

SANCTITY IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The Cult of St. Anne in Medieval
and Early Modern Europe

Jennifer Welsh



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Emerging in the early centuries of Christianity, St. Anne – mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus – become an increasingly popular figure in late medieval northern Europe, standing at the centre of an elaborately constructed extended holy family. Despite this popularity, and the ideal model of female lay piety she represented, St. Anne's absence from Scripture made her a problematic figure for Reformers. Tracing the history of the cult of St. Anne across the medieval and early modern period in German- and Dutch-speaking Europe, this book examines her shift from incredibly popular late medieval saint, to target of Protestant criticism, to reconfigured focus of post-Tridentine Catholic devotion.

Drawing upon a broad range of both textual and visual sources, Dr. Welsh advances novel arguments about St. Anne's cult from its medieval roots right through to the nineteenth century. Challenging received notions of her cult as the last gasp of medieval piety or a precursor of later trends, this study provides a new and multi-textured understanding of St. Anne in Northern Europe, which can in turn be used to explore shifting relationships between domesticity and sanctity, concepts of properly pious lay behaviour for both men and women, and attitudes toward women (particularly older women) across several centuries. Perceived in these terms, St. Anne's cult provides an example of how important it is not only to move beyond old clichés that rigidly separate 'elite' and 'popular' religion, but also to look past traditional chronological boundaries in the study of medieval and early modern Europe.

Jennifer Welsh received her M.A. in Medieval Studies from Cornell University in 2000, and her M.A. and Ph.D. in History from Duke University in 2004 and 2009. Her dissertation dealt with the cult of St. Anne in late medieval and early modern Europe. After four years as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina, she started working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Lindenwood-University Belleville in Belleville, Illinois, in August 2014. This is her first book.

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Jennifer Welsh

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**Dedicated to my grandmothers Irene Williams Mayne
and Kathleen Swetman Welsh**

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Introduction

“Help me, St. Anne, I wish to become a monk!”¹ With these words, young law student Martin Luther changed the course of his life and embarked upon a path that would drastically alter the religious landscape of Western Europe. Nowadays, St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, is most widely remembered among historians of medieval and early modern Europe as the saint Luther cried out to in panic during a thunderstorm in 1505 and for her subsequent role as a target of Protestant ire. At the time Luther called on her, however, her cult had risen from relative unimportance in the earlier Middle Ages to become one of the most prominent in Northern Europe, even though Anne was not found in the Bible and there were no historical records of her life. In fact, there is no evidence whatsoever that she existed.

St. Anne was created in the early centuries of Christianity to solve two important problems. First, her personal virtue and miraculous pregnancy after years of barrenness guaranteed the holy status of the Virgin Mary, rendering the latter worthy of being the mother of God. Second, St. Anne became the linchpin of Christ’s human genealogy, linking Jesus to Old Testament prophecies about the lineage of the Messiah. The medieval St. Anne also stood at the center of an elaborately constructed extended family. Known as the Holy Kinship (*Heilige Sippenchaft*), it surrounded St. Anne with three husbands, three daughters, and a host of saintly grandsons as part of late antique and early medieval endeavors to explain or connect problematic passages within Scripture through the use of St. Anne as a keystone (Figure I.1). During the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century heyday of her cult, printers churned out miracle stories, *vitae*, broadsheets, and liturgical texts devoted to St. Anne and her extended family. St. Anne confraternities sprang up rapidly across Northern Europe; pilgrims traveled to sites such as Annaberg and Düren to view relics and celebrate St. Anne’s Day; and innumerable works of art depicted the Holy Kinship or the grouping of St. Anne with the Virgin Mary and Jesus, known as the *Anna Selbdritt*.² St. Anne was credited with wide-ranging powers in her role as mother and grandmother, a role that promised protection to men and women who, like Luther, called upon her for aid in distress. As Friedel Roofs wryly notes, she was “absolutely *the* saint” for Northern Europe between the mid-fifteenth and the mid-sixteenth centuries.³

how we can use St. Anne to explore the relationships between domesticity and sanctity, what constituted properly pious lay behavior for both men and women, and attitudes toward women (in particular older women), from the late Middle Ages through the nineteenth century. Perceived in these terms, St. Anne's cult provides an example of how important it is not only to move beyond old clichés that rigidly separate "elite" and "popular" religion, but also to look past traditional chronological boundaries in the study of medieval and early modern Europe.

As a saint who played a key role in the lineage of Christ, but who was not herself present in Scripture, interpretations of St. Anne could change radically over time with cultural and doctrinal shifts even as her biological status as Mary's mother remained at the core of her legend and provided an appearance of consistency. This combination of practical malleability with theoretical solidity is in keeping with Christianity's history as a religion that has traditionally defined itself as following doctrines rooted in the earliest establishment of the church under Jesus and the Apostles, and that has shunned the idea of "innovation" as a dangerous slide away from truth as viewed by whichever confession is doing the shunning.

