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‘That Profession and Habit that None Other Be of Within this Realm’: The Battel Hall Retable, Visual Culture and Intersections of Community Identity in a Late Medieval English Convent

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Abstract
The Battel Hall Retable – created around the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century and once belonging to the Dominican nuns of Dartford Priory – offers a rare glimpse into the visual lives of late medieval English nuns, inviting an insight into the intersections of communal identities for these women religious. This article builds on scholarship that has predominantly addressed Dartford’s textual history, and of the piety and experiences within female monastic communities more widely, by exploring the intersections of English, female and Dominican spiritual identities for the community within, reflected by and provoked by this visual culture. It argues that the iconography, the specific portrayal of the figures and the potential positioning of the altarpiece speak to the engagement of these women with key facets of their identities, partially forming and enhancing a community identity that enabled them to withstand the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

The Battel Hall Retable’s story is, in many ways, one of survival. At nearly one metre tall and nearly two and a half metres wide, the oak altarpiece, created sometime between 1375 and 1410, housed at Battel Hall in Kent for centuries, can now be seen on public display at Leeds Castle following a restoration in 2018.[1] Its scars from the Reformation era and subsequent centuries are immediately apparent to the modern viewer as shown in Figure 1. Its images were aggressively defaced in what Straub and Wrapson believe to have been iconoclastic fervour. Elsewhere, the wood shows signs of even later misuse, potentially by schoolchildren. The altarpiece’s short stint in the British Library, as a key part of the *Medieval Women* exhibition (25 October 2024 to 2 March 2025), however, speaks to an even more intriguing element of its history and survival.[2] The Battel Hall Retable more than likely belonged to Dartford Priory in Kent, the only Dominican female convent in medieval England, and one of only two female religious houses to survive the Dissolutions of the 1530s to be officially reinstated under the Marian revival twenty years later. The geographical proximity of Battel Hall to Dartford, the corresponding medieval time periods of the convent’s growth and the altarpiece’s creation, and the artistic focus of the work, all reflect this likelihood.

[1] Michaela Straub and Lucy Wrapson, ‘The Battel Hall Retable: history, technique and conservation’, *Hamilton Kerr Institute*, 7 (2018), pp. 7–22.
[2] The exhibition catalogue is Eleanor Jackson and Julian Harrison (eds), *Medieval Women: Voices & Visions* (London, 2024). The altarpiece is reproduced on pp. 208–9, though is not discussed more within the volume, echoing a wider lack of scholarly attention.

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Figure 1 The Battel Hall Retable. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Leeds Castle Foundation.

It features images of saints that would have chimed with the Dominican Order, as well as images of female virgin martyr saints who would have held special significance to women in English religious communities. On the furthest left stands St Dominic in black Dominican robes, next to St Agatha, with pierced breasts shown as a symbol of her martyrdom. The central Virgin holding the baby Jesus is flanked on the left by St Katherine of Alexandria, who is holding a sword as a symbol of her beheading and standing above her wheel, and St Margaret of Antioch, to the right, who is standing above and killing the dragon of her much-debated legend. Mary Magdalen, holding oil and her hair, with which she is meant to have washed Christ's feet, is second to the furthest right figure, who is strongly likely to be St Catherine of Siena, wearing black Dominican robes and shown nimbed, despite the very early date.[3]

The Battel Hall altarpiece visually mirrored, established and maintained the three intersections of Dartford Priory's identity (female, Dominican and English) that ultimately led to the continuation and survival of their community. The aim of this article is to show that the Battel Hall Retable offers scholars a visual insight into the complexities and overlapping nature of this convent's identity. It will achieve this by exploring the potential placement and functions around the viewing context of the altarpiece, the political background of its creation in Dartford's history, and most importantly the artistic and symbolic resonance of the figures depicted. Through a concentrated analysis of this surviving visual culture, this study advances previous work that explored Dartford's female monastic community predominantly through texts, therefore building a richer picture of their medieval and sixteenth-century lives. It contributes to the developing, but still relatively less explored, field of English female religious' visual culture and adds further nuance to the question of why this convent maintained its community into late sixteenth-century exile.

