protestant offshoots, and then its Tridentine manifestation all used images of Saint Sebastian to communicate larger messages about Christian theology and piety, as well as to provide guidance to believers seeking to live a pious life grounded in those theological ideals. Furthermore, the evolving nature of these images offers insight into the nature of each of these institutions as a major cultural influences on the lives of late medieval and early modern European Christians.

Utilizing paintings of Saint Sebastian completed in the years before the Protestant Reformation, this paper will first explore the three clear roles and one less certain but possible role Saint Sebastian played in the lives of late medieval Christians in the years preceding the Protestant Reformation; these roles were illustrative of the Roman Church’s efforts to bring comfort to the suffering laity in the face of the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of plague. When faced with the enormity of the pestilence and the suffering to which it led on all levels of society, the late medieval church was forced to devise new methods of teaching the laity of appropriate Christian behavior in the face of what was believed to be a divinely-sent disease. Thus, emphasizing and expanding Saint Sebastian’s cult as a plague saint was one way in which the late medieval Church responded to the challenges of the Black Death.

While art historians have traditionally neglected the art inspired by the Protestant Reformation due to its overtly didactic nature, it would be remiss for this paper to ignore the art that either came from or reflected the ideals of these movements. Thus, a brief section about the art of the Protestant Reformation will argue that Protestant art was created for the same purposes as that of Catholic art—to instruct new Protestants about vital aspects of their newly adopted form of Christianity. Citing the example of Jusepa de Ribera, this section will acknowledge the possibility that images of Saint Sebastian were altered by artists in ways that made them acceptable to Protestants as well as Catholics.

The third section of this paper will focus on Saint Sebastian’s roles in early modern Catholicism, the Catholicism that not only responded to the challenges of the Protestant Reformation but also emerged from the sixteenth century with a new vision of its mission in early modern Europe. In this final section, three specific roles will be discussed; two roles served as visual means by which the Tridentine Church sought to redefine Saint Sebastian’s cult. The third role served as a didactic tool for early modern Catholics through which they could learn how to live out their lives as pious Christians. While none of these roles were newly developed during the Catholic reform movements, one was vastly more popular than the other two; this emphasis is illustrative of the aspects of Catholicism on which the reform movements focused, as well as the goals set forth by the Church for moving forward as the Tridentine Church into the seventeenth century and beyond.

\(^{12}\) As this paper seeks to provide an overall survey of the ways in which Saint Sebastian was interpreted by major movements in European Christianity, little attention to regional differences was paid except in evaluating the motivations of particular artists in depicting Saint Sebastian in a specific manner. Future research on this subject would do well to complete a more regionally focused study of how a particular area or nation interpreted Saint Sebastian over the same period.
This final section will argue that the Tridentine Church acknowledged that the interpretation of Saint Sebastian’s cult had reached astronomical proportions during the years following the Black Death; as part of the effort to reaffirm Catholic theology, the Church reduced his official role in the lives of early modern Catholics to that of a martyr and a model for Christian Death. However, the Church also recognized that Saint Sebastian was a familiar, even comforting, figure to many Catholics who had invoked his cult during times of pestilence. Based on this idea, the Tridentine Church used the image of Saint Sebastian to educate believers about other aspects of Tridentine theology, including the role of women in the church.

PRIOR TO THE BEGINNINGS of the Lutheran Reformation in 1517, Saint Sebastian had three definitive roles and one possible additional role in late medieval Christianity. These roles can clearly be seen in paintings from the period following the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348 through the first half of the sixteenth century. Drawing upon the previous introduction concerning the rise of plague art in late medieval Europe and Saint Sebastian’s place within that movement, it will first be demonstrated that Saint Sebastian’s multiple roles within the late medieval church included that of a martyr and model for Christian behavior in the face of certain death. He was consistently recognized as a martyr throughout this time period, but the idea of Saint Sebastian as a model for Christian death became popular only near the end of the fifteenth century, and remained so into the sixteenth century.

Scholarship pertaining to Saint Sebastian has largely focused on the two roles that will be first discussed in this section; the last part will explore a lesser-discussed role and suggest the possibility of a fourth role. The first of these roles—his identity as an active intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy—was consistent during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but was subject to much artistic interpretation that has been acknowledged but not discussed in much detail. When depicting his role as an active intercessor, Saint Sebastian was represented either during his martyrdom or as a model for Christian death in which he was made to mirror imagery of Christ as the “Man of Sorrows”.

The last section will address the possibility that Saint Sebastian was able to autonomously halt the plague by his own merit. As opposed to the roles that were either consistent or had origins that can be traced to a specific time within the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, this role seems to have gradually developed over time and has not been previously addressed by historians utilizing artistic sources. Due to a shortage of artistic sources, this section about Saint Sebastian’s possible role as an autonomous plague-halter will incorporate written sources from prior to and from the time of the fourteenth century Black Death to provide further insight into this possible role that is demonstrated in art from the centuries following the Black Death.

The most consistent image of Saint Sebastian in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries prior to the Protestant Reformation was paintings that illustrated his status as a Christian martyr. Variations within these paintings were reflective of artistic license rather than changes in Saint Sebastian’s role in the lives of late medieval Christians. Though there are often similarities, it is important to differentiate between works that portrayed Saint Sebastian simply as a martyr and those that used his image as the Christ-like “Man of Sorrows” in a devotional manner, which will be discussed later in this section.

When Saint Sebastian was pictured as a martyr, the image documents the event of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom. In c. 288 CE, the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered that Sebastian was to be shot to death, and the Golden Legend, an influential medieval hagiographic text, reported that “the archers shot at him till he was full of arrows as an urchin
is full of pricks” and left him to die.¹³ This event was relevant to the lives of late medieval Christians because it was “at the shrines of the martyrs [that] Christianity dramatically breached the ancient barriers and joined together earth and heaven, the living and the dead.”¹⁴ Through martyred figures such as Saint Sebastian, medieval Christians believed they gained access to the distant deities.

Fifteenth and early sixteenth century artistic representations of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom varied in the manner in which they emphasized or de-emphasized the role of the archers, the manner in which the arrows were depicted, and the appearance of the saint himself. Two examples of these paintings serve to illustrate these different criteria; one example comes from the 1475 painting The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, which told the story of a dramatic martyrdom. In this painting, archers were very much prominent, as many of them are positioned so that they are ready to pelt the saint with arrows.

What is more, Saint Sebastian has very few arrows that are already piercing his barely-clothed body, suggesting that even more are to come. Saint Sebastian is depicted on a level above the archers, so that the arrows are being directed upwards from earth. This is significant in the classification of this painting because the arrows were not sent from the heavens, which would have suggested overtones of “Man of Sorrows” imagery. Also, Saint Sebastian was painted in a way so that his body is more defined, suggesting the influence of the Renaissance ideal of the human body. He looks worriedly heavenwards, his face not betraying any pain, and is represented with a halo around his head.

![Figure 1.1 Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo, The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, 1475, oil on wood, 9’7” x 6’8”.

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¹³ It is perhaps interesting to note that Saint Sebastian did not die as a result of being shot with the arrows, but rather by being clubbed to death after surviving the arrow wounds inflicted by the archers. Therefore, scenes depicting his martyrdom by and large do not represent the actual manner in which Sebastian finally died after proclaiming his Christian beliefs within the context of pagan Rome. Over the course of this project, I came across only a few paintings in which Saint Sebastian’s actual death by clubbing was depicted; for an example, see Josse Lieferinxe, The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, c. 1497, Philadelphia Musuem of Art.

¹⁴ Marshall, 493.
The 1532 painting by Jan de Beer entitled *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* is another example that had many elements in common with its fifteenth century counterpart, but differed slightly in terms of spatial organization and in the appearance of Saint Sebastian himself. This painting depicted the dramatic scene of Sebastian’s martyrdom as something of a social event, as there were several finely-dressed bystanders in the vicinity of the archers, who were once again in the midst of flinging arrows at the motionless saint. De Beer portrayed Saint Sebastian on the same spatial level with the archers, and in this image the saint appeared powerless. His halo-less head was bowed and he looked down at the ground, and de Beer placed a much greater emphasis on the pain that Sebastian endured during the archers’ attack—blood from the arrow wounds was visible, and the saint weakly slumped against a tree.

![Figure 1.2](image)

Paintings such as these firmly established Saint Sebastian as a martyr within the late medieval church; late medieval Christians would have recognized Saint Sebastian as an individual whose actions had earned him special favor with God within the framework of the late medieval celestial hierarchy. Near the time of the fifteenth century *quattrocento*, artists began to interpret Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom in an additional light—this interpretation led to representations of Sebastian that recall images of Christ suffering on the cross, and served as a model for a pious Christian death. It is important to note that these new images did not replace the creation of images that simply depicted the event of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom, but were instead created alongside the images that portrayed the manner by which Diocletian ordered his death.

*Though images of Saint Sebastian* that illustrated his role as a model for Christian death were being created as early as the first years of the fifteenth century, they exponentially multiplied near the end of the *quattrocento*, and represent the overwhelming majority of artistic representations of Saint Sebastian that exist today. Paintings of Saint Sebastian that recalled the “Man of Sorrows” devotional image became increasingly popular during the last years of the fifteenth century, a popularity that Louise Marshall claims was “due to the way in which the image allows the worshipper direct access to the promise of salvation from the plague
contained in Sebastian’s wounded but living body.”15 Through representations that recalled the images of Christ on the cross as the “Man of Sorrows”, images of Saint Sebastian in a similar pose served as devotional objects for late medieval Christians in which Saint Sebastian modeled exemplary Christian behavior in the face of a divinely-sent pestilence.

In paintings in which Saint Sebastian assumed the role of the “Man of Sorrows”, the saint was shown in an isolated environment pierced with arrows, yet very much alive. These images of Saint Sebastian created an artificial moment in which “historical time [was] suspended and inverted, transforming the narrative into a devotional image that exist[ed] outside of time and place.”16 Furthermore, Louise Marshall maintains that this imagery “celebrates his [Saint Sebastian’s] resurrection as proof of his inexhaustible capacity to absorb in his own body the plague arrows destined for his worshippers.”17 It is important to separate these images from paintings in which Saint Sebastian is actively interceding on behalf of humankind.

As the “Man of Sorrows”, Saint Sebastian is shown in an artificial, artistically created moment. In these paintings, Saint Sebastian exists as a model for Christians, proof that the arrow wounds—or an onslaught of pestilence—could be overcome. Due to the amount of existing scholarship pertaining to Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows”, this section will use examples from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to focus on the differences between these paintings that were charged with devotional meaning for those individuals facing the threat of pestilence and those that simply portrayed Sebastian’s martyrdom story.”18

Images of Saint Sebastian were popular devotional items in the centuries that followed the Black Death; believers would have looked to these images for an example of a late medieval Christian approach to death.19 According to one widely-distributed late medieval English manual entitled “The prepared death”, the manner in which individuals were encouraged to take death was “when God wills, willingly and gladly, without any grudging or contradiction, through the might and boldness of our soul, virtuously disposed and governed by reason and true discretion, though the lewd sensuality and frailty of our flesh naturally grudge or strive against it.”20 Late medieval Christians in the years before the Protestant Reformation would have looked to these images of Saint Sebastian in the wake of a plague outbreak as an example of how to follow this advice—by the time of the fifteenth century quattrocento, images of the saint that echoed the “Man of Sorrows” were being composed by a multitude of artists, and would have been widely visible across Europe.21

Sandro Botticelli’s 1484 painting entitled Saint Sebastian exemplified the idea of welcoming death “without any grudging or contradiction”; in this image, Saint Sebastian was shown with arrows piercing his body, but staring serenely towards the viewer with a halo around his head. This image differed from paintings that documented the scene of Saint

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15 Ibid., 500.
16 Ibid., 496.
17 Ibid., 500.
18 This section draws extensively upon the work of Louise Marshall, who used images of Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows” to shed light upon the attitudes of late medieval contemporaries in relation to the pestilence. Her work has focused upon the relationship between individual worshipper and image. Richard Trexler addresses this larger issue in his article “Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image” *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972), 7-41.
19 It is a considerable testament to the popularity of Saint Sebastian’s cult that he was depicted as a devotional image; this type of imagery was normally reserved for depictions of Christ.
21 The image of Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows” remained a popular subject, so much that these images are so numerous that it now seems that one cannot enter a major art gallery in Western Europe (or at least in Berlin, Dresden, or Paris) or the United States (in Washington, D.C. or New York City) without seeing at least two or three representations of Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows”.

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Sebastian’s martyrdom because the onlookers and archers were absent, having already completed the task of shooting Saint Sebastian and leaving him for dead. Louise Marshall refers to this type of imagery by saying that in these paintings, “plague is divinely ordained, but God has withdrawn from the task of punishing humanity. Such an identification also shifts the focus of appeal from the supreme deity to more accessible intermediaries…[who were] sufficiently powerful to control demonic activity.” These paintings served to remind late medieval Christians that although they could not access the divine of their own accord, there existed figures above themselves in the celestial hierarchy who held more power in the eyes of God.

One fifteenth century example of the “Man of Sorrows” devotional image that emphasized the “frailty of our flesh” against which Saint Sebastian fought when he was martyred was Andrea Mantegna’s Saint Sebastian, which was completed around 1460. In this painting, Sebastian was depicted with an expression looking toward heaven with a painful grimace while his body was pierced with multiple arrow wounds, including an arrow that had been shot directly through the saint’s head. The pain Saint Sebastian experienced from these wounds was evident by the manner in which the saint’s body was contorted and the blood that was streaming from his wounds. Depictions of Saint Sebastian that focused upon the pain he felt were supposed to be representative of the suffering incurred by individual European Christians over the course of the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of plague, but in the context of these images it was recognized that just as Saint Sebastian had survived the arrow

Figure 1.3 Sandro Botticelli, *Saint Sebastian*, 1484, tempera on panel, 77 x 30 in.

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22 Marshall, 515-516.
wounds, so could late medieval Christians have survived—or at least weakened—the onslaught of plague by invoking figures such as Saint Sebastian to intercede on their behalf.

Saint Sebastian’s many representations as the “Man of Sorrows” that served as devotional images for late medieval Christians who dealt with the effects of the Black Death hinted at his role as an active intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy, but did not explain this role as fully as did other images of Saint Sebastian from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Of all the roles he played in the lives of late medieval Christians, the one most open to artistic interpretation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was his role as an active intercessor within the celestial hierarchy of late medieval Christianity. Within this role, he could appeal to those who held higher places in the hierarchy, such as Christ, the Virgin Mary, and perhaps God, to shield humanity from the plague. However, this capability did not elevate him to a higher status within the celestial hierarchy than patron saints of other issues; according to these images, he was only powerful in manners that pertained to pestilence. Images from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries represented Saint Sebastian in his capacity as an active intercessor in both very dramatic and very subtle ways.

One painting that dramatically illustrated Saint Sebastian’s intercessory capabilities within the celestial hierarchy in cases of plague was Paolo Calari Veronese’s sixteenth century painting entitled “Christ Arresting the Plague with the Prayers of the Virgin, St. Rocco, and St. Sebastian.” In this painting, Christ sat atop a cloud surrounded by heavenly figures; Mary, Saint Sebastian, and Saint Roch (also referred to as Saint Rocco) were
pleading with Christ from various positions within the painting. The Virgin Mary was positioned closest to Christ—her maternal relationship with Christ made her the “greatest intercessor”. Saint Roch—the other patron saint of the plague—and Saint Sebastian were on the same level with each other below the Virgin Mary and Christ, and each looked heavenward. In this painting, the saints and the Virgin Mary do not have the ability to individually halt the plague, but simply to pray to Christ on behalf of humankind for its ceasing.