Saints across time periods

While every historical study must have an ending point, the idea that the Middle Ages "closed" when the Reformation started creates a set of boundaries that prevent us from asking questions that reach across them. Even though the historiographical perception of the divide between the Middle Ages and the Reformation has shifted since 1945 from a sharply defined change to "a gradual, fluctuating, highly contextualized blending of 'late medieval' with 'early modern,'" the majority of historians work within rather than across long-established chronological boundaries.⁶ Medieval historians present the radical socio-cultural transformations of the sixteenth century as an epilogue to their work on earlier centuries, while historians of the early modern period use the Middle Ages as a prologue to show the problems and tensions that resulted in the upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Merry Wiesner-Hanks notes, the break between medieval and early modern looms large for historians, and there have been "few analyses which cut across the divide, and talk about, for example, 'Lancastrian/York/Tudor England,' or 'Germany in the short fifteenth and long sixteenth century.'"⁷ For present-day historians, the differences between those periods seem obvious; however, it is important to remember that the people living through them experienced them as continuous and contiguous centuries, not neatly periodized blocks.

For this book, I have selected the period from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries in order to extend the boundaries of historical inquiry by placing St. Anne within a broader religious and social context. This allows for a deeper investigation into how the cult of St. Anne and the Holy Kinship interacted with both Protestantism and Catholicism and how

the beliefs and values of the Middle Ages continued to be more relevant in later centuries than past historians have recognized. Tracing trends from the Middle Ages through to the nineteenth century also sheds new light on the process of religious and social change occurring over these crucial centuries. The longer time frame highlights continuities as well as changes and erases the artificial boundaries encountered in previous work on St. Anne's cult.

By looking at the same type of material across the periods under discussion, it is possible to examine the cult in depth over the long term; for example, late-fifteenth century and eighteenth-century saints' lives (*vitae*) are part of the same genre, but speak from vastly different historical positions. Devotional texts, including prayers and songs, show how the faithful addressed St. Anne over the centuries, and which other saints appeared in conjunction with her. Confraternities and shrines demonstrate continuities and changes in the veneration of St. Anne over the centuries of their existence. I also analyze images and works of art as manifestations of a saint's cult in order to understand fully the socio-cultural spaces that St. Anne and her family filled. While people heard and read *vitae*, shared miracle stories, and listened to sermons on saints' days, it was through visual culture that the most substantial encounters between the faithful and their saints took place.⁸ Saints surrounded the medieval and early modern faithful, physical images reflecting and defining the faithful's mental picture of their appearance and attributes. Shifts in the iconography of St. Anne and the Holy Kinship had strong connections to wider socio-cultural shifts, and the changing image of St. Anne across the centuries is significant for understanding her changing role in Northern European Christianity.

I emphasize Germanic-speaking Northern Europe, the area where St. Anne's cult experienced an explosive rise in popularity in the second half of the fifteenth century, and where the Reformation and Catholic Reformation's effects on the cult in subsequent centuries are most apparent.⁹ I have included some sources from Dutch-speaking areas; the Rhineland-Netherlands area, linked by language, trade along the Rhine, and religious infrastructure, is frequently studied as a single unit in religious historical works, including those about the cult of St. Anne.¹⁰ This region produced the largest number of late medieval texts and a significant percentage of the late medieval artworks presenting St. Anne and the Holy Kinship and will form an important component of the analysis. Other key focal points include Thuringia, Bavaria, and Saxony. The areas under investigation were all active sites of St. Anne veneration that maintained similar devotional practices and beliefs as well as a common iconography. This broader geographical focus is particularly important given the chronological parameters of the study, as it allows me to include both areas that became Protestant and areas that remained Catholic.

My research suggests that St. Anne and her extended family rose to prominence in the late Middle Ages because their diverse roles appealed to a broad range of men and women from all levels of society, and because the familial structure around her was presented as expandable and inclusive. This familial

structure was intimately connected to new ideas about the sacrality of proper marital and family life and individual lay devotion to God, ideas that were in part later realized by the Protestant Reformation. In addition, St. Anne was strongly connected to late medieval visual piety, with specific benefits believed to accrue from veneration of the *Anna Selbdritt* and with images frequently playing a key role within her miracle stories.

When viewed in this way, a paradox emerges: Though St. Anne and her family anticipated lay attitudes about marriage and the family that became more widespread in the sixteenth century, Protestants criticized and ultimately rejected her cult.¹¹ Protestant tracts on marriage ignored the model provided by St. Anne, while reformers vigorously attacked the Holy Kinship as fiction. Reformers repeatedly invoked St. Anne's name in conjunction with what they saw as incorrect and excessive devotional practices. Nevertheless, the actual disappearance of St. Anne in Protestant regions took decades.¹² This conflict and the inconsistent attitude toward St. Anne in the early Reformation is typified by Martin Luther, who spent most of his adult life debating with himself about St. Anne's existence (see Chapter 5).