[3] David Park, 'Form and content', in Christopher Norton, David Park and Paul Binski (eds), *Dominican Painting in East Anglia: The Thornham Parva Retable and the Musee de Cluny Frontal* (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 33–56, at p. 38; Straub and Wrapson, 'The Battel Hall Retable', p. 8. For a recent article announcing the conservation and unveiling of the newly restored Battel Hall Retable, primarily focusing on its post-Dissolution/iconoclastic history, see <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/beheading-of-saints-just-the-start-of-medieval-altarpiece-s-tribulations> [last accessed 12 April 2025]. For further exploration of the cultural background of the type of face and hand-focused iconoclasm experienced by the Battel Hall Retable and other stationary, two-dimensional religious images, see C. Pamela Graves, 'From an archaeology of iconoclasm to an anthropology of the body: images, punishment and personhood in England, 1500–1660' *Current Anthropology*, 49/1 (2008) pp. 35–57.

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Some of the intersections of identity inherent in the Battel Hall Retable's artistic depictions of saints have been explored by historians before. In placing the providence of the Retable, Park has argued that both the pairing of Saints Margaret and Katherine, a common feature of English medieval iconography, and the specific image of Mary Magdalen that matches a contemporary and proximate Norfolk scene, are evidence of its specifically English, and possibly more specific South-Eastern English origin.[4] The geographical specificity of the popularity of these saints is echoed elsewhere. As Juliana Dresvina has articulated, the gradual and firm establishment of the cult of St Margaret in English society by the thirteenth century is pre-empted by a particular popularity in East Anglia, demonstrated through monastic foundations in Cambridge, Norwich and Kent.[5] Cultish devotion to St Katherine arrived in England later than that of her fellow virgin martyr saints, but, as Katherine Lewis has argued, not only did this devotion develop beyond the popularity of all others, but even before this, there was a particular focus on her in the South of England, especially amongst royal and aristocratic women. Catherine of Siena might be one of the most famous examples of a mystic in this period and, as Jennifer N. Brown has argued, had 'a textual tradition that was firmly incorporated into the devotional practice of Late Medieval England'.[6] Yet in both its early fifteenth-century creation and its likely display, the Battel Hall Retable goes further than reflecting a geographically specific, English, Dominican style. By showing the Dartford commitment to and intersection of the nuns' English, Dominican, enclosed female piety, it offers a visual consolidation of their community's monastic identity.

The community was announced by Edward III in 1346, with French nuns established at the site in late 1356.[7] These women would set the tone of Continental Dominican observance for almost 200 years. Dartford's royal connections and lineage were central throughout, and even before, its existence; in announcing the foundation, Edward III was building on the unrealized wishes of his father, and even earlier, his grandmother, Eleanor of Castile, had contemplated the idea of founding a Dominican house for women.[8] Across the nearly two centuries of Dartford Priory's existence, the convent continued to be a place with which the royal family held an affinity; both nuns (Bridget, daughter of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville, and the last medieval English Princess to undertake the cloistered life) and Prioresses (Joan Scrope, the granddaughter of Edward IV's aunt Margaret, sister of Cecily Neville) linked the priory to the royal family across the fifteenth century.[9] Women of the nobility and aristocracy also featured heavily in the priory's members throughout the fifteenth century, illustrating the respected and elevated position it must have held in late medieval English society.

Similarly, Dartford appears to have retained popularity with their local community into the Reformation; though most of those who remembered the priory in their wills did not have a personal relationship with any individual nun, parishioners 'directed their bequests to the prioress and convent of nuns as well as or instead of to the friars

[4] Park, 'Form and content', pp. 37–8.
[5] Juliana Dresvina, *A Maid with a Dragon: The Cult of St Margaret of Antioch in Medieval England* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 42–3.
[6] Jennifer N. Brown, *Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Toronto, 2019), p. 4.
[7] C. F. R. Palmer, 'History of the Priory of Dartford, in Kent', *The Archaeological Journal*, 36/1 (1879), pp. 241–71, at p. 246.
[8] VCH, Dartford Priory, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/kent/vol2/pp181-190#fnn1> [last accessed 2 July 2025]; Palmer, 'History of the Priory of Dartford', p. 242.
[9] Paul Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: The Dominican Priory of Dartford* (York, 2002), p. 61.