Another painting that dramatically illustrated Saint Sebastian’s ability to intercede on behalf of the laity is Josse Lieferinxe’s c. 1497 Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken. This painting gives a more concise perspective of the celestial hierarchy than does Veronese’s Christ Arresting the Plague; only Saint Sebastian is positioned between God and the laity, with a demon and an angel fighting below the main intercessory action. Although Lieferinxe never went to Italy, this painting is set in Pavia, where Saint Sebastian was supposed to have aided in halting a seventh-century pestilence.

By depicting a group of Christians who were experiencing or witnessing the sudden death that was characteristic of the Black Death, this painting highlights Saint Sebastian’s intercessory capability as well as other important aspects of iconography associated with pestilence. Lieferinxe’s Saint Sebastian is approaching a God who is buoyed on a gathering of dark clouds, which were iconographic metaphors for God’s anger; late medieval Christians would have understood that God’s anger caused the plague from which the Christians in the painting were suffering. While the Christians below are suddenly succumbing to the plague, Saint Sebastian is kneeling before and pleading with God. Although he has arrows already

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23 Saint Roch was the other well-known patron saint of the plague. In comparison to Saint Sebastian, Saint Roch’s cult developed rather late in the chronology of the spread of the pestilence; he became associated with the plague due to his reputation for devotion to the ill, as well as the presence of the bubo-type growth on his left leg.
absorbed in his body suggesting that he is stopping the arrows destined for the laity, Saint Sebastian is not autonomously halting the onslaught of the pestilence. Upon closer examination, it can be seen that God is not holding any arrows; thus, the arrows protruding from Saint Sebastian’s body are simply attributes. This painting helps to illustrate the larger mindset of late medieval Christians pertaining to the cause of the Black Death, as well as to illustrate Saint Sebastian’s role as an intercessor.

Figure 1.6 Josse Lieferinxe, *Saint Sebastian Interceding for the Plague Stricken*, c. 1497, oil on wood, 81.8 x 55.4 cm.

In addition to these paintings, there existed many other paintings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that less dramatically illustrated Saint Sebastian’s role as an intercessor within the late-medieval celestial hierarchy. Oftentimes, these paintings were not created to specifically address issues of or provide commentary on the spread of plague, but nonetheless shed light upon Saint Sebastian’s position within the heavenly workings of the celestial pecking order.

An example of one such painting was Lorenzo de Credi’s “The Virgin and Child with Saint Sebastian and Saint John the Evangelist” from 1516 that depicted the Virgin Mary flanked by both Saint John and Saint Sebastian. In this painting, Saint Sebastian is fully clothed, a marked difference from the images that depicted his martyrdom or showed him as a model for Christian death as the “Man of Sorrows”. What is more, this painting is an example of an instance in which Saint Sebastian was depicted with the arrow as an attribute rather than with arrows that pierced his body. Saint Sebastian appears as if he could be conversing with the Virgin Mary and perhaps Christ as well—this once more illustrated his ability to communicate with those above him in the celestial hierarchy.
Another painting from the sixteenth century that illustrated Saint Sebastian’s place within the late medieval celestial hierarchy was Girolamo Bedoli’s 1532/33 painting entitled *The Virgin and Child with Saint Sebastian and Saint John the Evangelist*. In this painting, the Virgin Mary was seated with the Christ child on her lap, and was surrounded by the figures of Saint Sebastian, Saint John, and Saint Francis—prominent saints within the church, as opposed to being simply patron saints of one issue or another. Saint Sebastian is depicted mostly naked and pierced with arrows, just as he was in images that recalled “Man of Sorrows” imagery as well as paintings of his martyrdom. By being pictured in a scene with other saints that had had nothing to do with plague or disease of any kind, this painting suggested that Saint Sebastian had equal standing with other saints within the celestial hierarchy; his ability to intercede on behalf of those suffering from the plague did not elevate him to a higher position than the others who were able to intercede on behalf of other issues.
These paintings illuminated the many ways in which Saint Sebastian’s role as an active intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy were interpreted; however, these images suggested that in times of plague Saint Sebastian had only the power to plead with the heavenly higher-ups to set in motion a chain of events that would eventually lead to the end of the spread of pestilence, not to stop the plague of his own accord.

*Found in only one example*, the possibility of the development of a fourth role in Saint Sebastian’s cult can be seen in the fifteenth century; according to the artist, he appears to have possessed the ability to autonomously halt the spread of pestilence. If it existed, this ability to individually halt the plague was a later development in his cult. In order to contextualize the development of Saint Sebastian’s capability to halt the plague of his own accord, a brief survey of written sources from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is necessary.

Jacopo da Voragine’s c. 1275 retelling of Saint Sebastian’s life in the *Golden Legend* speaks to Saint Sebastian’s ability to intercede with the Trinity in efforts to halt the pestilence, but gives him no authority to independently stop the onslaught of pestilence. Concerning the capabilities of Saint Sebastian during times of plague, da Voragine wrote, “then let us pray to this holy martyr S. Sebastian that he pray unto our Lord that we may be delivered from all pestilence and from sudden death, and so depart advisedly hence, that we may come to everlasting joy and glory in heaven.” As the *Golden Legend* was considered a highly authoritative source concerning the biographies of saints during the late-medieval period; this source affirms the role—Saint Sebastian as an active intercessor within the late-medieval celestial hierarchy—which the previous section of this paper discussed, but does not assign Saint Sebastian with the independent authority to halt the plague.

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Moving into the fourteenth century, a prayer from the time of the Black Death very clearly illustrates that some contemporaries of the plague believed in Saint Sebastian’s ability to autonomously halt the pestilence. The prayer implored, “O martyr Sebastian! Be with us always, and by your merits keep us safe and sound and protected from plague. Commend us to the Trinity and to the Virgin Mary, so that when we die we may have our reward: to behold God in the company of martyrs.”

At this point in time, Saint Sebastian appears to have developed the independent authority to shield humanity from bouts of plague; however, he could only intercede on the behalf of humanity in matters of salvation after death—his saintly capabilities never reached complete Christ-like proportions.

The painting which very clearly articulated the makeup of the late medieval celestial hierarchy as well as Saint Sebastian’s ability to autonomously halt the arrows of plague which were being directed towards humanity was Benozzo Gozzoli’s 1464 work entitled “Saint Sebastian Intercessor”. Despite its name suggesting that it simply illustrates Sebastian’s role as an intercessor, it actually suggests at his larger, more developed role as an individual who could halt plague of his own accord. According to this painting, God sat atop the celestial hierarchy with a gigantic arrow in hand, flanked by figures who were also wielding arrows, poised to hurl them at humanity. Christ and the Virgin Mary kneeled directly below God, and below those two stood Saint Sebastian with a blue and gold cape spread wide; it was with this cloak that he deflected the arrows being flung at humanity. Unlike the images of Saint Sebastian which depicted him as either a martyr or the Christ-like “Man of Sorrows”, this image showed Saint Sebastian fully dressed with a halo around his head. The figures below Saint Sebastian were praying to the saint and being shielded by his efforts; the divinely-flung arrows were depicted as shattered after they had been deflected away by Saint Sebastian’s cloak.

Louise Marshall has argued that this painting recalls images of the Virgin Mary as the Madonna della Misericordia, and that this painting simply reflected the idea that invocation of Saint Sebastian’s aid against the plague would set “in motion a systematically pursued joint effort that proceeds inexorably upwards through the celestial hierarchy.” However, when other sources which date from the centuries preceding as well as the time of the Black Death are taken into consideration in connection with this image, it becomes possible that in the eyes of late-medieval Christians, Saint Sebastian may very well have developed the ability to autonomously halt bouts of pestilence alongside his other roles as a martyr, model for death, and an intercessor within the late medieval celestial hierarchy.

25 A prayer made to Saint Sebastian against the mortality which flourished in 1349. (Horrox 129-30): here at 129-130.

26 At this point in my research, it is not clear whether or not this capability of Saint Sebastian to autonomously halt the spread of pestilence developed out of ideas among the lay people, or if it was an idea that was officially endorsed by church officials either during the Black Death or in the centuries following the outbreak of plague. In the third chapter concerning the Catholic Reformations, I argue that the Tridentine Church sought to redefine Saint Sebastian’s official roles in the Tridentine Church, thus suggesting that this role was not endorsed by church officials.

27 This type of image portrayed a larger than life Virgin Mary who used her cloak to shield humanity from the effects of God’s wrath.

28 Marshall, 527.
The four different roles—martyr, model for Christian death, active intercessor, and autonomous halter-of-plague—which this paper has discussed all represented ways in which the idea of Saint Sebastian brought comfort to late medieval Christians who were experiencing death on an unprecedented scale. It is also important to note that not all of these four roles were apparent at the disputed beginnings of Saint Sebastian’s cult; this clearly demonstrates that medieval Christians were constantly examining the ways in which they understood the world and the heavens. The fourteenth century church “had inherited a strong institutional framework from the ecclesiastical reforms and the process of centralization that had been among the great legacies of the previous century.” However, this did not mean that the beliefs of the church were static; in fact this strong internal structure aided the church in early responses to the plague. These responses included modifying practices to meet the needs of the catastrophe; the development of additional roles for Saint Sebastian, patron saint of the plague, is an example that is very visible in the art from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

AFTER THE BLACK DEATH devastated Europe from 1348-52, the disease continued to ravage parts of Europe roughly every ten years on a much smaller scale; this is one reason that images of Saint Sebastian continued to be produced after the initial onslaught of the plague. Christine Boeckl argues that Christians in the early modern period continued to

believe that “God sent the scourge because of human frailties; most Christians still regarded plague as divine retribution for sin.” However, when the Protestant Reformation began in 1517, newly formed ideas about the nature of man’s relationship with the divine would shape Protestant thought pertaining to the cult of saints, which in turn affected the manner in which saints such as Sebastian were depicted. This chapter will first address the context in which a Protestant definition of “saint” developed, and will then provide two examples of Saint Sebastian paintings that would have been theologically acceptable to both Protestants and their Catholic counterparts as means of demonstrating the complicated process by which reform ideas were implemented in early modern Europe.

Led by Martin Luther and other reformers, the Protestant movement as a whole shunned the medieval cult of saints. In his 1520 “Open Letter to the German Nobility”, Luther offered a critical assessment of the institution, claiming that:

Although the canonizing of saints may have been good in olden times, it is not good now; just as many other things were good in olden times and are now scandalous and injurious, such as feast-days, church-treasures and church-adornment. For it is evident that through the canonizing of saints neither God's glory nor the improvement of Christians is sought, but only money and glory, in that one church wants to be something more and have something more than others.

Luther saw the veneration of saints as one more example of the ways in which the medieval church had gone astray, and worked to reform the term “saint” in a manner consistent with his theology.

Luther devised a definition of saint that declared all Christians simultaneously sinners and saints, and eliminated the role of intercessors, save for Christ. He claimed that “God’s forgiving Word bestowed full and complete holiness on all God’s chosen believers; all believers therefore were the true saints of God. In true fashion of many of Luther’s theological ideas, there was a contradiction inherent in this idea; namely that “all these saints were also sinners, their lives permeated by the failure to fear, love and trust in God above all things that prevented human life on earth from enjoying the perfection of Eden.” By declaring that all Christians were at once saints and sinners, the Protestant movement “reclaimed providential power over daily human life for God alone, and they insisted that mediation with him is provided by Jesus Christ alone.” Thus, Christ was now the only intercessor, and other holy figures—namely saints—were unnecessary figures. This also meant that, in a marked difference from the late medieval church, Christ was personally accessible to all Christians. This new interpretation of saints, along with iconoclastic Protestant ideas about art, meant that any images—let alone images of the medieval saints—were largely unacceptable in these movements.

The Protestant Reformers had varying ideas about the role of images in the lives of Christians; Luther, Melanchthon and Karlstadt in particular were strong proponents of the iconoclast movement at the beginning of the German Reformation. However, Luther adopted
a more moderate view as the movement progressed and finally adopted a view in which he “tolerated and finally even encouraged church art if it served to instruct.”\(^{36}\) It is from this didactic perspective that much Protestant art was created. Joseph Leo Koerner emphasizes in his book *The Reformation of the Image* that both Protestant and Catholic art of this period was created with education as well as the cultivation of personal piety in mind.

This is not to say that all art that would have been formally and theologically acceptable to Protestants was intentionally created as Protestant art. For purposes of clarity, this section will treat art that was known to have been created by or commissioned by Protestants as Protestant art, while art for which an artist’s theological persuasion is ambiguous or unknown will not be assumed to be Protestant art based solely on its composition. This definition also applies for art with an unknown patron; while the subject of such a work could have been acceptable to Protestants, it is impossible to discern whether or not it was intended to be Protestant art without explicit information about the patron. As Saint Sebastian would have been an easily recognizable figure to Christians living at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, his image could have been easily adapted to paintings that reflected ideals that were common to both the Protestant movement as well as the existing Church.

*Citing its overtly didactic nature*, art historians have traditionally shunned Protestant Reformation art that survived or was created in spite of the iconoclastic movement. Koerner argues that art inspired by the Protestant Reformations was at once iconic and iconographic, that it depicted the living church that was itself largely opposed to images. It is a well-established fact among art historians that art was used by the Catholic Reform movement to communicate messages about theology to the laity, and the Protestant movement was no different. In the case of the Protestant movement, important theological ideas that were being transmitted through art pertained to the idea of justification by grace alone, *sola scriptura*, and the relationship between law and gospel.\(^{37}\)

While the Protestant movement put forth images heralding those ideas, artists such as Lucas Cranach were also producing images affirming ideas common to both the Protestant and Catholic Reform movements. Catholic as well as “Protestant theology stressed the necessity of prayer and the sorrowful recognition of sin,”\(^{38}\) and both factions emphasized the idea that “repentant sinners were obliged to open their hearts to God in prayer, examining their sins and expressing their contrition.”\(^{39}\) Using Rembrandt and his depictions of Saint Jerome as an example, Catherine B. Scallen argues in her article “Rembrandt’s Reformation of a Catholic Subject: The Penitent and Repentant Saint Jerome” that artists in this period recognized that paintings that utilized imagery that were acceptable to both factions of Christianity would receive a wider scale of distribution.

Two paintings of Saint Sebastian completed in the seventeenth century show that this methodology was applied to Saint Sebastian as well; but this is not to suggest that this imagery was officially accepted or endorsed by the Protestant movement. Saint Sebastian did not become a Protestant saint, but his image could be manipulated in a way that would have been theologically acceptable to Lutherans and other factions of Protestantism, suggesting

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\(^{37}\) A well-known example of this type of art is Lucas Cranach the Elder’s *Allegory of Law and Gospel*, 1529.


\(^{39}\) Scallen, “Rembrandt’s Reformation of a Catholic Subject”, 78.
that artists and patrons were actively examining ways in which to adapt tenants of traditional Christianity to meet the changing circumstances of the sixteenth century.

