



St. Leonard of Noblac

Born: 19 May

Died: 559 AD

Venerated: in Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Anglican Church

Feast: November 6 Attributes depicted as an abbot holding chains, fetters or locks, or manacles.

Patronage: political prisoners, imprisoned people, prisoners of war, and captives, women in labour, as well as horses.

Leonard of Noblac (or of Limoges or Noblet; also known as Lienard, Linhart, Leonhard, Léonard, Leonardo, Annard) (died 559 AD), is a Frankish saint closely associated with the town and abbey of Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat, in Haute-Vienne, in the Limousin (region) of France.

Traditional biography

According to the romance that accrued to his name, recorded in an 11th-century vita, Leonard was a Frankish noble in the court of Clovis I, founder of the Merovingian dynasty. He was converted to Christianity along with the king, at Christmas 496, by Saint Remigius, Bishop of Reims. Leonard asked Clovis to grant him personally the right to liberate prisoners whom he would find worthy of it, at any time.

Leonard secured the release of a number of prisoners, for whom he has become a patron saint, then, declining the offer of a bishopric— a prerogative of Merovingian nobles— he entered the monastery at Micy near Orléans, under the direction of Saint Mesmin and Saint Lie. Then, according to his legend, Leonard became a hermit in the forest of Limousin, where he gathered a number of followers. Through his prayers the queen of the Franks was safely delivered of a male child, and in recompense Leonard was given royal lands at Noblac, 21 km (13 mi) from Limoges. It is likely that the toponym was derived from the Latin family name Nobilius and the common Celtic element

-ac, simply denoting a place. There he founded the abbey of Noblac, around which a village grew, named in his honour Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat.

According to legend, prisoners who invoked him from their cells saw their chains break before their eyes. Many came to him afterwards, bringing their heavy chains and irons to offer them in homage. A considerable number remained with him, and he often gave them part of his vast forest to clear and make ready for the labours of the fields, that they might have the means to live an honest life.

Diffusion of cult

In the 12th century, although there is no previous mention of Leonard either in literature, liturgy or in church dedications, his cult rapidly spread, at first through Frankish lands, following the release of Bohemond I of Antioch in 1103 from a Danishmend prison, where the successful diplomacy was inspired by Leonard of Noblac. Bohemond, a charismatic leader of the First Crusade, subsequently visited the Abbey of Noblac, where he made an offering in gratitude for his release. Bohemond's example inspired many similar gifts, enabling the Romanesque church and its prominent landmark belltower to be constructed. About the same time Noblac was becoming a stage in the pilgrimage route that led towards Santiago de Compostela. Leonard's cult spread through all of Western Europe: in England, with its cultural connections to the region, no fewer than 177 churches are dedicated to him. Leonard was venerated in Scotland, the Low Countries, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, particularly in Bavaria, and also in Bohemia, Poland, and elsewhere. Pilgrims and patronage flowed to Saint-Leonard de Noblac.

Leonard or Lienard became one of the most venerated saints of the late Middle Ages. His intercession was credited with miracles for the release of prisoners, women in labour and the diseases of cattle. His feast day is November 6, when he is honoured with a festival at Bad Tölz, Bavaria. He is honoured by the parish of Kirkop, Malta on the third Sunday of every August.

Veneration

Since the *vita* written in the 11th century is without historical value according to the Catholic Encyclopedia, one may approach the legendary Saint Leonard, whose bones lie in the Romanesque collegial church, by means of the historic village, instead of the other way around. The growing tide of pilgrims passing on their way to Santiago inspired romances to publicize more than one locally venerated saint along the pilgrim routes. Saint Martial is another example of a saint of the Limousin whose dramatic *vita* helped attract pilgrims to his shrine. The village below the shrine of Saint Leonard, perched on its hilltop site, had its origins in the 11th century, when under the jurisdiction of the *château* of Noblac it was first encircled with walls, a necessity of life in the region. It developed as a small center of commerce in the 13th century, based on forges and foundries (perhaps the origin of the saint's association with chains) and leatherworking, with communal consuls who were in charge of defending its rights and privileges -its "liberties" in the medieval sense. A history of the commune, written by the local antiquary and historian of the Limousin, Louis Guibert in 1890, was reissued in 1992.

Today Saint-Léonard-de-Noblat, Haute-Vienne, population 4766 in 1999, is one of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites connected with the routes to Santiago. It retains the Romanesque collegial church and its belltower, 52 m (171 ft) tall. Its old houses follow a medieval street pattern, with many streets converging in a public space by the former abbey church. In the 19th century, a papermill and a porcelain manufactory were added

to its commerce. No longer attracting visitors as a stop on the route to Santiago, it is now attracting them as an overnight stop on the Tour de France. The town is also famous for its native son, the scientist Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac (1778 – 1850); there is a small museum in his honor.