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of the monastery'.[10] It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that when it was valued in the 1530s as being worth over £360, it was one of the wealthiest of all monastic houses in the country and certainly higher than the majority of female religious communities, of whom two-thirds had less than £100 a year, and a third had less than £50.[11] The prestige that was partly built by and that attracted these women and their families was the result of Dartford's reputation for both spiritual discipline and education. In 1558, in the reign of Mary I, seven former nuns of this convent were reinstated in an official monastic revival. Official records suggest that these former nuns, alongside those of Syon Abbey and four male houses, petitioned the government to have their institutional boundaries reinstated.[12] The women of Dartford Priory retained their sense of togetherness, therefore, across a twenty-year hiatus of 'official' monastic recognition, to be rewarded with eventual reinstatement. Only a year later, on the ascension of Elizabeth I, a group consisting of 'two priests, the prioress, four choir-nuns… four lay sisters and a young girl not yet professed' crossed the Channel to undertake a nomadic monastic life in exile.[13]

The ability of the nuns of Dartford Priory to withstand not one but two official suppressions in the space of barely a generation suggests something specific about their collective identity. Only one other female monastic house, historiographically and contemporaneously notable for its 'pious strictness of discipline', the wealthy Bridgettines of Syon Abbey, was able to withstand top-down political dissolution.[14] The communal experiences of women religious were multiple. Laura Roberts has argued that Syon Abbey in particular was 'spiritually singular', enabling them to retain their community's togetherness into the twenty-first century. They point to Syon's commitment to, and enforcement of, a rigorous, disciplined structure of daily life; the centralization of Bridgettine symbolism of the Virgin in their lives; and the benefits of patronage and benefaction as demonstrative of their unique position in surviving and thriving for so long.[15] Dartford Priory shared Syon's spiritual discipline, a notably pious culture, and a positive external reputation, not to mention status as a financially healthy convent, yet it remains less historiographically focused on as an exceptional example of an English female religious community.

Though Dartford leaves sparingly little in the way of specific, explicit evidence for what created or instilled such communal bonds, the way the community asserted its own identity does have some explanation. Paul Lee, the authority on the history of Dartford, has argued that the longest-serving and arguably greatest Prioress in the convent's history, Elizabeth Cressener, played a crucial role in advocating for and establishing these communal bonds as she articulated in a 1536 letter to Thomas Cromwell.[16] In the context of the Minor Suppression of smaller houses, she was successful in her request that no other nuns be added to the convent: 'especially that we [the convent] may not receive into our monastery none of any other religion, for we be of that profession and habit that none other be of within this realm; and therefore it should be very troublous to us to have any other than we bring up after our own order

[10] Ibid., p. 108.
[11] Ibid., p. 113; John H. Tillotson, *Marrick Priory: A Nunnery in Late Medieval Yorkshire* (York, 1999), p. 2.
[12] See, for example, *Calendar of Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office: Philip and Mary, 1555–1557 vol. III* (London, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1938), p. 403.
[13] VCH, Dartford Priory, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38217> [last accessed 15 January 2024].
[14] Alexandra de Costa, *Reforming Printing: Syon Abbey's Defence of Orthodoxy, 1525–1534* (Oxford, 2012), p. 1.
[15] Laura Roberts, 'The spiritual singularity of Syon Abbey and its Sisters' *Ezra's Archives*, 5/1 (2015), pp. 65–83.
[16] Paul Lee, 'Cressener, Elizabeth (d. 1536/7), Prioress of Dartford' Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-105936> [last accessed 2 July 2025].

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and fashion'.[17] In one of the only written letters that survives from the convent's two centuries of existence, the Prioress of nearly fifty years explicitly stated their singular identity as unbendingly Dominican within their national context. The autonomy of her female leadership was not always respected (a second letter to Cromwell articulated her distress at their confessor-president being replaced, as 'this great unkind deed') but the strands of Dominican, English and female religious identity can be seen in these letters to have formed a perceptible bond; it is how Cressener conceptualized, addressed and presented the community.[18] The Battel Hall Retable embodied these intertwined strands of identity, visually identifying and emphasizing what created and recreated the community of Dartford Priory.