Jose de Ribera was a Spanish painter who completed two paintings of Saint Sebastian that emphasized theological principles similar to both the Protestant and Catholic movements. Ribera spent extensive time in Italy and became a follower of Caravaggio’s trademark tenebrist style; it is especially interesting that he created these theologically ambiguous images as part of a career in traditionally Catholic areas. When examining his motivations for creating art with ambiguous iconography, both economic and religious factors must be taken into account. Any analysis of art created in the early modern period—or any other—must consider economic as well as religious motivations for creating artwork. For example, Lucas Cranach the Elder is regarded as a leading painter of the Protestant Reformation, yet he also created images affirming Catholic theology when his patrons requested them.\(^{40}\) It appears that Ribera followed this trend as well; his other works include dramatic images of other saints as well as mythical scenes, all created in varying styles.

Ribera was baptized Catholic in 1591, but it is not known if he maintained his Catholicism throughout his adult life. What is more, one of his greatest patrons was the Duke of Osuna of Naples, a territory that was occupied by Spain during this period and who was presumably Catholic.\(^{41}\) Assuming that Ribera followed the contemporary trend and completed works for both Catholics and Protestants regardless of his personal persuasions in order for his paintings to have a wider spectrum of distribution, this section will address two of his works as examples of how Saint Sebastian’s imagery was adapted to de-emphasize “penitence, physical chastisement, or the performance of works” and to reflect penitence that was “understood as inward contrition.”\(^{42}\) While these images were not accepted by all Protestants or the Protestant movement as a whole, the imagery of these paintings would have reflected theological ideals championed by the different reform movements.

Ribera completed was *S. Sebastian* in 1628; this work emphasized a Saint Sebastian who appears personally repentant before God. By this time, multiple Protestant movements had taken hold in Europe, and clear divisions had been drawn between Protestantism and Catholicism as a result of the Council of Trent, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. This painting shows Saint Sebastian in an isolated environment already pierced with arrows, a setting that is very similar to images in which he is shown as the Man of Sorrows. Furthermore, Sebastian is kneeling with outstretched arms and his face is directed upwards at a subject—presumably God—who is absent from the painting.

Furthermore, Saint Sebastian appears to be having a conversation with God, but this is not the *sacre conversazione* that characterized earlier paintings of him as an intercessor within the celestial hierarchy. Rather, this painting shows an isolated Saint Sebastian who is praying directly to God—this can be interpreted as an affirmation of both the power of prayer and of a personal relationship with the divine. Arrows are present, but they serve only as an attribute by which to identify Saint Sebastian, and are not the emphasis of the painting. Also interesting to consider is the fact that Saint Sebastian is kneeling in this painting—this is the only example in which that type of stance is depicted. As a common theme of Saint Sebastian paintings is the overtones of Christ-like imagery, it is not too much of a stretch to observe

\(^{40}\) Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg was a notable Catholic patron of Lucas Cranach the Elder; Cranach’s paintings for both factions were often very formally similar, but close formal analysis betrays the theological differences between works created for Catholic patrons and Protestant patrons such as Frederick the Wise of Saxony.

\(^{41}\) This could not be confirmed, but as the Duke was an official in a Catholic-dominated area, it follows that he would have officially affirmed Catholicism.

\(^{42}\) Catherine B. Scallen, “Rembrandt’s Reformation of a Catholic Subject”, 71.
that Saint Sebastian appears similar to images of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.\footnote{For an example of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, see Filippo Tarchiani, \textit{Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane}, c. 1625, Museo Di San Marco, Florence, Italy.} This painting would have been acceptable to both Catholic and non-iconoclastic Protestants; Catholics would recognize it as another manifestation of Saint Sebastian, but Protestants would have acknowledged that the painting portrayed a repentant Christian personally praying to God, thus in alignment with the Protestant ideal of a sinner who was saved by a grace through a personal relationship with the divine.

![Figure 2.1 Jusep de Ribera, \textit{S. Sebastian}, 1628, oil on canvas, 179 x 130 cm](image)

The other painting by Jusep de Ribera that walked the line between Catholic and Protestant imagery was his 1636 painting entitled \textit{The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian}. Given Ribera’s fascination with “compelling drama…which often embraced brutal themes”, it is somewhat surprising that Ribera chose to depict Saint Sebastian in a quiet, repentant manner at least twice over the course of his career.\footnote{Fred Kleiner, ed. \textit{Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: A Global History} 13\textsuperscript{th} ed (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2009), 667.} As no information could be found for the patron(s) of these pieces; this goes to further suggest the possibility that these paintings were commissioned by a Protestant-leaning individual or group. Acknowledging this possibility allows for a wider interpretation of this second Ribera representation of Saint Sebastian in Europe during the years when the Council of Trent’s decrees were being implemented across Europe.

While \textit{The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian} could be interpreted as the presence of a separate role for Saint Sebastian in the lives of early modern Protestants, it illustrates how Ribera possibly interpreted the events of Sebastian’s martyrdom in a way that aligned with aforementioned Protestant ideals of repentance. This painting is formally similar to the previous image in that Saint Sebastian is shown in an isolated environment; a key difference is that this painting is intended to be a depiction of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom. In a marked
difference from late medieval depictions of his martyrdom—and even from early modern depictions, which will be discussed in the next chapter—this martyrdom image takes place after the archers have left, leaving Saint Sebastian alone with God. More arrows are present in this image than in the other Ribera example cited in this section; this can be attributed to the setting of the painting. What is more, blood is visible, but neither the arrows nor the suffering is the main message of this painting. Whereas late medieval images of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom were intended as history paintings, to document the actual event of the archer’s attack, this painting is intended to reflect Saint Sebastian’s personal interaction with God following the arrow onslaught.

Thus, the work of Jusepa de Ribera illustrates a different interpretation of Saint Sebastian than was seen in the late medieval church; by carefully eliminating visual elements (save for the identifying iconographic arrows) that were blatantly Catholic in nature, Ribera created images of Saint Sebastian that emphasized quiet prayer directly between God and believer. In Ribera’s images, Saint Sebastian is not performing any works, he is not appealing to any higher spiritual being such as the Virgin Mary or Christ, and in one image, he is even kneeling before God. Because of the emphasis on an individual believer and his personal interactions with God, these images would have not offended Protestants, but were not officially embraced by the movement. These images were being created contemporaneously with images of the Catholic Reformations, further showing that Saint Sebastian’s image could be manipulated to meet the wishes of individual patrons who either did not fully understand or disregarded the theological nuances of the various reform movements.

DURING THE REFORM MOVEMENTS that occurred within the Roman Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Saint Sebastian’s image was again modified to meet the changing needs of the Church. It was during this time that “art was placed in the service of the Church to preach the Roman Catholic faith and was an important factor in creating the
Baroque style in the early 1600s.” As a saint of the Tridentine Church, Saint Sebastian was depicted in at least three different ways; these roles will be more fully explored after a brief summary of the transition of the themes of art in which Saint Sebastian was depicted. By exploring these roles, it will be shown that Saint Sebastian went from being regarded as exclusively a plague saint after the beginnings of the Reformations to a figure that the Tridentine church also utilized to educate contemporary Christians about larger issues of piety, pertaining particularly to women.

Two of Saint Sebastian’s roles in this period were reprisals of his late medieval roles of a martyr and a model for Christian death, and were intended to affirm the continuity of and the Church’s support for these roles. Saint Sebastian’s third role in the Tridentine Church was rather indirect; depictions of him being aided by holy women after the arrow attack served as didactic examples of female piety within early modern Catholicism, as well as a commentary on women in the Tridentine Church. This final role in particular represents the shift from Saint Sebastian’s image as exclusively a plague saint to a holy figure whose image was utilized in order to enable early modern Catholics to better understand what was required of the individual as a believer, as opposed to earlier paintings meant to offer comfort to struggling believers in the face of pestilence.

As mentioned in the previous chapter about Protestant interpretations of Saint Sebastian in the years after the Black Death, pestilence continued to be a legitimate threat to the lives of Europeans until the seventeenth century. This is significant for the study of art of the Catholic Reformation because the fear of dying suddenly without the aid of the church was a major motivation for late medieval Christians in seeking the aid of figures such as Saint Sebastian. However, by the time of the Catholic Reformation, “the fear of dying and hell lessened because the lucid judiciary system of the Ten Commandments had replaced the rather vague concept of the Seven Deadly Sins.” Furthermore, “Catholic clergy [now] emphasized a more merciful passage through Purgatory; formerly perceived as almost like hell, Purgatory was now presented as a place of purification where angels served the sacraments to the suffering souls.” Therefore, early modern Christians were still concerned about the effects of plague outbreaks, but their fear of a bad death had been somewhat pacified by these theological developments that offered a concrete view of how to live a good life, as well as a new interpretation of purgatory that was less frightening than the late medieval version.

Although the three different roles Saint Sebastian fulfilled in the period of Catholic reform were not new creations, some images produced during the formation of the Tridentine Church display signs of innovation to roles that had been created during earlier years of Saint Sebastian’s cult as a plague saint. For his roles as martyr and a model for Christian death, the visual changes in these roles were largely cosmetic; paintings of these roles from the period of Catholic reform show no real theological development, only a determined return to an official, theologically appropriate interpretation of a patron saint of the plague. In a marked difference from pre-Reformation times, images of Saint Sebastian being helped by Saint Irene were extremely popular in the period of Catholic Reform; these images were not necessarily reflective of theological innovations so much as a commentary on the role of women in the Tridentine Church. The first two roles were illustrative of the Church’s attempt to reestablish the official nature of Saint Sebastian’s cult that had grown to epic and

45 Boeckl, Images of Plague and Pestilence, 109.
47 Ibid. Related to the idea of angels serving sacraments to souls in purgatory, I did find one example of a painting in which Saint Sebastian is depicted with an angel that is gesticulating towards Saint Sebastian, seemingly with the intent of removing an arrow from his side. Perhaps Hendrik Goltzius’s Saint Sebastian from 1615 was an attempt to illustrate a contemporary view of purgatory?
theologically problematic proportions following the outbreak of the Black Death, while the last role is an example of how the Tridentine Church used familiar figures to emphasize various tenants of Catholicism.

The basis of the didactic nature of Catholic paintings of Saint Sebastian produced in the years following the Protestant Reformation can be traced to the Council of Trent. Meeting in three periods between 1545 and 1563, the Council of Trent was a major turning point in the history of early modern Catholicism. The first period was lead by Pope Paul III, the second by Julius III, and the third by Pius IV. Although there is copious evidence showing that attempts at reform from within Catholicism had been taking place ever since the fifteenth century, Trent constituted the church’s official response to the Protestant Reformations. Based upon the topics discussed during the sessions, the Council released decrees and canons designed to reassert the authority of Catholicism in the face of the powerful Protestant movements.

As an instrumental aspect of late medieval Christianity, the cult of saints was one of the topics addressed by the Council of Trent. Peter Burke explains that the Council devised a three-fold manner by which to repair the abuse of the cult of saints that had occurred in the years preceding the Reformation. The first step of this movement was to be an attempt to “emend the accepted accounts of the lives of saints and to replace these accounts with something more reliable, judged by the criteria of humanist historical criticism.” The next step was a series of regulations that made it much more difficult for new saints to be canonized. In fact, no new saints were canonized for sixty five years after Saint Benno and Saint Antonio of Florence were admitted in 1523.

Finally, the Church created the Congregation of Sacred Rites and Ceremonies in 1588 that was intended to oversee the process by which new saints were canonized, but this responsibility grew more connected to the papacy in the early seventeenth century. All of these measures together were intended to implement the decree of the Council of Trent that “affirmed the desirability of venerating the images and relics of the saints and of going on pilgrimage to their shrines.” Furthermore, the Council of Trent issued three decrees specifically pertaining to the images of saints, and the influence of these decrees can be seen in depictions of Saint Sebastian created after Trent.

When speaking to the motivation behind creating art depicting saints as well as other religious subjects, the Council decreed that:

By means of the histories of the mysteries of our redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed and confirmed (in the habit of) remembering and continually

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48 Much of the historiographical debate surrounding the reactionary nature of the Roman Church’s response to the Age of Reform is outside the scope of this section, which seeks to understand the didactic nature of Christian art created in the years following the Council of Trent. For an excellent historiographical sketch of the transformation of Roman Catholicism in the early modern period, see John W. O’Malley, Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002). Elisabeth Gleason argues that there were three distinct periods of Catholic Reform in her article “Catholic Reform, Counterreformation, and Papal Reform in the Sixteenth Century.” In Handbook of European History 1400-1600 Volume 2, Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy, ed. 317-342. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995). Also relevant is Hubert Jedin’s classic article “Katolische Reformation oder Gegenreformation? Ein Versuch zur Klärung der Begriffe nebst einer Jubilaeumsbetrachtung ueber das Trienter Konzil” (Luzern: Verlag Joseph Stocker, 1946): 7-38.
50 Peter Burke also notes that this so-called canonization hiatus did not affect the unofficial rise of other saints, particularly Saint Roch. Saint Roch was canonized in Venice in 1576, but the papacy allowed the official state of his cult on a church-wide level to remain rather ambiguous during the period of Catholic reform.
51 Burke, 131.
revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; that so they may give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety.  

The Council thus justified that sacred images allowed the laity to see physical depictions of benefits and gifts from God, and to see the miracles of the saints that God had performed through those holy people; these images were argued to be ways in which lay Christians could observe and study the actions of holy people in order to model their own lives after the actions of the saints. Therefore, Saint Sebastian was to be redefined in a manner consistent with these decrees that still allowed him to be a recognizable figure to contemporary Christians so that his images could serve as a means of encouraging Christians to “adore and love God, and to cultivate piety.”

Furthermore, the Council sought to oversee the visual aspects of the subject matter of paintings in order to ensure that newly created images were purporting the approved image of the Tridentine Church. When speaking to depictions of saints, the Council decreed that “in the invocation of saints…every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished; finally, all lasciviousness be avoided; in such a wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust.” For images of Saint Sebastian, this meant that the miraculous nature of his survival was to be explicitly explained; in the years prior to the Reformation, his survival of the arrow onslaught was often ascribed to a miracle; the Council of Trent sought to ensure that Saint Sebastian’s miraculous survival was understood as having been orchestrated by God, and not by Saint Sebastian’s own actions. Furthermore, the violent nature of his martyrdom story was no longer to be emphasized as it so often was in the late medieval period. Interestingly, artists continued to depict him as a nearly-naked young man, despite the decree that figures not be painted with “a beauty exciting to lust”.

This section will assume that this was due to the value that Renaissance and Baroque artists placed on the ability to depict the human form; furthermore, this form of representation helps to illustrate the often-ambiguous nature of reform implementations.

In an effort to decrease the amount of ambiguity in implementing the reforms laid out at the Council of Trent, the church also decided that artists commissioned to create religious images were to be closely overseen. Post-Trent, the church exercised “detailed theological supervision of painters, [assigning] subjects and themes to counter Protestant teachings and glorify Catholic doctrines and institutions.” The Council of Trent’s decrees were intended to guide the church into the next century as a forward thinking body of believers; while origins of Catholic reform can be traced to Trent, the implementation of these reforms took time and additional legislation before they were manifested in art.