Initially on the defensive against Protestant attack, the post-Tridentine Catholic Church also came to see the cult of St. Anne as excessive and the Holy Kinship as emblematic of the kind of rampant, unregulated popular religious practices that had led to the Reformation. After a definite period of decline during the mid-sixteenth century (visible in lower pilgrimage levels, confraternity records, and a lack of textual and artistic production), St. Anne enjoyed a revival in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Catholicism in a "purified" form, reconfigured to suit new religious and social norms that emphasized patriarchal authority within the household and obedience to the Catholic Church among the laity. This severe post-Tridentine reconfiguration of St. Anne and its repercussions are areas that scholars of early modern Europe have not previously investigated. These significant shifts in how St. Anne was viewed and venerated within the Catholic church paved the way for a Baroque revival of her cult. In this context, St. Anne became a humble, pious widow whose own purity served as proof of Mary's Immaculate Conception, and whose meek devotion to her holy daughter and grandson exemplified properly obedient reverence for the laity. This characterization carried forward into the nineteenth century, as the Virgin Mary became an ever-more important part of a Catholic church which increasingly focused on the role of women. At the same time, scholarly approaches to the study of religion and the Middle Ages established paradigms for the understanding of St. Anne that were strongly inflected by contemporary confessional conceptualizations of her position.

The long shadow of the Reformations: St. Anne in historiography

The events of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations shaped the parameters of the historiography of St. Anne and the Holy Kinship for centuries,

6 Introduction

obscuring the complexity of her role within religion and culture due to a confessionally dominated historiography that had no room for it, and that viewed aspects of St. Anne's cult, particularly the Holy Kinship, as ignorant behavior on the part of the uneducated late medieval laity. In these readings of her history, St. Anne's decline or reconfiguration represented a long-overdue pruning by the official forces of Protestantism or Catholicism as they restored Christianity to a purer form.

The first modern study of St. Anne was written by Beda Kleinschmidt, a German Franciscan who published his expansive tome in 1930.¹³ This was the first of a planned series dealing with folklore (*Volkskunde*), and Kleinschmidt emphatically declared his desire to bring together "scientific hagiography" (*wissenschaftliche Hagiographie*), art history, and folklore in this study of St. Anne. His research goals were ambitious, and his discussion of what is necessary to study a saint properly anticipated later historiographical developments. In the introduction, he declared that it was becoming more and more evident

...that countless connections exist between hagiography, iconography, and folklore, that cannot be overlooked when the veneration accorded a saint at the time and by posterity is to be evaluated correctly... If the language of art is not listened to, and if one doesn't pursue the folk customs, then a picture results that is not infrequently incorrect, and that is always incomplete.¹⁴

Kleinschmidt focused on the "correct" evaluation of St. Anne's cult in order to contrast his arguments with those of Protestant historians, seeking via both textual and pictorial examples to show that the roots of her cult dated back to the earliest history of Christianity. The book is densely packed with photographs of works of art, buildings, and objects dedicated to St. Anne, and explores every aspect of St. Anne's cult, from confraternities to bells with dedicatory inscriptions. It continues to be an amazing resource, particularly for buildings, works of art, or documents that have been destroyed since 1930.¹⁵ Kleinschmidt's analysis of St. Anne's cult, particularly his discussion of its late medieval heyday in Northern Europe, became the standard for subsequent historical discussions of St. Anne. Even the recent *Medieval Germany: An Encyclopedia*, published in 2001, uses Kleinschmidt as the major source for the entry on St. Anne and the *Anna Selbdritt*, inexplicably ignoring the existence of several important works on the cult of St. Anne dating from the early 1990s.¹⁶

There are, however, several ways in which long-standing confessional debates and personal belief interfere with Kleinschmidt's study. First, his determination to counter Protestant arguments by showing the depth and breadth of devotion to the saint led him to generalize widely from minimal evidence, particularly when discussing the first several centuries of Christianity. Second, Kleinschmidt's personal devotion to the Virgin Mary strongly