Historiography of medieval (English) women religious

Just over a century ago, Eileen Power's posthumously published *Medieval English Nunneries* brought together an enormous variety of mainly textual primary materials to present an authoritative and ultimately highly influential thesis on English women religious. As Nancy Bradley Warren has summarized, despite Power's comprehensive work, they also 'did much… to solidify the perception of later medieval nunneries as poverty stricken, ill managed, riddled with corruption, and filled with illiterate women'.[19] Historians of male monastics, similarly, have shown relatively little interest in, and sometimes scorn for, the female contemporaries of their subjects.[20] Studies from the late twentieth century onwards, however, have gone beyond challenging these arguments; instead, they have shown female monastic life in medieval and into sixteenth-century England to be places of vibrant spiritual expression, depth of learning and connected both to their local communities and wider trends of piety.

Bradley Warren's own work begins with an introduction to Dartford Priory, a convent that represents their arguments about both the vibrancy of piety more generally and about the particularity of the Ordered identities and spiritual practices of individual convents.[21] Studies that examine regions, that highlight specific Orders or even individual Houses as case studies, or that speak to specific themes of female monastic life, all highlight the rich, complex and varied experiences of female monasticism in this time period. Marilyn Oliva's regional examination of convents in Norfolk, Valerie Spear's exploration of abbesses and prioresses as leaders, and the challenges, subversions and authorities that they held in those roles, and the wealth of work examining the writing and textual culture of convents, as in the work of Veronica O'Mara amongst others, all attest to this.[22] In particular, studies exploring religious expressions and identities have drawn links to the community-enforcing role that shared reading and literacy played in late medieval convents.[23] Lee's monograph

[17] Elizabeth Cressener Senior to Thomas Cromwell, 1536, in Mary Anne Everett Wood (ed.), *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain* (London, 1846), pp. 154–5, at p. 155.
[18] Elizabeth Cressener Senior to Thomas Cromwell, 1536, in Mary Anne Everett Wood (ed.), *Letters of Royal and Illustrious Ladies of Great Britain* (London, 1846), pp. 265–6, at p. 266; Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, pp. 39–43.
[19] Nancy Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies: Female Monasticism in Later Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001), p. ix.
[20] A more detailed discussion of this historiographical disregard can be found in Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England: Female Monasteries in the Diocese of Norwich, 1350–1540* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 2–5.
[21] Bradley Warren, *Spiritual Economies*, pp. vii–xi.
[22] Oliva, *The Convent and the Community*; Valerie Spear, *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries* (Suffolk, 2005); Veronica O'Mara, 'Female scribal activity in late medieval England: the evidence?' *Leeds Studies in English*, 27 (1996), pp. 87–130.
[23] For examples of texts within those communities, see: Mary C. Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2002); Susan Powell, *The Birgittines of Syon Abbey: Preaching and Printing* (London, 2017);

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on the learning and spiritual values of Dartford Priory placed the Dominican nuns at the centre of these historiographical ideas, arguing convincingly that the Dominican convent's community was created and maintained in large part because of this shared textual and literary culture.

Few studies, however, have explored in-depth the role that visual culture played within the formation of a convent community in late medieval England. Nearly thirty years ago, Jeffery F. Hamburger bemoaned 'exclusion and disregard' that perpetuated a lack of serious interest in the art seen and produced by European women religious more widely, with his work offering one of the earliest and most comprehensive examinations on the topic in medieval Germany.[24] In thinking about nuns as 'active participants' in their visual environments, Hamburger argued that they shaped the use of visual and material space for themselves.[25] The field has since flourished. Studies have explored women in convents across Europe, into the Early Modern period, and have addressed different forms of nuns' artistic expression, including challenging understandings of their art as 'simplistic' or 'reactionary', and have partly aimed at appreciating more 'feminine' (and therefore dismissed) forms of expression like needlework.[26] The role of patrons and reformers, the impact of decoration and space on religious lives, and the negotiations between the enclosed and the outside world all enable valuable insight into the communal experiences and community constructions of women religious.