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54 There are a few instances of Saint Sebastian paintings in which he was shown clothed, but these images were a shocking minority in his many depictions throughout the periods examined in this paper. Typically, an image of Saint Sebastian in which he was clothed was typically meant to show him as a Roman soldier.
Despite the amount of sacred legislation and guidelines for implementing reforms pertaining to the cult of saints that were created at or inspired by the Council of Trent, Christine Boeckl argues that changes in Saint Sebastian paintings did not begin to reflect the decrees of the Council until after the first edition of the Rituale Romanum (Roman Ritual) was issued in 1584. The official edition of the Rituale Romanum was issued in 1614 by Pope Paul V, and was intended to be a guide to rituals in the Tridentine Church such as the rite of ordination, prayers at meals, and other official ceremonies.\footnote{By no means a comprehensive guide to all of the rituals of the newly renewed Tridentine Church, it did include a section that offers insight into the Church’s official interpretation of Saint Sebastian’s saintly capabilities in the Tridentine era.} While the Rituale Romanum was by no means a comprehensive guide to all of the rituals of the newly renewed Tridentine Church, it did include a section that offers insight into the Church’s official interpretation of Saint Sebastian’s saintly capabilities in the Tridentine era.

One of the ceremonies detailed in the Rituale Romanum was a “Procession in Time of Epidemic and Plague”; this ceremony includes prayers to Saint Sebastian that demonstrate his reevaluated role as a saint in the Tridentine Church. This ceremony is designed as a litany between priest and congregation, and concludes with a prayer to be said collectively by all participants:

\begin{center}
Hear us, O God, our Savior, and by the prayers of glorious Mary, Mother of God, and ever a Virgin, of St. Sebastian, your martyr, and of all the saints, deliver your people from your wrath, and in your bounty let them feel certain of your mercy…We beg you, Lord, to hear our sincere pleas, and graciously to avert this plague which afflicts us; so that mortal hearts may acknowledge that such scourges come from your wrath and cease only when you are moved to pity; through Christ our Lord.\footnote{By emphasizing Saint Sebastian’s lesser spiritual role in the celestial hierarchy and by affirming that plague scourges could be stopped only by Christ’s efforts, this prayer clearly demonstrates that Saint Sebastian’s role had been returned to that of a Christian martyr who had the ability to intercede on behalf of humanity in times of plague. This prayer can be seen as a reflection of the Church’s attempts to reorganize after the Black Death; it was recognized that Saint Sebastian’s cult had grown to unexpected proportions and the Church sought to clearly define his position in the celestial hierarchy. Before experimenting with new ways in which Saint Sebastian’s image could be used in service to the Tridentine Church, the church first sought to emphasize that Saint Sebastian was first and foremost a Christian martyr whose actions had earned him special favor with God.}
\end{center}

Paintings of Saint Sebastian completed after the Council of Trent and the issuance of the Rituale Romanum showed of Saint Sebastian’s status as a Christian martyr in the Tridentine Church; this role was a holdover from the years before the Reformation. Paintings of Sebastian’s martyrdom created or commissioned after the Council of Trent had cosmetic differences from those created before Trent. However, these differences suggested an emphasis on the aspects of Saint Sebastian’s identity that were officially endorsed by the late medieval Church in the years following the Black Death and were not reflective of any real theological innovations. Using one example of a painting depicting the cosmetic changes that characterized paintings of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom after the Council of Trent, this section will show how Saint Sebastian’s role as a martyr saint in the Tridentine Church was affirmed in art created after the Council of Trent.

\footnote{Due to the insurmountable language barrier existing between myself and Latin, this section will utilize a version of the Rituale Romanum that was translated in 1962; this version also includes a document called the Instruction of September 1954.}

Jacopo da Empoli’s c. 1616-18 painting entitled *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* depicts the event of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom; in contrast to many late medieval representations, this painting takes place at the very beginning of the event. This is a marked cosmetic difference from late medieval representations such as Jan De Beer’s work (Figure 1.2) where the archers are well into the process of flinging arrows at Saint Sebastian, but is similar to Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo’s painting (Figure 1.1) in which the archers have just begun their task. Saint Sebastian has no arrows absorbed in his body, and the Roman soldiers are still in the process of securing him to the post. This is in a nod to the Council of Trent’s decrees concerning the nature of images of saints, one of the methods by which the Council aimed to restore credibility to the cult of saints.

This work is clearly in line with the decree that “all filthy lucre be abolished” from religious paintings in that this painting is not inherently violent; in fact, no blood can be seen anywhere in this work.\(^{58}\) Perhaps most interestingly, Saint Sebastian is already a martyr in this painting; although he has not yet been shot with arrows, he has a halo over his head, and he is looking heavenward. Far from the action-filled paintings created prior to the Reformations, this painting is a deliberate attempt to emphasize Saint Sebastian’s divinity he had earned as a result of his actions in pursuance of a pious Christian lifestyle.

![Figure 3.1 Jacopo da Empoli, Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, 1616-1618,](image)

Therefore, this painting shows the influence of the decrees of the Council of Trent; the Church reasserted Saint Sebastian’s proper role as a martyr saint in the celestial hierarchy while obeying the decree to refrain from depicting excessive. To followers of early modern Catholicism, Saint Sebastian was regarded as a martyr, an example of a faithful individual who had done exceptional actions in the service of God. This type of painting was not rare during the period of Catholic reform, but was not nearly as popular as it was in the years preceding the Age of Reform. This could be due to the fact that martyr saints were not

particularly emphasized or celebrated in the Tridentine Church as compared to other periods in Christian history; however, the cosmetic changes in imagery when depicting Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom were more likely due to the Church’s desire to once again gain control of the interpretation of Saint Sebastian’s cult.\(^{59}\)

*The second manner in which* Saint Sebastian was represented during the period of Catholic Reform was a further innovation on the “Man of Sorrows” image that was so popular in the late medieval period. Just as the Tridentine Church sought to use art reassert Saint Sebastian’s approved role as a Christian martyr, his role as a model for Christian death was also affirmed in the art of the Catholic Reformation. In order to explore these developments, this section will examine “Man of Sorrows” paintings created by Paolo Veronese and Peter Paul Rubens. These paintings are similar to earlier “Man of Sorrows” representations of Saint Sebastian in that they show Sebastian in the same moment as the late medieval “Man of Sorrows” representations—following the archer’s attack in which historical time was again suspended and inverted, and in that the artists each chose to show Saint Sebastian as a young, bearded, and largely nude young man.\(^{60}\)

Both of these paintings were created after the Council of Trent, and showed a strong influence of both the Italian and Northern Renaissance artists desire to return to the classical ideas of naturalism and perfection when depicting the human body. As previously discussed, this type of visual depiction was not necessarily in line with the intentions of Trent; however, images of Saint Sebastian as the Christ-like “Man of Sorrows” did not overstep the boundaries of Saint Sebastian’s spiritual capabilities as outlined in the Rituale Romanum. In fact, the Tridentine Church more than likely embraced imagery of Saint Sebastian as a model for Christian death in spite of his blatantly nude representation because of its didactic nature that encouraged early modern Christians to follow the example of a holy figure. What is more, this type of imagery assured early modern Catholics that in a time in which the idea of saints as heavenly beings was being roundly attacked by the Protestant reformers, Saint Sebastian remained a model for Christian death in the face of disease.

Paulo Veronese’s 1565 painting entitled *Saint Sebastian* was completed only two years after the final session of the Council of Trent; its imagery has much in common with images completed before the Council, yet some influences of the Council’s decrees are evident in Veronese’s work.\(^{61}\) Recalling themes of classical art that were valued in the High Italian Renaissance, this work shows Sebastian slumped against a column with his wrists tied to either side of his body; the positioning of his arms recalls further imagery of Christ on the cross. Furthermore, the rest of his body is contorted in somewhat of an s-curve, but his feet are not bound. Saint Sebastian’s face does not reflect any pain, there are only two arrows absorbed in his body, and the blood from those wounds is present, but not emphasized.

By depicting Sebastian in this way, Veronese was most likely working to convey themes of Christ on the cross while also showing his prowess at representing the human body in realistic manner in the tradition of the High Italian Renaissance artists. The ideals of the

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\(^{59}\) Peter Burke observes that the Tridentine Church was far more likely to affirm the sanctity of founders of religious orders, missionaries, individuals known for their charitable activities, pastors, and mystics (or ecstasies) than martyrs when canonizing saints.

\(^{60}\) Marshall, 496.

\(^{61}\) Veronese is a particularly interesting artist to discuss in the context of the age of Catholic Reform; only eight years after he completed his *Saint Sebastian*, he was called before the Inquisition to defend his *Last Supper*. This further demonstrates that the officials of the Tridentine Church took their decrees about art very seriously, and was actively seeking those who were believed to have overstepped artistic boundaries. Veronese’s *Saint Sebastian* goes to illustrate that some artists were already affirming the decrees of the Council of Trent before the *Rituale Romanum* was issued, yet the abundance of paintings in the seventeenth century affirming the decrees shows that Boeckl’s argument is valid.
Council of Trent are apparent in this image; in accordance with the canons and decrees, the violent aspects characteristic of earlier Saint Sebastian “Man of Sorrows” paintings are visibly de-emphasized. Saint Sebastian is gazing upwards, but he does not appear to be communicating with the viewer or any other character—even God—in the painting. This type of gaze recalls images such as Andrea Mantegna’s *Saint Sebastian* from c. 1457 that was referenced in Chapter One; whereas some images of Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows” from the pre-Reformation period featured a saint who gazed in the direction of the viewer, images post-Trent tended to feature a Saint Sebastian whose gaze was focused heavenward.

![Figure 3.2 Paolo Veronese, *Saint Sebastian*, 1565; oil on canvas, 114 x 71 cm.](image)

Another example of “Man of Sorrows” imagery following the Council of Trent comes from Peter Paul Rubens, who completed a painting entitled *Saint Sebastian* around 1618. Rubens showed a great attention to naturalism, and spent much more effort on creating a distinctive setting for Saint Sebastian’s suffering. In this painting, Saint Sebastian is bound to a tree in a direct nod to Christ-like imagery; unlike Veronese’s painting where Sebastian’s arms are stretched out to the side, the saint’s hands are tied behind him in Ruben’s work. Rubens showed off his ability to depict the human form through the slight s-curve in which Sebastian is positioned, and arrows are sticking out of Sebastian’s body, yet very little blood is visible. Saint Sebastian is in much more visible pain in Ruben’s work, yet his gaze is still directed heavenward.
Thus, paintings of Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows” created after the Council of Trent were very visually similar to those created before Trent, and affirmed the continuity of his role as a model for Christian death in the face of the plague. Besides the paintings referenced in this section, many other artists undertook depictions of Saint Sebastian as the “Man of Sorrows”, demonstrating the enduring popularity of this type of imagery during the period of Tridentine Reform. By continuing Saint Sebastian’s role as a model for Christian death in the face of the ever-recurring plague, the Tridentine Church was also following a visual tradition first established during the Black Death. In the Tridentine as well as the late medieval Church, Saint Sebastian was an example of how to face death when the traditions of Catholicism could not be executed, thus providing comfort to believers. However, these devotional images likely decreased in popularity as early modern Christians were given access to more specific guidelines for how to live a pious life, as well as new interpretations of purgatory that were not nearly as terrifying as the hell-like late medieval manifestation became widely accepted.

Images of Saint Sebastian being helped by women were extremely popular in the years following the Council of Trent and the issuance of the Rituale Romanum; far from communicating a message about Saint Sebastian himself, these paintings sought to emphasize the Council of Trent’s decrees about the role of women in the Tridentine Church. Though this imagery was present prior to the Age of Reform, it became much more popular following the Council of Trent. Images of Saint Sebastian being helped by women helped the Church to both de-emphasize the miraculous aspect of Saint Sebastian’s survival of the arrow onslaught as well as to illustrate what were seen as acceptable roles for women in the Tridentine Church. This section will use three paintings of Saint Sebastian in which the saint is being

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62 An example of a painting in which Saint Sebastian is being aided by Saint Irene that was completed in the years preceding the Age of Reform, see the Master of Saint Sebastian, Saint Irene Nurses Saint Sebastian, 1497-98, Philadelphia Museum of Art.
aided by either Saint Irene or other holy women to argue that this type of imagery was part of the larger movement to mold Saint Sebastian’s cult and iconography into more than that of exclusively a plague saint.

In *The Golden Legend*’s account of Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom, Saint Irene appeared after the archers shot Saint Sebastian and left him for dead. She is purported to have nursed him back to health from his arrow wounds before he was finally clubbed to death by the Roman soldiers. *The Golden Legend* reported that “the night after [the archer’s attack] came a christian woman [Irene] for to take his body and to bury it, but she found him alive and brought him to her house, and took charge of him till he was all whole”63. This part of Sebastian’s martyrdom story was known in the years following the Black Death, but art of the late medieval period largely supported the idea that Saint Sebastian had miraculously survived the arrow onslaught, paying no attention to Saint Irene’s role in the matter. The Council of Trent officially addressed the idea of miracles in the same decree as it addressed sacred images and decided that “no new miracles are to be acknowledged…unless the said bishop has taken cognizance and approved thereof.”64 By showing images of Saint Sebastian being cared for after the archer’s attack, the Church was attempting to provide appropriate context for Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom story as a whole, rather than attributing his survival to a miraculous coincidence.

By including Saint Irene in paintings of Saint Sebastian and depicting her role in his martyrdom story, the Church and the artists it employed also used these paintings to depict women in a manner consistent with their new role in the Tridentine Church, and to inspire other Christians to adopt the ideal of service to one another in times of need. These same paintings were an important didactic commentary on the role of women in the Tridentine Church; the Council of Trent’s decrees mandated “all monasteries subject to them, and in others, by the authority of the Apostolic See, they make it their especial care, that the enclosure of nuns be carefully restored, wheresoever it has been violated, and that it be preserved, wheresoever it has not been violated”.65 Although this decree ordered that all female religious orders be cloistered, many examples of female orders that functioned among and served the public welfare existed, and the popularity of these paintings affirmed the importance of their work.

Susan E. Dinan has written a survey of these early modern female religious orders in the years following the Council of Trent arguing that the Council’s legacy for women was ambiguous; that some religious women were able to become active participants in offering to help the sick and poor of various communities in spite of Trent’s decrees.66 These orders were especially prominent in the initial decades of the seventeenth century, and again go to show that the European populace did not readily accept all of the Council’s decrees, and that the actual implementations of reform were not as sudden and effective as the Church would have desired. In this case, the strict boundary between cloistered and secular life never became a reality as it was imagined at Trent. Dinan also argues that the Council’s motivation for mandating the cloistering of female orders was another attempt to restore order to the Church where it had been lost in the previous centuries, citing instances of rape and promiscuity that had occurred in loosely cloistered Renaissance convents.67 Therefore, the

63 *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints (Aurea Legenda)*

64 *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent Celebrated Under the Sovereign Pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV*, 236.

65 Ibid., 240.


67 Dinan, 73.
same motivations that caused the church to adamantly establish Saint Sebastian’s two official roles in art were also manifested in the Council’s decrees about women.

An example of Saint Sebastian being helped by Saint Irene is Hendrik Terbrugghen’s 1625 painting entitled *St. Sebastian Tended by Irene.*[^68] This painting depicts the moment at which Saint Irene is taking Saint Sebastian away from the scene of the arrow onslaught, after the archers had already left him for dead. Irene is joined by one other anonymous woman, who is helping her with the task of removing Saint Sebastian away from the post to which he was bound during the attack. Similar to other depictions of Saint Sebastian, there is a hint of Christ-like imagery; in this case, there is an argument to be made that this image recalls scenes after Christ was taken down from the cross. However, this image would have been recognized as a scene in which one Christian was aiding another, and it would have been particularly interesting that two females were aiding a male. This would have perhaps reminded early modern Catholics of the work of female religious orders such as the Daughters of Charity who were active in France after they were founded following the Council of Trent.