influenced his theories regarding the rise of the cult of St. Anne in the late fifteenth century. The third and most significant problem with Kleinschmidt's analysis lies in his approach to what he referred to as "folklore," one of the key areas he argued must be examined in order to ascertain the full dimensions of a saint's cult. The beliefs and practices of the laity were very useful for proving that St. Anne's cult had a long history and a wide geographic distribution, and for showing the deep piety of medieval Christianity, but Kleinschmidt was unwilling to look at them in a wider contemporary religious and social context. Throughout the book, the unspoken thesis is that a set of recoverable historical facts regarding St. Anne and her family exists, and any deviation from those "facts" represents the unfortunate delusions of people who, however devout, were caught up in the ignorance of the Middle Ages. Kleinschmidt differentiated between "popular" devotion to St. Anne, which was tainted by ideas such as the Holy Kinship, and "learned" devotion, which venerated St. Anne because of belief in the Immaculate Conception. His discussion of the Holy Kinship took place under the heading of "Popular Expansions of the Legend" (*Volkstümliche Weiterbildung der Legende*). After discussing how widespread belief in the Holy Kinship was, even among the well educated, he concluded his chapter with the words, "Let it additionally be mentioned, that a St. Anne legend from this period has also been preserved in Ethiopian literature, which goes far beyond Western narratives in its fantasy."¹⁷ For Kleinschmidt, the embarrassment of centuries of incorrect belief within his own faith could be mitigated somewhat by claiming that other, less civilized cultures, held to more ridiculous notions.¹⁸

The growth of interest in popular belief and women's history, combined with a growing interest in saints and saints' cults as a legitimate field of historical inquiry, led to a group of works focusing on the medieval cult of St. Anne in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Beginning with Werner Esser's 1986 study of the iconography of the Holy Kinship, historians have written about the cult of St. Anne from a socio-cultural rather than a confessionally defined perspective.¹⁹ The ability to look at her cult without positioning it as either merely the outgrowth of medieval superstition or as a subset of the cult of the Virgin Mary expanded the potential for fresh interpretations of St. Anne's cult in the later Middle Ages, because the types of belief that had been dismissed or used as a means of criticizing the cult in earlier works had suddenly become relevant to more general historiographical trends looking at medieval and pre-Reformation religious and social structures.

Werner Esser was the first to connect the iconography of the Holy Kinship to fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century urban family composition, and to trace the historical, theological, and hagiographical development of St. Anne's extended family. Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn edited a collection of essays discussing the roles of St. Anne across medieval Europe.²⁰ Ton Brandenburg's work on the Netherlands and Rhineland argues that St. Anne became so popular because the late fifteenth-century upper-middle class saw the Holy Kinship as a reflection of their own lives, and as a model for proper

bourgeois marriage.²¹ Ann Moss's 2003 investigation of the shifting uses of Latin by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century humanists uses their devotional and critical texts about St. Anne as a way to organize the larger narrative.²² Michael Alan Anderson explores European court culture and politics through the study of music devoted to St. Anne, making a convincing argument for the importance of "sonic expressions of devotion" as part of the late medieval and early modern religious environment.²³

The most comprehensive of these recent scholarly examinations of St. Anne's cult is Angelika Dörfler-Dierken's 1992 dissertation, *The Veneration of St. Anne in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*.²⁴ Her main foci are the humanist promotion of St. Anne and the development of St. Anne confraternities. Both Dörfler-Dierken and Brandenburg introduce a new element to the study of St. Anne's cult in the late Middle Ages by connecting the growth of St. Anne's cult to learned culture in Germany and the Netherlands—a theme which Moss expands on in her investigation of humanist culture across Europe. This challenged previous interpretations that had viewed it as part of late medieval popular devotion, whether those interpretations had classified popular devotion as ignorant superstition or as uneducated but devout piety. Dörfler-Dierken structures her use of textual and archival material to explore these humanist and confraternal elements, working with *vitae*, confraternal records, treatises, and humanist writings printed prior to 1530 while excluding liturgical texts, hymns, and art.²⁵ She argues that humanists promoted St. Anne's example as a saintly template of married life suitable for lay emulation. St. Anne, engaged in the world yet living a life of such virtue that she was worthy to bear and raise the Virgin Mary, became the model for a fulfilled lay life with an emphasis on individual piety and charitable actions within the community. The meticulous collection of source materials and Dörfler-Dierken's tracing of the development of strands of St. Anne's legend in Northern Europe make her study invaluable for scholars looking at connections between humanism and religion as well as for studying the cult of St. Anne. Any subsequent work on St. Anne, including my own, is deeply indebted to her. However, by choosing an extremely limited time frame for her examination, she views St. Anne primarily as a late medieval saint. Her narrow range of sources also omits a great deal of evidence that could illuminate the complexity of the movement, including records dealing with pilgrimage practices, liturgical texts, songs, and, most importantly, works of art.

Virginia Nixon's 2004 publication *Mary's Mother: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Europe*, moves even further from previous scholarly conceptions about St. Anne and popular religion while maintaining a strict focus on the late medieval period. Nixon argues that St. Anne's cult did not spring from popular religious devotion at all, but was entirely imposed from above.²⁶ For Nixon, St. Anne's "clerical and humanist promoters saw her cult as a means for controlling lay, especially female, piety, and ... they built on—and encouraged—anxiety about salvation to do so."²⁷ Nixon refuses to grant any agency to the laity, viewing all members of the clergy and religious orders