June Mecham's work has offered specific insights into the role space and visual culture played in defining and continuing medieval female religious communities. That the nuns of Wienhausen took active roles in manipulating and creating the visual and physical space of their convent to provide a more profound pious experience speaks to the inherent importance both of these surroundings in general and to the fact that the women themselves recognized it. The material make-up of the convent enabled and forced nuns to physically enact a created Passion journey, whilst instilling that community through repeated performance.[27] Corine Schleif, Volker Schier and Anne Simon have argued in their fascinating exploration of Katerina Lemmel's letters in the sixteenth-century monastery Maria Mai in Germany that the Bridgettine inhabitants not only built their communities with visual reference to their patrons

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David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1995); A. Hutchinson, 'What the nuns read: literary evidence from the English Bridgettine house, Syon Abbey', *Medieval Studies*, 57 (1995), pp. 205–22; C. A. Grise, 'The textual community of Syon Abbey', *Florilegium*, 19 (2002), pp. 149–62.

[24] Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), pp. 4–5.

[25] Jeffrey F. Hamburger, 'Art, enclosure and the Cura Monialium: Prolegomena in the guise of a postscript', *Gesta*. 31/2 (1992), pp. 108–34.

[26] Review by Volker Schier: Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Eva Schlotheuber, Susan Marti and Margot E. Fassler (eds) *Liturgical Life and Latin Learning at Paradies bei Soest, 1300–1425: Inscription and Illumination in the Choir Books of a North German Dominican Convent* (Düsseldorf, 2016), <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/3472#.XdgGN-f7R8d> [last accessed 20 November 2019]. For further scholarship on the artistic surroundings and outputs of Medieval and Early Modern women religious, see: Corine Schleif and Volker Schier, *Katerina's Windows: Donation and Devotion, Art and Music, as Heard and Seen in the Writings of a Birgittine Nun* (Pennsylvania, 2009); Joan Barclay Lloyd, 'Paintings for Dominican nuns: a new look at the images of saints, scenes from the New Testament, and apocrypha, and episodes from the Life of Saint Catherine of Siena in the Medieval Aspe of San Sisto Vecchio in Rome', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 80 (2012), pp. 189–232; Ann Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art: The Convent of San Domenico of Pisa* (Aldershot, 2008); Elizabeth A. Lehtfeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Aldershot, 2005); Jeryldene M. Wood, 'Breaking the silence: the Poor Clares and the visual arts in fifteenth-century Italy', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 48/2 (1995), pp. 262–86; Marilyn Dunn, 'Invibilia per visibilia: Roman nuns, art patronage, and the construction of identity', in Katherine A. McIver (ed.), *Wives, Widows, Mistresses, and Nuns in Early Modern Italy: Making the Invisible Visible through Art and Patronage* (Farnham, 2012), pp. 181–205.

[27] June L. Mecham, 'A northern Jerusalem: transforming the spatial geography of the convent of Wienhausen', in Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer (ed.), *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London, 2005), pp. 136–60.

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and Passion-focused imagery but 'relive[d]' this experience through repeated physical engagement with it as a communal body.[28] Stefanie Seeberg's work on the textiles created by enclosed nuns similarly has pointed to a conscious effort to promote their convent and to act as *memoria* to the outside world but also that speaks directly to the experiences of the women themselves.[29] These connections between the interior decorated space and the community shaping itself offer important precedent and insight, then, into the continuation of Dartford's community and its engagement with its visual culture.

Unlike their continental counterparts, however, English female monastic houses have not been widely considered as spaces for innovative visual culture. The overwhelming lack of primary material still surviving is the predominant reason, so work like Roberta Gilchrist's groundbreaking *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*, which employs a comparative methodology of material across regional, institutional and often chronological boundaries, is all the more valuable.[30] Where necessary, this article makes reference to the only other surviving altarpiece belonging to English nuns, the Romsey Reredos. Painted in the 1520s or early 1530s for the Benedictine abbey, the remaining panels of four original and substantially larger tiers display a row of saints above a resurrected Christ rising from his tomb. Arthur Green's analysis of the altarpiece has explored the figures and their potential role in the spiritual and cultural history of the house, including a traditionally pierced and bloody St Sebastian, a figure likely to be St Scholastica, founder of the order of Benedictine nuns, and St Benedict himself.[31] In the bottom left, a Benedictine nun, holding a crozier, indicating her status as a leader in the convent, and a scroll adding additional textual narration to the scene ('Surrexit Dominus de Seplcro'), is representative of a Romsey Abbess, either Ann Westbroke or, as Julian Luxford argued, more likely, the last leader of the convent, Elizabeth Ryprose.[32] When looking at Romsey's financially and culturally healthy position in an immediate pre-Dissolution content, Spear has argued that such representation 'makes an important statement about perceptions of the nunnery and the spiritual role of the abbess in the monastic and secular world'.[33]