![Figure 3.4 Hendrik Terbrugghen, St. Sebastian Tended by Irene, 1625, oil on canvas, 150.2 x 120 cm.](image)

While many female religious orders did obey the Council’s decree to be cloistered, the Daughters of Charity directly defied this guideline; as an order devoted to serving the poor and sick in various communities, they could not carry out their mission if cloistered. They were a rather industrious group, and by 1633 the “Daughters of Charity were not only

[^68]: It is also interesting to note that Terbrugghen became a prominent painter of the Dutch Baroque period after studying in Italy, and this image very prominently portrays a Catholic image. As the Netherlands (and particularly Utrecht, where Terbrugghen completed much of his work) was officially Protestant in the seventeenth century, it is possible that images such as this one were created in direct contradiction to the overwhelming Protestant influence of the surrounding area, and were therefore “more Catholic” in nature than images created in Protestant-dominated areas.
serving the poor and sick in Parisian parishes, they were staffing hospitals, hospices, insane asylums, and prisons across northern France, including a huge orphanage outside of Paris. Based on the order’s history of performing services such as this to other Christians or indeed, simply other community members, in need would have made Terbrugghen’s image a familiar image of life during the age of Catholic Reform, but set in a martyrdom story with which early modern Catholics would have been familiar.

A second example of Saint Sebastian being aided by women is Georges de la Tour’s painting entitled Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene that was completed in 1649. This painting is set after Irene had taken Saint Sebastian away from the scene of the archer’s attack, and she is joined by two other women in caring for his wounds. Chronologically, this painting takes place following the Terbrugghen example and three other women have joined Saint Irene; they are caring for Saint Sebastian as a team. Saint Sebastian is far from an active participant in his own survival in this painting, and there is nothing to suggest supernatural events in this work. This painting and others like it are striking in that there are no miracles being performed; furthermore, none of the excessively dramatic themes that are often thought to define religious art in the age of Catholic Reform are present in this painting that was completed during the Baroque years.

Figure 3.5 Georges de la Tour, Saint Sebastian Tended by Irene, 1649, oil on canvas, 160 x 129 cm.

Completed between 1624 and 1626, Giovanni Battista Vanni’s Saint Sebastian Cured by the Holy Women has many elements in common with the previous two examples, but is the most theologically ambiguous of the three examples in this section. In addition to the figures of Saint Sebastian and the holy women, the painting also contains two angel-like figures coming from the clouds. As mentioned in the section pertaining to Saint Sebastian as an intercessor in the late medieval celestial hierarchy, clouds were also iconographic symbols for plague; therefore, this painting may be an example of a mix of plague iconography as well as a message about women—and Christians in general—helping each other in times of need.

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\[^{69}\text{Dinan, 81.}\]
Of the three examples used in this section, this painting is most illustrative of the religious ambiguity of the Age of Reform; like the images that would have been theologically acceptable to Protestants, this image could have been created for a patron who was not completely aware of all of the intricacies of post-Trent Catholic thought. It is unlikely that the iconographical ambiguity in this painting was a result of the artist’s ignorance of the Council’s decrees—Vanni studied under Jacopo da Empoli, who created the first martyr image that was analyzed in this chapter. All nuances aside, this painting does fall under the larger theme of paintings in which Saint Sebastian was aided by others, and would have been viewed by contemporary Christians as an example of how they should aid their fellow believers in times of need.

Thus, images of Saint Sebastian being aided by Saint Irene or other holy women did not seek to establish a new role for Saint Sebastian himself, but instead sought to use his image to create didactic images that were at once an illustration of Christians aiding each other in times of need and a commentary on the success of un-cloistered female religious orders. This type of imagery was also an opportunity for the Church to provide context to Saint Sebastian’s martyrdom story, thus eliminating some of the miraculous elements of the story. For the larger arc of Saint Sebastian’s interpretation in the Catholic Reformation, this type of imagery is illustrative of the changes that were occurring in the secular as well as sacred spheres of early modern Europe. By creating a place for Saint Sebastian that did not directly associate him with any active role pertaining to plague, the Church was responding to the changing mindsets about the nature of pandemic disease that were a result of the beginnings of Enlightenment thought.
BY EXAMINING PAINTINGS OF SAINT SEBASTIAN that were created between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, it can be concluded that these paintings can offer a window into the changing ways in which martyr saints were interpreted throughout the reform movements that occurred in early modern Europe. Separating this larger period into three distinct sections—the late medieval Church, the Protestant Reformations, and the Catholic Reformations—allows for the themes of each period to be identified. This also allows for each period’s interpretations of Saint Sebastian to be compiled together as a reflection of larger issues facing the early modern Church and its followers; namely, the Scientific Revolution and the development of Enlightenment thought.

Peter Burke suggests that “saints are indeed cultural indicators, a sort of historical litmus paper sensitive to the connections between religion and society.”70 In the late medieval period, the development of Saint Sebastian’s different roles was indicative of the late medieval Church’s need to provide comfort to believers who were not only facing death on an unprecedented scale, but did so without the social and religious structures that had been devised to aid Christians in dying what was considered to be a good death. By being interpreted as a martyr who had survived an onslaught of arrows, the iconographical symbol of divinely-sent disease, late medieval Christians saw a metaphorical triumph over the plague. This idea was further explored in devotional images that featured Saint Sebastian in the guise of the “Man of Sorrows”; these images served as an example of how one could die a Christian death. These images were especially influential due to the collapse of religious hierarchies designed to educate late medieval Christians about how to die correctly when faced with pestilence.

What is more, the late medieval period also saw Saint Sebastian as a figure who could actively intercede on behalf of humanity to halt the spread of plague. This role was a further reflection of the idea that God was punishing human sin with the Black Death, but God could perhaps be persuaded to halt the scourge if holy figures such as Saint Sebastian appealed to God on behalf of humanity. The final way in which Saint Sebastian was possibly interpreted in the late medieval period was as an autonomous plague halter who could stop the spread of pestilence even after God had decided to make it descent on humankind.

As a form of “historical litmus paper” of the late medieval period, paintings of Saint Sebastian illustrate that the church did not fundamentally alter core theologies to meet the needs of the struggling laity, but the interpretation of his cult stretched the limits of what the late medieval Church officially believed. These roles are also indicative of the astonishing degree to which the Black Death devastated late medieval society as a whole. The church was actively interpreting traditional aspects of Christianity as means of comforting the laity in a time where societal structures were devastated. During this time, the laity was also actively examining the ways in which they understood the pestilence, and how to deal with its effects.

Moving into the Age of Reform, Saint Sebastian’s various images also serve as a window into the nature of the Protestant Reformations and the way in which these movements affected the relationship between religion and society. The cult of saints and its inflated role in the late medieval Church was one of the reasons for which reformers such as Martin Luther attacked the practices of the Latin Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, the ever-present nature of plague outbreaks in early modern Europe meant that Saint Sebastian continued to be a popular spiritual figure even as the Protestant Reformations were well underway. In response to the church’s view of the saints that he vehemently opposed, Martin Luther devised a new definition of saint that declared all Christians to be simultaneously sinners and saints.

70 Burke, 142.
This new interpretation, as well as the iconoclastic nature of many of the Protestant movements, should have theoretically resulted in an absence of Saint Sebastian images that were in line with Protestant ideals. However, individual reformers such as Luther adopted a moderate stance pertaining to religious art, and indicated that it was acceptable if it served a didactic rather than a purely aesthetic purpose. What is more, individual artists such as Jusep de Ribera created images of Saint Sebastian that were not necessarily approved by any of the Protestant movements, but which were absent of overtly Catholic imagery to which the reformers were vehemently opposed. These images reflect ideals of repentance, humility before God, and a personal relationship with the divine built through prayer. These images of Saint Sebastian that are illustrative of the shared ideals of the Protestant and Catholic movements serve as a window into the ambiguous nature of reform implementations, as well as to the economic realities facing artists in the early modern period.

Concerning the Catholic Reformation movements, the Tridentine Church sought to redefine its own definition of what sort of duties a saint could perform, and applied this definition to individual saints. This effort was occurring around the same time in which artists such as Ribera were exploring ways to make images of Saint Sebastian that would be acceptable to multiple factions of Christianity. The reformation of individual saints was a topic of discussion at the Council of Trent, and the decrees resulting from the Council laid out specific steps for redefining the roles of each individual saint, as well as guidelines for the manner in which these newly reexamined saints were to be depicted in artwork that the Tridentine Church so effectively used in a didactic manner. Under the auspices of this new legislation, Saint Sebastian’s four roles from the late medieval Church were reduced to two, with a new emphasis of one more in which he played a passive role.

Saint Sebastian was a sort of “historical litmus paper” to the Catholic Reformations in that his role was reduced as part of a larger effort to redefine the cult of saints in a manner consistent with core theologies, and the paintings in which he was being served help to illuminate the value of helping others propagated by the Tridentine Church. In the art of the Tridentine Church, Saint Sebastian was clearly established as both a Christian martyr as well as a model for Christian death. Both of these roles clearly illustrate that Saint Sebastian’s heavenly capabilities were subservient to Christ and God; this was a possible response to late medieval interpretations of Saint Sebastian’s cult that were believed to have stretched the boundaries of what was theologically acceptable in the Latin Church. Saint Sebastian’s third role in the Tridentine Church was rather indirect; he was depicted as receiving aid from holy women after he was shot by the archers. This type of imagery helped to accomplish a number of the Church’s goals; by ascribing to the Council of Trent’s decree to de-emphasize unauthorized miracles, these paintings illustrated the value placed on the idea of everyday Christians helping each other in times of need.

The changing themes of Saint Sebastian paintings from the late medieval period, the Protestant Reformations and the Catholic Reformations reveal his changing role from that of a multi-purpose plague saint to a subservient member of the cult of saints whose image was used to support the ideal of helping one’s neighbor. This reformation of Saint Sebastian’s image can be seen as a “historical litmus paper” indicator of the changing relationship between the secular and sacred spheres as European society began to explore the ideas of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. This was especially significant when considering the effect that these movements had on how early modern European Christians viewed disease.

As the seventeenth century progressed, early modern Christians became less likely to believe that plague was divinely sent as punishment for sin. This was due to increased knowledge about the contagious nature of pandemic disease; new theories about how disease was spread helped discredit the idea that Saint Sebastian was needed to intercede in order to
stop the plague. Saint Sebastian’s late medieval role as an intercessor was no longer emphasized in the later years of the Tridentine Church, and there was no longer any hint of the idea that Saint Sebastian himself could halt the onslaught of pestilence. Instead, Saint Sebastian served a visible example of how Christians should serve each other in times of sickness, rather than search for ways to appease God. Thus, the reformation of Saint Sebastian’s image reflects the changing relationship between religion and society amid movements of religious reform in the late medieval and early modern periods.

Rachel Barclay '11 wrote this essay for the requirements of the Senior Honors Project (History 493). She used some of her time while enrolled in Luther’s Münster Program to take photographs of relevant paintings and carry out some research toward this project. This essay won the Department’s Fosso Prize for 2011.
Orchards in the Desert: How Irrigation Shaped the Development of the Yakima Valley

Callie Mabry

“Should I state what wonderful things I have seen and of the things I have heard and re-heard concerning the productiveness of our farms in the growth of all sorts of produce, I am satisfied that what I should say would not be believed: for a great majority of people cannot appreciate how much more productive land is when watered by means of irrigation, than when watered by the rainfall.”¹ These words, uttered by Margaret J. Cline in 1901, reflect the widely held belief that irrigation was a way of improving an otherwise wasted space, which advanced the development of vast irrigation systems in the Yakima Valley of Washington State (See Appendices I and II). Nestled between large, brown, shrubby, chaparral hills on the east and west, the Yakima valley is covered in luscious, fertile, green orchards (See Appendix III). There appears to be little water to produce this abundance, as a rain shadow from the Cascade Mountains causes this region to receive less than 10 inches of annual precipitation. The Yakima Valley is well known for being a leading agricultural producer of apples, hops, peaches, pears, sweet cherries, vineyard grapes and other crops. The fertile, loamy soils from nearby volcanic mountains, the hot summers, and the nearly 300 days of sunshine per year make this valley an ideal place to grow such produce (See Appendix IV). The Yakima River and its tributaries which run through the valley are the main sources of water for the thriving agricultural business. The watershed has undergone numerous changes as European Americans settled the valley to construct irrigation canals to supply their crops. Beginning in the 1860’s and culminating in the early 1900’s, numerous irrigation systems were constructed in the valley, diverting the water of the Yakima River and its tributaries. Over the twentieth century, irrigation and subsequent agricultural production developed at increasingly larger scales, vastly affecting both the ecosystem and the people inhabiting the valley. Indeed, the radical changes to the environment brought about by irrigation systems in Yakima, Washington, had enormous implications for shaping the social structures of the valley. While irrigation also influenced economics and politics, these structures reciprocally affected the feasibility of irrigation systems and the orchard economy built around them.

Irrigation had its roots in the desires of early settlers to make the land habitable, but it was not until federal water management projects came to fruition that irrigation became the lifeblood of agriculture in the region. While irrigation was used by Native Americans and early missionaries in the 1850s, it was not until the 1890s when farmers constructed the Kennewonk canal and other private investment companies were formed that irrigation became essential for agriculture. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the creation of water storage and diversion projects proliferated, culminating in numerous canals and five storage reservoirs located at the headwaters of the Yakima River.² With the increased availability of water, farmers were able to transition from feed crops such as alfalfa to more specialized orchard production of fruit, gradually making the change since the initial investment in orchards is high and there is a delay in the returns.

The implementation of irrigation systems changed the landscape dramatically. Before the settlers began cultivating the land, the valley was known as “an arid district, the land in its natural condition producing nothing but sagebrush and the very scantiest supply of grass...”\(^3\) The clearing of land for canal passage as well as the replacement of native vegetation with nonnative crops and trees depleted habitats for certain organisms. Additionally, depending on the irrigation method used, a great deal of topsoil washed back into the water supply. When farmers flooded their fields to water their crops and then drained them, the water carried rich fertile soil with it. The water velocity housed within some of the earlier canals, before concrete was used, eroded the banks of the canal, causing water seepage and a loss of the precious liquid resource into non-cultivated areas. In the dry summer months, especially in drought years such as in 1903-1904, and before proper oversight was instituted, water would often be over-allocated to diversions and the river would dry up, causing aquatic life to perish.\(^4\) Dam construction at the headwaters of the Yakima basin before the 1950s failed to account for fish ladders and as a result, many fish populations, such as the culturally important salmon to Yakama Indians, diminished.\(^5\) More recently, since irrigation water often seeps from the fields back into the watershed, the water quality and chemical composition of the valley has been affected by the use of agricultural pesticides. Nitrates and phosphates have been found, often in concentrations exceeding EPA desired levels to prevent eutrophication in 2000.\(^6\) Although irrigation was generally seen as a positive development that made the land more productive and useful, there were many unforeseen ecological and social consequences that manifested themselves in other areas of life for people in the Yakima Valley.

