



THE ATHENS GREEK RELIGION SEMINAR, Tuesday, September 15, 2026

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What is in the Bath? Space and Ritual in the Byzantine Legends of St. Barbara

ABSTRACT

The subject of this paper sits at the crossroads of the history of storytelling - within the conventions of the hagiographical genre - and cultic practices directed towards saints, and brings into focus the early Byzantine Passions of St Barbara. A considerable part of Barbara's story unfolds in a Roman bath, where the martyr first experienced her own conversion to Christianity and then converted the bath into a Christian site. Even though the story suggests that Barbara's bath was an early pilgrimage destination and a center of a healing cult, and while Barbara's cult was attested in Rome and Constantinople already in the seventh century, the site of the bath has never been identified and thus may be studied only as a literary, even if plausibly conceived, space. The paper untangles the literary representation of this space in two directions. On the one hand, it retraces the imaginary contours of the bath converted for Christian use and related ritual practices within their cultural and historical context. On the other hand, it questions how, by preserving its spatial focus, the story defies the antagonistic dichotomy of fiction and truth, thus gaining credibility in the eyes of its recipients.

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