Though this is a wonderful and illustrative example of the visual culture of a female monastic house, having such a small amount of this type of evidence means that more work needs to be done to understand the contexts and meanings of these works. As Gertsman and Stevenson have argued, it is in the 'exploration of such thresholds – connecting the visual and verbal, the sensory and the performative…' that enables studies of fragmented sources to be brought together in comparative analysis. In doing so, we as historians can decipher not only the themes that run across the piety of women religious but also how these themes invoke and inform

[28] Volker Schier, Corine Schleif and Anne Simon, *Pepper for Prayer: The Correspondence of the Birgittine Nun Katerina Lemmel, 1516–1525* (Stockholm, 2019).
[29] Stefanie Seeberg, 'Women as makers of church decoration: illustrated textiles at the monasteries of Altenberg/Lahn, Ruppertsberg, and Heiningen (13th–14th. C.)', in Therese Martin (ed.), *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makes' of Medieval Art and Architecture* (Leiden, 2021), pp. 355–98; Alexandra Gajweski and Stefanie Seeberg, 'Having her hand in it? Elite women as 'makers' of textile art in the Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History*, 42/1 (2016), pp. 26–50.
[30] Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (Abingdon, 1993).
[31] Arthur R. Green 'The Romsey Painted Wooden Reredos: with a short account of Saint Armel', *Archaeological Journal*, 90/1 (1933), pp. 306–14, at pp. 307–8.
[32] Julian M. Luxford, *The Art and Architecture of English Benedictine Monasteries, 1300–1540: A Patronage History* (Woodbridge, 2005), p. 56.
[33] Spear, *Leadership in Medieval English Nunneries*, pp. 133–4.

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the boundaries of community between them.[34] As Jan Assmann has established, such complex, community-defining symbolic boundaries morph, change and need almost constant reassertion. In their study on cultural memory, Assmann has asserted the specific principles of community definition throughout the period of that group's life and how such specifics are remembered and expressed differently. Defining the 'symbolic universe' of short-term communicative memory (bound by shared language and the ability to communicate through generations on an everyday, informal level) and long-term cultural memory (focused on fixed points in the past, upon myths and origin stories enacted through formal and ceremonial communications), Assmann has suggested that, much like ritual, the basic principle of community lies in the repetition of these two types of memory, depending on the time frame in which the community has existed.[35]

The following section will explore how the nuns might have engaged with and seen the Battel Hall Retable, enabling an exploration of Assmann's community-defining repetition of viewing as central to the strength of community in Dartford Priory. This will set up the last and most expansive section of the article, analysing the iconography of the altarpiece and putting this into Dartford's communal context.

The use, role and viewing of the Battel Hall Retable

While it is difficult to ascertain exactly how or when the altarpiece would have been viewed and what significance it would hold in the worship of the Dominican women religious, there are plenty of clues that allow us to make convincing suggestions. Van Der Ploeg has argued that, far from playing only a liturgical role in devotion, an altarpiece could instead fulfil many different types of function, with only some limited suggestion of a ritual participation in a divine act.[36] By suggesting that retables 'only refer to the central issue of the liturgy, to re-enact ritually the history of salvation in the Eucharistic sense', Van Der Ploeg has addressed a central concern in how the late medieval viewer might see and interpret the images before them in church.[37] Such a concern is discussed at length by Williamson, who has concluded that 'interpretations of images based on functional categories have tended to privilege the "intended" reading [of the image]… [and so] such a method unavoidably leaves images whose original context is unknown somewhat out in the cold'.[38] Instead, she has argued for the contextual information, if known, to be considered as supportive to, rather than instrumental in, the analysis of historians through the seeking of processes by which images engage their beholders: 'This is preferable to… using information about context as a means of sorting images into categories determined by function and using those categories as a key determining factor for enquires into meaning'.[39]

Van Os has advocated for the altarpiece as a backdrop, 'a physical framework for ritual', and thus a visual continuation for the medieval viewer of the religious ritual being enacted.[40] Binski's study into the English parish church and its relationship to altarpieces, by contrast, has suggested that, alongside Duffy's work in the late