Early settlers arrived with the ideology that changing the landscape was betterment for society, especially since the Yakima Valley had the potential to be highly productive with water added. Some farmers even promoted that the lack of rain in the climate made harvest easier because crops could be kept outside without the possibility of rain.\(^7\) The influx of settlers who shaped the social institutions which supported irrigation of the valley, largely farmers from the Midwest, was made possible by the construction of railroad access to the area. Furthermore, the railroad opened up new markets, lands and jobs which were lucrative reasons to emigrate.\(^8\) Not only did the railroad encourage people to emigrate, it also provided access to markets so that fruit could be shipped all over the Pacific Northwest and Midwest.\(^9\) The Northern Pacific Railroad arrived in the Yakima Valley in the mid-1880s and was given about half of the land in the valley, including tracts on the Yakama Reservation.\(^10\) Early emigrants lived closed to rivers and were ranchers, following the pattern argued by Worster that occurs during the incipience phase as settlers began to make the land habitable, but did not yet have the infrastructure in place to build extensive irrigation systems. For many of the early settlers, irrigation was seen as a necessary instrument for the advancement of civilization and thus culture. An early booster pamphlet argued this by saying, “As primitive

\(^10\) Pfaff, *Harvest of Plenty*, 8.; What is now Union Gap, Washington was originally known as Yakima City. When the railroad arrived, out of fear of being by passed economically, most of the city moved to what was known as North Yakima (present day Yakima) until the official name was shortened to “Yakima”.

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man outgrew nature’s fertile spots, there being no rain but springs and streams, he led those from their channels to the surrounding soil, and caused it to produce abundant harvest.”

The conversion of sagebrush shrub lands to cultivation was seen and continues to be seen as a “successful” and triumphant enterprise rather than a tragic loss of habitat for both the Yakama tribe and flora and fauna. As water historians John Donahue and Barbara Rose Johnston assert, “the story of water is all too often a story of conflict and struggle between the forces of self-interest and opportunity associated with ‘progress’ and the community-based values and needs of traditional ways of life.”

The progress associated with white settlement and cultivation ultimately destroyed many facets of the traditional ways of life for the Yakama Indians.

The members of the Yakama Nation were greatly impacted by the irrigation culture, which affected their mobility, food cultivation and cultural traditions. What allowed the initial settlers into the valley was the settlement and forced agrarian lifestyles of the Yakama Indians with the 1855 Treaty with the Yakama Nation. By 1865 the tribe had approximately 1,000 acres irrigated and in 1896 the Indian Bureau constructed an irrigation ditch on the reservation, further supporting the shift of Yakama lifestyles to crop growing. Furthermore, the Yakama Indians received 80 acre tracts of lands from the reservation and could lease three quarters of it to whites; in 1906, the Jones Law authorized Yakama Indians to sell portions of their land to the Reclamation Bureau, which was further evidence of their culture being degraded.

The construction of a canal through the reservation in 1903 was a clear violation of the 1855 treaty which appropriated land to the nation, but little was done in response to this violation until 1914, when Congress realized that “Indians had been unjustly deprived of the portion of the waters of the Yakima River to which they [were] entitled. That same year, the Wapato Project gave water rights and reparations to the reservation.

The story of the Yakima Nation’s displacement echoes the fates of other Native American tribes in the United States at approximately the same time that were forced to move in order to expand white settlement and agriculture.

Besides forced settlement and changed lifestyles, the Yakama were also deprived of some of their cultural means of obtaining food. Some methods of irrigation failed to account for fish, and allowed pesticide laden water to return to the watershed, changing the chemical composition of the waters and thus harming the fish. During World War II, security was tightened around the reservoirs for fear of domestic terrorism, which also restricted Yakama access to the salmon catch. Positive steps in the right direction occurred in the 1970s, when the Yakama tribe was given the right to half of the salmon catch of the Yakima River through a court decision and measures were implemented to protect salmon habitat.

The Yakama Indians were not the only ones to feel the social effects of irrigation; the need for the autumnal arrival of Hispanic migrant workers as extra laborers during the harvest season has brought numerous Hispanic people to the Yakima Valley and changed the ethnic composition of the region. The agricultural industry produced by irrigation has also caused the social effect of a large permanent Hispanic population which has changed the

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12 Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, 143.
14 Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, 7. According to Pfaff, it was implied in the treaty that the Yakama would settle into an agrarian lifestyle.
15 Ibid.
16 Jayne, Irrigation in the Yakima Valley, 12; Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, 32.
17 Ibid., 23,75.
18 Ibid., 75.
19 Ibid., 138.
demographics of the region.\textsuperscript{20} Since a large part of the arable land in the Yakima Valley is orchard, the inherent, labor requirement structure of orchard production requires vast amounts of labor during the harvest and less during the rest of the year.\textsuperscript{21} Early settlers lauded this aspect of orcharding as an advantage because other crops could be grown throughout the rest of the year.\textsuperscript{22} However, as the tracts of land held by an individual grew larger and farmers specialized in growing certain crops, the labor requirements grew. By WWII, with an increase in demand for food production and shortage of labor, workers were recruited through newspaper advertisements throughout Washington at first, and then recruitment spread to Mexico after a labor agreement was negotiated between the U.S. and Mexico.\textsuperscript{23} Initially, farmers “praised” workers as “saviors of the valley” because there was so much to harvest and needed all of the workers they could get.\textsuperscript{24} Workers, or “braceros,” had legally binding labor contracts that guaranteed them some rights in housing, but toward the end of the war, the braceros’ rights were exploited.\textsuperscript{25} Today, approximately 35% of the population of the city of Yakima identifies as Hispanic and nearly 30% speak a language other than English at home.\textsuperscript{26} It has been noted that the working conditions in the orchards are strenuous, requiring bending over to pick certain crops or climbing ladders to pick fruit. Workers can also be accidentally exposed to pesticides and chemicals.\textsuperscript{27} The changing demographics since the 1940s and the annual shift in population causes social tensions in the valley, which may correlate with the changing cultural composition of the valley or may be coincidental, but as an 1992 article in the \textit{Economist} declared, “Once a quiet pastoral and mostly white, the Yakima valley is now sharply divided by economics, politics and race. Increasing urbanism in Yakima itself has brought drugs, gangs and a jump in crime. Much of it is blamed on the new arrivals.”\textsuperscript{28} Not only did the addition of white, Euro-American settlers change the social makeup of the Yakima Valley around the turn of the twentieth century, the later addition of a large Hispanic population also changed the social structures of the valley, or at least they way that they were perceived.

Political decisions, both at the state and federal level, greatly affected the development of irrigation based agriculture. The earliest attempt at government encouragement of the ideology of settling “wasted,” unused agricultural land was in 1877 with the Desert Lands Act. This act gave settlers 640 acres of arid land under the condition that they irrigate it within three years, but was ineffective because there were high startup costs and it was difficult to irrigate without a broader irrigation system in place.\textsuperscript{29} In 1890, Washington State allowed irrigation districts to form in order to “issue bonds to cover operating costs” of irrigation projects and thus provide for some of the larger infrastructure


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Washington Irrigation Company, Sunnyside}, 9.

\textsuperscript{23} Gamboa, “Mexican Migration into Washington State,” \textit{The Pacific Northwest Quarterly}, 121, 123.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, 124.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, 124-125.


\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{29} Pfaff, \textit{Harvest of Plenty}, 17.
the Desert Lands Act overlooked. In 1894, the Carey Act gave western states one million acres of public domain land to settle and irrigate, determining that it was the responsibility of the states rather than the national government to develop irrigation. This political system changed with the passage of the National Reclamation Act of 1902. This act gave the Secretary of the Interior the power to locate and build irrigation systems in the western United States, funded by the sale of public lands. After the irrigation systems were built, the public land surrounding them was to be sold in relatively small parcels to encourage family settlement. This act marked the pivotal transition point between a society that water historian Donald Worster would argue was the transition from the beginning or “incipience” stage of irrigation to the “florescence” phase, when the American West began to distinguish itself from previous hydraulic societies by extending the scale of water control and manipulation. Worster poignantly insisted that the National Reclamation Act of 1902 “has been the most important single piece of legislation in the history of the West, overshadowing even the Homestead Act in the consequences it has had for the region’s life. The West, more than any other American region, was built by state power, state expertise, state technology and state bureaucracy.” While the incentive for irrigation was strongly motivated by the ideology of the time period, that transforming desert habitats was testimony to the triumph of man over nature, irrigation arguably could not have happened to the extent that it did without federal funding and land.

The involvement of the federal government in irrigation in the Yakima Valley and western United States in general allowed the system to expand and tend toward the interests of large producers. In spite of the estimated 400,000 acres of irrigable land in the Yakima Valley, the Reclamation Bureau was initially hesitant to propose projects in the Yakima Valley, due to already existing private irrigation companies with which they would compete and the large amount of privately owned land that they would have to take into public domain. However, many citizens voiced support and sent letters to the Department of Agriculture articulating their requests for irrigation. In contrast to the original stipulations in the 1902 Reclamation Act that the benefits of the act would be to family farmers, the 1911 Warren Act allowed the Secretary of the Interior to sell extra storage water to corporations and associations under certain conditions. With these acts, the water management policy was on its way to becoming what Worster would classify as “empire,” when government leadership and private investment are intertwined in the economic and political systems because of their prominent roles. Without the higher network of support, wide scale irrigation that would have benefited the average small farmer was out of reach. However, the involvement of the government soon allowed the scope of irrigation to enlarge so much that mostly favored the interests of large agricultural producers. The Yakima Valley, when viewed as a microcosm for the arid U.S. West, illustrates the power that the federal government involvement can have in shaping not only the social, political and economic systems but also the very environment itself.

Political considerations affecting the viability of irrigation often went hand in hand with economic factors. One of the most important economic factors that aided in the expansion of the scope of irrigation and agriculture was the increased size of land holdings,

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 17.
32 Ibid., 19.
34 Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, 21.
36 Jayne, Irrigation in the Yakima Valley, 3
Orchards in the Desert

especially by corporations. After World War I, there was a farm depression because of the decreased demand for food production after the war.\(^{37}\) The Great Depression caused financial strains on the irrigation projects because many communities were unable to make repayments to the Reclamation Bureau; however, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) also helped expand irrigation during this time.\(^{38}\) The political effects of the New Deal during the Great Depression era were significant as many (CCC) workers were instrumental in building the five storage dams at the headwaters of the Yakima River. By the 1940s, the economy of the Yakima Valley was “based almost entirely upon irrigation, by means of which thousands of acres of land, formerly semi-arid and covered with sagebrush, [had] been transformed into farms, villages, and cities, providing a livelihood for approximately 100,000 people.”\(^{39}\) World War II not only caused some of the water management projects to fall into disrepair due to a lack of maintenance labor, but it also caused increased security for fear of domestic terrorism.\(^{40}\) The value of land increased after World War II, providing large profits to speculators.\(^{41}\) Some historians, such as Christine Pfaff, argue that over the entire history of irrigation in the valley, irrigation has had the positive effect of allowing new homes and businesses to be built because of the prosperity of agriculture produced by irrigation, while others, such as the Economist article, would argue that “all of the wealth [goes] to growers and packers” instead of the labor force of the valley.\(^{42}\)

Besides the 1902 Reclamation Act, some of the most significant political effects on the watershed of the Yakima Valley were environmental legislation enacted in the 1970s, including the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the Clean Water Act of 1972, which brought awareness to the issue of degraded fish habitats.\(^{43}\) In an attempt to restore these habitats and also address other water quality issues, the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Act of 1979 sought to increase fish populations and stream flows, provide water to less priority users even during dry years, allotting more water to the Yakima Indian Reservation and increasing the efficiency of the canal systems.

The feasibility of irrigation agriculture in the Yakima Valley was and continues to be affected by external factors of the market for agricultural products, as well as the overhead costs to maintain agriculture in the arid valley. Irrigation is a costly endeavor because the system is inherently unnatural and therefore involves a great deal of maintenance and repair to keep the water and plants from wearing down the structures and breaking out of captivity. The orchard agriculture which much of the irrigation supports also has high operating costs. Planting an orchard has a high opportunity cost because the farmer does not see any returns until the trees mature. Orchardists are at the mercy of fruit prices because of the lack of other economic options when prices are unfavorable, since orchards are a very permanent crop and “farmers are reluctant to pull established orchards because the only way to realize on the investment in trees is to continue production.”\(^{44}\)

The watershed of the Yakima Valley has undergone numerous changes since European settlers came westward with the ideology that all land ought to be cultivated and began using irrigation. Some of these changes have negatively impacted the ecosystem and groups of people such as the Yakama Nation. However, some people have benefited from the strong agricultural economics in the valley. Societies that rely heavily on irrigation (with the

\(^{37}\) Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, 85.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 90.

\(^{39}\) Hurd, Economic Conditions, 5.

\(^{40}\) Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, 89.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 120.

\(^{42}\) “Bad Apples?” Economist; Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, vii.

\(^{43}\) Pfaff, Harvest of Plenty, 138.

\(^{44}\) Hurd, Economic Conditions, 10.
Yakima Valley as a case study, face risks when the watershed can no longer supply them with enough water to meet their needs. Events in the political spheres shaped the ability of irrigation to grow as it did, and now the Yakima Valley has arguably reached the point where government support of irrigation and the economic success of the valley are inextricably linked.

Callie Mabry ’14 wrote this essay as part of the assigned writing for Environmental History (History 291) in Fall Term 2011.
Appendix I: Map of Yakima Valley

Appendix II


This map more clearly shows the Tieton River, which is also an important tributary to the Yakima River.
Appendix III: Photo of irrigated crops and arid hills.

Appendix IV: Map of Agricultural Uses of the Yakima Valley

This map from the US Geological Survey water quality report illustrates the various agricultural uses of the Yakima Valley.

OLIVER BROWN WAS AN INTERESTING PLAINTIFF. He worked as a boxcar repairman and welder, and no part of his background suggested that he would ever become the face of an African American community struggling for equal education and civil rights, but that became his legacy.

Brown and his family lived in Topeka, Kansas, a town that, in 1954, hosted a large African American community that was mostly segregated. In order to get to Monroe Elementary where one of Brown’s daughters, Linda, attended school, she was forced to walk over a mile in each direction every day. Interestingly, on her walk to school she passed Sumner Elementary, an all-white school, which was much closer to the Brown’s home than Monroe.

Earlier that summer, registration notices had been placed in mailboxes throughout the Brown’s neighborhood, which was one of the only racially-mixed parts of Topeka. Thus, one morning in 1950, Brown brought Linda to Sumner and was directed to the principal’s office where he asked for the admittance of his daughter to Sumner. When he came out, he was “quite upset,” Linda recalled. Linda had been denied admission to Sumner on the basis of racial segregation; blacks were not to be allowed in Sumner Elementary. What followed became one of the greatest legal and civil battles that this nation has seen.

May 17, 1954 became a day worth celebrating for African Americans and supporters of desegregation. It marked the tremendous legal victory of Brown v. Board of Education and for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its law team, the Legal Defense Fund (LDF). Two decades of planning and litigation had apparently paid off, but not everyone was in high spirits. Thurgood Marshall, the chief architect of the case and director of the LDF, was not so certain that much had been won. “You fools go ahead and have your fun,” he said to partygoers, “but we ain’t begun to work yet.” This was a peculiar statement, but one that ended up being incredibly accurate. Nothing had been won yet.

Politicians, lawyers, scholars, and activists alike hail Brown as one of the greatest legal victories of the twentieth century. Brown overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and with it, desegregation was to be ushered into American public schools. The case was supposed to knock down the barriers of racial inequality and serve as a vehicle for the advancement of the civil rights movement, but it did not. Instead, the Supreme Court’s hands-off approach to Brown empowered whites across the nation by allowing local governments to decide for themselves the force and extent to which desegregation ought to be implemented. Though some states responded positively, several others, specifically in the Deep South, did not. As a result, the case directly threatened the socioeconomic well being of Black America in several ways. For instance, the aftermath of Brown left nearly half of the African American public educators across the Deep South without employment, helped develop the concept of busing, and removed whites from urban

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2 Ibid, pp. 410.
3 Lerone Bennett, Confrontation: Black and White (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1965), 221-222.
centers across America. Therefore, the influence of Brown was hugely dampened and achieved only modest advancements toward obtaining civil rights for African Americans. Therefore, though Brown was certainly a legal achievement, what followed did not greatly assist the African American struggle. At most, Brown aroused increased activism in the fight for civil rights as it provided a firm, legal stance for blacks and the desegregationist to shout from. However, that said, Brown quickly evolved into a case that assisted its white adversaries and enlivened Jim Crow.

This notion became clear a year following the Supreme Court’s verdict of Brown II on May 31, 1955. Brown II provided the guidelines and rules of implementation to be followed by individual states in carrying out Brown to desegregate America’s public schools. This time, however, the NAACP and Marshall’s LDF were not successful. In his closing statement, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced that at the local level, states must pursue desegregation “on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed.” The terminology “with all deliberate speed” came under intense scrutinization. This phrase was originally used in 1912 in Graham v. West Virginia, a unique case between two states about disagreements over who owned which land and buildings following the split of Virginia in 1863. In it, the Court ruled that it was unreasonable to expect immediate action in the matter or from state officials where such officials did not control the processes necessary to achieve total compliance. Following his retirement, Justice Sherman Minton, a member of the Supreme Court during the Brown trial, offered his opinion on the controversial phrase. He stated that the words were the result of “long and careful consideration” and that they were drafted specifically to provide lower courts with additional time to adjust to the Supreme Court’s ruling. In Chief Justice Warren’s view, “with all deliberate speed” was implemented to “consider problems related to administration . . . the school plant, the school transportation system . . . and revision of local laws and regulations which may be necessary in solving the foregoing problems.”

Nevertheless, this phrasing was detrimental to Brown. Brown II rejected the LDF’s plea that desegregation be ordered immediately and decided in favor of the attorney general and the states that authorized segregated schooling. This essentially gave the states the power to decide desegregation in public schools on their own. No timetable was ever devised by the Supreme Court; only that desegregation must be completed “with all deliberate speed.” This greatly disempowered African Americans from making forward progress. Now, the poor socioeconomic status of a large population of African Americans was no longer a result of denied equality. This was due to the fact that Brown explicitly determined that segregated schools were inherently unequal. Therefore, any failure on the part of African American communities to secure for their youth equal and integrated educational facilities was no longer viewed as a fault of the American system. Instead, “it marked a personal failure to take advantage of one’s definitionally equal status.”

“WITH ALL DELIBERATE SPEED,” Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and the subsequent Brown II (1955) ruling laid the initial groundwork for court-ordered desegregation in

7 Ibid., 218-219.
8 Ibid., 220.
America’s primary and secondary public schools. The Court insisted that this unique method for compliance was implemented in order to allow for the necessary administrative changes that would be required for a transforming school system. However, as was later proven, the Supreme Court “failed to realize the depth or nature of the segregation problem.” Therefore, by attempting to regulate the pace that desegregation ought to move so as to show a sense of understanding for the white South, the Court “not only failed to develop a willingness to comply, but instead aroused the hope that resistance to the constitutional imperative would succeed.”

These methods of resistance formed in politics, urban centers, and the schools themselves.

_Though issues with implementation of Brown_ were not confined solely to the South, many of the problems lay here. Some southern states did, actually, take steps to comply with the Supreme Court’s 1954 verdict. Shortly following the ruling, Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and North Carolina announced that various school board meetings had resulted in detailed planning for desegregating the district. Integration generally moved quite smoothly in these states for two reasons. First, these particular southern states hosted a drastically smaller black population than did the Deep South. For example, in 1960, six years following _Brown_, African Americans made up 35% and 15% of South Carolina’s and Tennessee’s population, respectively. Second, in the southern states that quickly complied with the May 17, 1954 ruling, there lay a unique willingness amongst whites to pursue desegregation that was simply non-existent in the Deep South. This was due to the simple fact that the black population was not as dense in these states and therefore the “threat” of integration was perceived as far less. Therefore, school boards found it much easier to comply with the Court’s ruling.

However, such steps were not taken everywhere. Especially in the Deep South, _Brown_’s verdict was generally ignored. Sixteen months following the May 17, 1954 decision, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina all had shown absolutely no indication that they were going to comply. Instead, these states began drafting their own legislation in attempt to hinder _Brown_’s affect. This was possible because of _Brown II_’s failure to provide a definite timetable for desegregation, allowing southern states to orchestrate their own interpretations of the ruling.

Mississippi Governor-elect James Coleman was one such interpreter. He contended that Mississippi’s way of life was being contested by “individuals of whom not a one ever lived in our state.” His goal was to preserve segregation by legal means, and essentially he argued that segregation was legally obtainable in Mississippi. To do so, Coleman and his delegates implemented a “pupil assignment plan.” It argued that if the assignment of children to school according to race was unconstitutional, then the appropriate relief was to assign them on a basis other than race, such as health, aptitude, and intelligence. In actuality, this

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11 Bell, _Silent Covenants . . .”_ 95.
12 Ibid, 95.
15 Ibid.
16 James Coleman, “Meeting the School Crisis: An Address by Attorney General J.P. Coleman,” delivered over the facilities of TV Station WLBT, Jackson, MS, June 1, 1954.
“individual assignment” of students on the basis of a variety of vague criteria obscured the fact that the true basis of pupil assignment was race. For example, in Virginia, school authorities considered thousands of possible placements yet discovered that not one black student qualified to be placed in a white school.19

Therefore, this method greatly assisted Mississippi and other southern states in resisting court-ordered desegregation. In fact it was so successful that by the late 1950s pupil placement plans had become the South’s standard response to Brown.20 Even the courts wrongfully viewed pupil placement as a useful tool for integration. The Supreme Court made this clear in Shuttlesworth v. Birmingham Board of Education (1958). Here, the Court ruled: “The School Placement Law furnishes the legal machinery for an orderly administration of the public schools in a constitutional manner by the admission of qualified pupils upon a basis of individual merit without regard to their race or color. We must presume that it will be so administered.”21 By doing so, the justices effectively upheld Alabama’s pupil placement plan and for years allowed segregation to prevail in the Deep South without any material advancements.

In addition to the pupil placement plan, another method frequently utilized by the Deep South in evading court-ordered segregation was the “equalization program.” Similar to the pupil placement plan, it sought to keep blacks from seeking and achieving integration following the Brown decree. To do so, the equalization program provided African Americans with increased state monies to improve the educational facilities in the community.22 Often times, black school officials and communities welcomed this equilibrium approach as it provided new or renovated buildings.23 Moreover, the schools were closer to home and thus safer for the children to attend.

Although the equalization programs brought some real improvements to the educational facilities of black youth, there were significant faults in the system as well. For instance, school buildings usually were constructed poorly and rarely maintained. Students and teachers complained of overcrowding and lack of funds, issues white students did not face.24 Funding was so disproportionate, in fact, that in only three of Mississippi’s 151 school districts were equal funds distributed to the black and white schools.25 Clearly, then, white students were favored despite the “equalization programs.” In fact, an unpublished 1962 State Department of Education report discovered that statewide, the average Mississippi school district spent $4 in local instruction funds on each white student for every $1 expended on each black student.26 In some districts, the gap was even wider. For example, in Amite County in 1962, $70.45 was spent on each white student annually, while just $2.24 was spent on each black student.27 Even further, at the all-black high school in Ruleville, Mississippi, the “library” in 1964 contained just six incomplete sets of encyclopedias and a dictionary.28 This blatant imbalance in funding and facilities was detrimental to black students and

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20 Ibid, 73.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid, 78-79.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid, 87.
28 Ibid, 88.
canceled out much of the potential for academic growth that they otherwise may have enjoyed.

As support for Brown and desegregation escalated, many whites simply left school districts that housed large black populations that were vulnerable to integration. They moved by the thousands to suburban areas in order to escape court-ordered desegregation. Though accompanied by a growing middle-class, enlarged family size due to the baby boom of World War Two, and increased crime and violence, integration was seemingly the primary motive to flee. 29

At any rate, white migration out of the cities and into rural areas occurred on a massive scale throughout the 1960s and 70s. As former white residents vacated the area, African American families purchased the homes. As a result, the black population in urban centers began to soar at this time. In fact, by the start of the 1980s, half of America’s black children “resided in the twenty to thirty largest school districts” in the nation. 30 On average, sixty percent of the students in these districts were African American, and only a few schools contained a majority of white students. 31 One of the most remarkable changes occurred in Los Angeles. Here, the proportion of white students in the district had dropped off so dramatically that between 1963 and 1988 the percent of white students fell from sixty-five percent to seventeen percent. 32

This created two key problems for integrationists. First, white flight created more segregated housing than had previously existed. When whites had lived primarily in the cities segregated housing was still prevalent, but now whites moved out of the cities and created their own suburban lifestyles completely separate from blacks. Therefore, housing segregation now occurred on a larger scale than before. This further hindered any positive influences that integration had in the classroom because at the end of the school day students still returned to their segregated neighborhoods. Second, white children were the “prospective objects” of school desegregation orders. With their absence, desegregation could be carried out only on a much smaller scale. 33

If white families preferred to stay within the urban centers, enrolling their children in private schools was a particularly effective method of avoiding integration. A notable example of this practice was evident in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Here, the school board authorized the desegregation of the Prince Edward County school district. In response, white families withdrew their children from the public school. 34 As a result, the white public school lacked a sufficient number of students and was forced to close. The black students that had been enrolled in the school then were left without a place to learn. The only alternative was to reenroll in the all-black school, and in the process circumvented the desegregation movement. Further, black taxpayers were still expected to pay for the white students’ private education despite the fact that their children were not permitted enrollment. 35 This was an enormous injustice to integrationists as it forced black residents to help finance the private education of white students while their own children remained out of school.

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29 Bell, Silent Covenant, 22.
30 Ibid, 110.
31 Ibid, 110.
32 Ibid, 110.
33 Ibid, 110.
34 Jill Ogline, A Mission to A Mad County: Black Determination, White Resistance and Educational Crisis in Prince Edward County, Virginia (2007), 120.
However, the practice of leaving public schools in favor of private education was greatly diminished by 1961. By this time, NAACP attorneys began filing legal motions in district courts requesting the condemnation of state and local scholarship grants and tax write-offs for contributions to the white private schools. The courts began returning verdicts that invalidated private education as a means of achieving segregation, and thus whites were better off utilizing other means of evading integration.

Court intervention within segregation rarely was with significant impact. And when it did have impact, it often was against the stance of African Americans. At least at first, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971) seemed different. In it, a case was brought against North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, which, in 1970, encompassed roughly 85,000 students of which 14,000 were black.36 The black students attended 21 different schools in the area, but all were incredibly segregated with less than one percent being non-black.37 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education argued that they were merely giving students the “right of choice” to decide where they wanted to attend school, but the Supreme Court argued that that was not good enough.38 Citing *Green v. County School Board* (1968) of New Kent County, Virginia, the Supreme Court required the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board to “come forward with a plan that promises realistically to work . . . now . . . until it is clear that state-imposed segregation has been completely removed.”39

What the school board arrived at was busing, arguably the most controversial tool used in attempt to achieve desegregation. From this point onward, busing was widely used as a tool of integration.

As discussed, white flight moved a vast number of urban white students out of the cities and into the suburbs. Generally, then, families favorable of desegregation were forced to transport their children from the black neighborhoods to white suburbia. Therefore, a system for busing was necessary.

The busing system operated similarly to how school buses do today. Students waited at a designated location, were picked up, and later brought to school. However, there were some clear differences. First, typically only black children were bused as the schools selected for integration were often in white neighborhoods. Therefore, at the end of each school day black students returned to their inner city, segregated homes. This nullified some of the positive effects desegregation had in the classroom as it reaffirmed the idea that African American students were only being integrated for their own advancement and thus were otherwise inferior to white students. Second, these students were often not brought to the nearest school, but typically to white-dominated districts in attempt to integrate black and white students. Here blacks were often the heavy minority and faced much of the same racism and discrimination that they faced prior to desegregation efforts. Black parents had no input on school policies in these areas and, because the schools were often miles away, rarely had opportunities to involve themselves in their children’s curriculum.40 Lastly, busing was largely unpopular even amongst blacks. According to a 1981 Gallup Poll, half of America’s black population believed that busing as a tool for achieving segregation had “caused more difficulties than it is worth.”41

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37 Ibid.
38 Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 87.
39 Cornell University Legal Information Institute, “Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg”
40 Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 112.
Further, busing frequently did not result in equal education, which was a primary goal for *Brown* supporters. In districts that required busing, and in some that did not, black children often entered the school under a “tracking” system. This system favored white students in that it admitted them to accelerated classes and school programs. However, black children were generally never placed into such programs. Instead, they were frequently relegated to inferior classes, teacher selection, and social activities. A specific example was found at all-white Brush Elementary School in Portland, Oregon. Here, twenty-four six to ten year old black students were bused to the school each day. From the start, these students were given little support in their academics. Ray Rist, an author who wrote a book about the tragedies at Brush titled *Invisible Children*, suggested that “white dominance of Brush School was so strong that the presence and contributions of black people were discounted. The black children confronted a school milieu that either rejected or ignored their existence.” The goal, Rist explained, was merely to achieve acceptable behavior from the black children. Academic improvement was never a priority. Thus, every day, the African American students emerged from the bus just to be made tolerable.

*A source crucial to the success* of white defense against school integration was the judicial system. As mentioned, the *Brown* verdict effectively empowered district and state courts to decide for themselves the speed and extent to which integration ought to be implemented. As a result, often times little progress was ever made as local courts often were dominated by whites who, assuming they wanted to keep their jobs, homes, and families intact, supported the opinions of the state’s general public. Therefore, though some states faced no tribulation in implementing *Brown*, others, specifically in the Deep South saw no progress toward desegregation even a decade following the original ruling of *Brown*.

Examples of court failure to apply *Brown* to their districts or states are numerous. For instance, in his book *Silent Covenants*, the prominent LDF attorney Derrick Bell discussed a personal encounter in Jackson, Mississippi during the summer of 1964, a decade following *Brown*. Here, Bell argued a typical case over the desegregation of Harmony School. He described the judge as being “particularly resistant to our suit, allowing the school board all manner of delays and expressing his disdain for us and our clients in most obnoxious ways.” The judge turned away from Bell and his colleagues as they spoke, overruled numerous objections while allowing all of the school board lawyers theirs, and allowed the school board to introduce a variety of irrelevant testimony and materials to their case. Generally, the judge made it clear both in his tone and his ultimate decision that he supported the “old pseudoscientific studies” that suggested black people were genetically inferior, and that the decision in *Brown* was erroneous and should be overruled at every level of law.

When local courts did implement measures that attacked segregation, not only were they frequently delayed for years, but they were often furiously in favor of the white point of view. Bell noted cases where he naively thought the white defendants were agreeing with his opinion on integration. Though, in reality, these same people often already prepared plans that would “ensure white patrons continued to enjoy priority in all matters of school policy.” For example, in many cases throughout the country, courts would rule to close

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42 Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 112.
46 Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 103-105.
47 Ibid, 103.
48 Ibid, 105.
49 Ibid, 106.
down one of two segregated schools in the same district. This gave the appearance that a type of merge would occur, but in reality only a few black students were ever admitted to the school and the rest denied on the basis that too many students jeopardized the educational value of those currently enrolled.\textsuperscript{50}

The most remarkable element about the Supreme Court during the first decade following \textit{Brown} was that it did so very little. Only when school districts resorted to violence or chaos did the Court feel obliged to intervene and make changes. What occurred at Little Rock High School in Little Rock, Arkansas during the 1957-58 school year serves as a notorious example. Arkansas’ Governor Orval Faubus called upon the Arkansas National Guard to bar the entry of admitted black students into the school. The Supreme Court cited and reaffirmed the \textit{Brown} decision in \textit{Cooper v. Aaron} (1958) by stating that “law and order are not here to be preserved by depriving the Negro children of their constitutional rights . . . . The federal judiciary is supreme in the exposition of the law of the Constitution . . . . No state legislator can war against the Constitution without violating his undertaking to support it.”\textsuperscript{51}

Therefore, only with federal intervention were the African American students at Little Rock High School able to enter the school. Still, it is misleading to assert that Little Rock was a success for integration considering the turmoil and negative imagery it produced for black onlookers. Instead, it discouraged others from taking the same stance and demonstrated to southerners that the Supreme Court and federal government remained “hands-off” unless seriously provoked.

Lastly, the courts failed tremendously to support \textit{Brown} against white flight. This migration of white families from cities to suburbia became one of the greatest tactics for white America in opposing \textit{Brown} and court-ordered desegregation. It created racial isolation and insulated these areas and their schools from court challenges and busing.\textsuperscript{52} School boards were able to do so by explaining white flight as the result of a “natural separation of races” rather than “official discrimination.”\textsuperscript{53} Through such arguments, many whites were able to avoid desegregation decrees. In Los Angeles, for example, the Supreme Court dropped many of its desegregation orders despite the fact that a substantial amount of schools remained segregated. They did so to prevent further white flight. But, in doing so, they allowed white flight to be used as a justification for avoiding desegregation and thus created a backwards incentive: the courts placed the least amount of pressure on the areas in which whites were most hostile to busing, and, consequently, the least likely to desegregate of their own accord.\textsuperscript{54} By doing so, the Supreme Court empowered whites by allowing them to use white flight as ammunition in the fight against segregation.

The Supreme Court dropped court-ordered desegregation for other reasons, as well. For example, in the case of \textit{Board of Education of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell}, the Supreme Court decided that the district ought to be released from court-ordered busing even though segregation persisted.\textsuperscript{55} “The Court had determined that all “practicable steps to eliminate the vestiges of discrimination had been exhausted.”\textsuperscript{56} Since then, the Supreme Court has taken nearly every opportunity to release school districts from court-ordered desegregation, even in areas where a large number of segregated schools remained.\textsuperscript{57} To

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{51} Bell, \textit{Silent Covenants}, 105.
\bibitem{52} Ibid, 110.
\bibitem{53} Ibid, 111.
\bibitem{54} Ibid, 126.
\bibitem{55} Ibid, 126.
\bibitem{56} Ibid, 126.
\bibitem{57} Ibid, 126.
\end{thebibliography}
supporters of integration, such decisions further exemplified the fact that courts would drop cases if the task became too difficult.

Therefore, despite Brown it remained clear that racism toward blacks and the general unwillingness to treat them as equal citizens never changed. In fact, in many ways, for years following the Supreme Court’s original stance on Brown, segregation remained not only intact, but above-the-law. Both the Supreme and local courts often failed to intervene with this injustice and, as a result, little was ever accomplished. Further, when the courts did occasionally come to a pro-integration ruling, the motives behind the order often favored whites, not the oppressed African Americans. Whites thus were able to use the court systems to gain a legal advantage in cases that should never have been defensible in the first place.

AS DEMONSTRATED, WHITES ATTACKED on a variety of fronts including politics, white flight, and the courts to delay and avoid desegregation measures and, in many cases, were incredibly successful. Other, more direct methods were also taken. One of the most successful and detrimental tactics against blacks in the fight over desegregation was the targeting and ridding of black schools and communities of their educators, especially in the Deep South. By doing so, whites further demonstrated that they had no interest in improving the education system for black students and communities, or in assisting them in their struggle for civil rights.

Scholar and former educator Samuel Ethridge suggested that “in war there must be some casualties and perhaps the Black teachers will be the casualties in the fight for equal education of Black students.” In many ways this proved true. Segregationists, specifically in the South but also in some northern cities, successfully stalled the effects of Brown by limiting the influence of black educators in their states’ educational curriculum. They accomplished this by firing half of the South’s black elementary and high school teachers. This was possible primarily because the Supreme Court failed to include any language that pertained to educators in the Brown verdict; however, they were greatly assisted by lower courts as well. Consequently, the firing and purging of black educators from their positions began immediately following the judgment of Brown v. Board of Education. This dismissal of thousands of black educators had a deeply negative socioeconomic and academic impact on the African American communities, the academic success of African American students, and the educators themselves.

Derrick Bell, an LDF attorney during the Brown trials, has remained especially critical that desegregation measures did not tackle the issue that legalized segregation was about maintaining white control of education, and not the integration of black and white students. Bell suggested that for many whites across the nation the aftermath of Brown became a battle solely over controlling the curriculum as they feared integration would loosen their grip. They feared losing a segregated educational system, being in close physical proximity to blacks, and of having white children taught by black teachers. Thus,

60 Bell, Silent Covenants, 7.
for concerned whites, the best way to eliminate this threat was to rid their school systems of
colored voices. 62

Below is a letter received in similar forms by thousands of African American
educators on the dawn of Brown v. Board of Education:

March 13, 1953
Miss Darla Buchanan
623 Western Avenue
Topeka, Kansas

Dear Miss Buchanan:

Due to the present uncertainty about enrollment next year in schools for Negro children, it is not
possible at this time to offer you employment for next year. If the Supreme Court should rule that
segregation in the elementary grades is unconstitutional our Board will proceed on the assumption
that the majority of people in Topeka will not want to employ Negro teachers next year for White
children. It is necessary for me to notify you now that your services will not be needed for next year.
This is in compliance with the continuing contract law. If it turns out that segregation is not
terminated, there will be nothing to prevent us from negotiating a contract with you at some later date
this spring. You will understand that I am sending letters of this kind to only those teachers of Negro
schools who have been employed during the last year or two. It is presumed that, even though
segregation should be declared unconstitutional we would have need for some schools for Negro
children and we would retain our Negro teachers to them. I think I understand that all of you must be
under considerable strain, and I sympathize with the uncertainties and inconveniences which you must
experience during this period of adjustment. I believe that whatever happens will ultimately turn out
to be best for everybody concerned.

Sincerely,

Wendell Godwin, Superintendent of Schools
WG: la
cc: Mr. Whitson Dr. Theilmann Mr. Caldwell

This letter clearly demonstrated the white, southern attitude toward blacks in the workplace
and the lengths that they were willing to reach in order to protect and control the public
education curriculum. Further, it is evidence of the fact that black educators were persistently
fired by whites and thus forced into unemployment. This occurred for various reasons. For
example, in 1959 Robert Clark, an African American and Michigan State University graduate
who instructed in Humphreys County, openly supported school integration. The following
year he did not receive a contract renewal. When he tried to secure a teaching job in a
neighboring district, he was told that his “education philosophy from Michigan State
wouldn’t fit those kids in the Delta.” 64 Ernestine Talbert’s story is also worth highlighting. In
1962, Talbert tried to register to vote in the southeastern Mississippi county of George. She
taught at the nearby Greene County schools. Following her attempt to vote, the school district
released her and from there on she found that no other school district in the state would offer
her a job. 65 Clearly, then, the indiscriminate firing of African American teachers was a
prominent method used not only to stall desegregation efforts and the progress of the civil
rights movement, but also to eliminate African American teachers from the educational
system.

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62 Bell, Silent Covenants, 7.
63 Tillman, “(Un)Intended Consequences,” 281.
64 Bolton, The Hardest Deal, 86.
65 Ibid.
A key instance occurred in Moberly, Missouri in 1959, just five years following Brown. The Moberly school district fired all of its certified black teachers, including one who held a doctorate degree, yet kept all of its 125 white educators employed including those who only held provisional teaching certificates.66 This particular case went to court as Naomi Brooks et al. v. School District of the City of Moberly, Missouri. In it, the judge ruled that Moberly’s Board of Education had the “right to make that decision” and thus calculated that blacks could be dismissed from their positions without any real cause except their race.67 The Moberly verdict set the judicial precedent for these types of cases and consequently was used to decide essentially every other similar case between 1959 and 1965.68

In other instances, black teachers were given the opportunity to “cross-over” from their communities and teach in white schools. A notable example occurred at Anderson High School, an all-black school in Austin, Texas. Here, black educators were reassigned to a predominantly white high school. However, unlike the white teachers at Anderson High, the reassigned African American educators were not allowed a choice of where they could work. In essence, the black teachers who were forced to participate in the cross-over could either agree to this involuntary reassignment, or lose their jobs. This served as another successful tactic frequently utilized by segregationists who discriminately favored whites over blacks in an educational setting, and acted as further evidence of the fact that civil rights were not being protected following Brown.

The teachers’ struggle for employment had an immense impact on black youth and students, as well. In 1986, Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy noted that: “the race and background of their teachers tell students something about authority and power in contemporary America . . . . These messages influence children’s attitudes toward school, their academic accomplishments, and their views on their own and others’ intrinsic worth. The views they form in school about justice and fairness all influence their future citizenship.”69

This is especially interesting because Brown was intended to serve as a vehicle driven toward equality and equal opportunity, especially in the realm of education. Yet it became clear that this was not occurring. Instead, the struggle demonstrated to black youth that they were still at the mercy and control of White America and that their “intrinsic worth” remained undervalued. Further, a key argument against black educators was that they simply could not educate students as well as their white adversaries. This, too, unfairly demonstrated to black youth that they should perceive themselves as being not as worthy as white students.

Admittedly, the tribulations of desegregation were not felt everywhere. In non-Southern states, such as Indiana, Illinois, Delaware, and Arizona, desegregation had generally been accomplished without setbacks.70 For example, prior to Brown v. Board of Education, the state of Delaware followed the precedent of “separate but equal.” However, immediately following the May 17, 1954 verdict, the state implemented a desegregation plan that created racially balanced school districts by consolidating formerly all-black and all-white schools.71 Here, black educators were teaching students in predominantly white schools and visa versa immediately following Brown.72 Even today, Delaware remains one of the nation’s most integrated states.73

66 Tillman, “(Un)intended Consequences,” 288.
67 Ibid., 288.
68 Ibid., 288.
69 Ibid., 290-292.
70 Ibid., 281.
72 Ibid., 283.
However, these were isolated instances and, despite some success, desegregation of schools and faculties was generally sluggish throughout northern cities as well. The city of Boston in 1974, for example, erupted in violent resistance over court-ordered busing to eliminate a dual school system. On September 12, when the first bus arrived in South Boston, an angry mob of white students rioted. For the next three years, episodic violence continued. Further, white flight pushed Boston’s white students out of the city at an alarming rate; in just a year, the enrollment of white students fell from fifty-five to forty-two percent.

Black teachers were not the only educators that faced discrimination and unfair dismissals following Brown. In fact, according to various research conducted by a variety of scholars, often times black principals were even more at risk than teachers. In thirteen southern and border states, a large number of black elementary and high school principals lost their jobs, some experts suggesting up to 90%. For example, in North Carolina between 1954 and 1971, the number of black principals managing schools decreased tremendously from 620 to 40, a 93.6% reduction. Further, in Oklahoma, Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware, more than 50% of the black principals were dismissed between 1954 and 1965.

Similar to teachers, African American principals occasionally submitted to a “cross-over” from all-black schools to predominantly white ones. However, in these instances principals of formerly black schools were frequently reassigned as mere assistants to white principals, or as central office supervisors. By doing so, school boards significantly diminished the influence that these individuals had in editing the curriculum or ensuring equal opportunity and treatment for black students. The argument used to dismiss principals was similar to that against teachers: that African American children had not secured a quality education because “black principals had not been effective in assuring that these children were educated,” a stance the courts often supported. This approach was incredibly successful for white oppressors, as by 1977 the National Association of Secondary School Principals indicated that only 3% of all high school principals were black.

Despite the numerous methods employed by whites to justify the mass-dismissals of black educators across the South, the fundamental motives were ultimately racism and fear of losing control of the public education curriculum. To protect themselves, whites used a combination of petty methods and accusations to fire teachers, including: lack of need, discriminatory “cross-overs,” and the failure of state and local courts to uphold the mandates of Brown. These unfair firing methods ultimately resulted in the loss of nearly half of the black teachers and 90% of all black principals in the United States. Consequently, the voices and perspectives of black educators were muted. Therefore what resulted was a disappearance of much needed leadership within the black community and a tremendous loss of educators who were committed and indispensable to the education of black youth.

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75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 293.
77 Ibid., 293.
78 Ibid., 293.
80 Ibid., 122.
scholars Hudson and Holmes noted, “it was during this period (post-1954) that the problems of low self-esteem, decreasing aspirations . . . and other systematic victimizations of Black youngsters developed.”

Thus, Brown accomplished little in terms of integrating white and black students and faculty. Instead what resulted were deeply negative outcomes for African Americans that slowed advancements toward equal education and ultimately toward civil rights. Today, the underachievement of African American students remains a major concern, and many of the issues that still resonate can be attributed directly to the aftermath of Brown v. Board of Education.

HISTORIANS FREQUENTLY SUGGEST that if Brown v. Board of Education did, in fact, fail to produce any meaningful results for African Americans, such problems were resolved following Congress’ passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Civil Rights Act officially outlawed discrimination by race and, most importantly, formally stated that racial segregation was unconstitutional. Even Walter Stephan, a scholar who acknowledged the burdens of Brown suggested that the “death knell for segregation came” ten years after the verdict with the enactment of the Civil Rights Act. However, it remained clear even after 1964 that schools throughout the nation were still struggling with the school segregation issue. For example, in the previously discussed Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, it was discovered that less than one-percent of students had been integrated by 1971. This was seventeen years following Brown and seven years past the Civil Rights Act. Even in Boston, a northern city, violence broke out in 1974, a decade after the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, over busing in the city’s southern districts. Therefore, clearly school segregation issues continued well after the Civil Rights Act.

FINALLY, WHITE SEGREGATIONISTS CLEARLY SUCCEEDED through a wide variety of methods in delaying and evading court-ordered desegregation throughout the South. Though Brown was praised as a tremendous legal victory for African Americans, it ultimately failed to knock down the segregated walls of many schools and certainly did not serve as a vehicle for racial equality in America. Instead, it resulted in further injustice for African American students and communities, and left nearly half of America’s black educators without occupation. Therefore, despite the common belief that Brown v. Board of Education achieved tremendous success for African Americans in their battle for equal education and civil rights, the aftermath only added to the struggle.

Dan Warden ’12 wrote this essay as the major paper for the Junior-Senior Seminar (History 485), led by Prof. Keona Ervin in Fall Term 2011.

82 M. Hudson and B. Holmes, Missing Teachers, 390.
83 Tillman, “(Un)intended Consequences,” 299.
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