[34] Elina Gertsman and Jill Stevenson, 'Limning the field', in Elina Gertsman and Jill Stevenson (eds), *Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 1–9, at p. 2.
[35] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 2–26.
[36] Kees Van Der Ploeg, 'How Liturgical is a medieval altarpiece?' in Victor M. Schmidt (ed.), *Italian Panel Painting in the Duecento and Trecento* (Washington, DC, 2002), pp. 102–21, at pp. 115–16.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Beth Williamson, 'Altarpieces, liturgy and devotion', *Speculum*, 79/2 (2004), pp. 314–406, at p. 405.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Henk van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces, 1215–1460: Form, Content and Function* (Groningen, 1990), p. 13.

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medieval English church, the need to see was not vital to spiritual experience but was actually regarded as distracting and unhelpful.[41] For Justin E. A. Kroesen, this interpretation is still too limiting. Believing that it would enable deeper understanding of the 'true nature' of the medieval altarpiece, Kroesen has called for a 'functionalist approach', defining altarpieces not simply by their shape, size or position but more in their function – meaning that any object or depiction, including architecture, wall painting and stained glass windows, which form a backdrop of liturgical activity, could be fully considered an altarpiece.[42] This is reflected in Donna Sadler's recent exploration of late medieval European altarpieces, which supports the acknowledgement of the devotional role of such imagery in a collective sense: 'This symbiotic relationship of all the media, or, the collaboration of the activities and images localised around the altar, resulted in a particularly nuanced didactic strategy on the part of the late medieval church'.[43] The Battel Hall altarpiece should be considered, then, not specifically as a liturgical item for visual meditation for the nuns of Dartford but rather as a piece in the collective devotional whole.

Whilst we are disadvantaged in not knowing exactly where the altarpiece would have been situated in the church, and therefore what function it might have fulfilled for the viewer, it remains plausible to make educated guesses based on comparative pieces. Discussing the churches of Italian Renaissance-era mendicants, for example, Donal Cooper situates the high altar and main chapel as the 'principal ritual focus of the building and one of its most lavishly embellished spaces', with retables being the modest, late thirteenth-century examples before moving to more impressive structures towards the next century.[44] Ann Roberts suggests in her study of Pisan Dominican nuns that limited access to the altarpiece was not uniform throughout all convents, with some architectural designs allowing and designing for nuns choirs to be separate from the laity whilst allowing the nuns visual access to the altar.[45] Access to the Battel Hall Retable, then, may have fluctuated, but there remains evidence that nuns themselves took great interest in their visual surroundings at spiritually communal moments.[46]

Park believes that the Retable is highly likely to have been the high altar of the priory church due to its decorative and contemporary content, which fits within a Continental Dominican style. However, Straub and Wrapson argue that, comparatively speaking, the smaller size suggests that the Battel Hall Retable served, instead, as an altarpiece for the nun's enclosure or as a chapel side altar rather than a high altarpiece (though they are at pains to point out that Dartford leaves no record of the scale of its altars).[47] They suggest that the iconography on the Retable, which this article focuses on, firmly supports a specific identification as being central to the

[41] Paul Binski, 'The English parish church and its art in the later Middle Ages: a review of the problem', *Studies in Iconography*, 22 (1999), pp. 1–25, at p. 5.
[42] Justin E. A. Kroesen, 'The altar and its decoration in medieval churches: a functionalist approach', *Medievalia*, 17 (2014), pp. 153–83.
[43] Donna L. Sadler, *Touching the Passion – Seeing Late Medieval Altarpieces through the Eyes of Faith* (Leiden, 2019), p. 216.
[44] Donal Cooper, 'Experiencing Dominican and Franciscan churches in Renaissance Italy', in Trinita Kennedy (ed.), *Sanctity Pictured: The Art of the Dominican and Franciscan Orders in Renaissance Italy* (Nashville, 2014), pp. 47–63, at p. 56.
[45] Ann Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art: The Convent of San Domenico of Pisa* (Aldershot, 2008).
[46] See, for example, Hamburger's analysis of a Swiss Dominican nun, Elsbeth von Stoffeln, who stood on a stall in order to see the high altar whilst receiving the host: '…despite the barrier separating nuns from the high altar, enclosed women sought and, on occasion, achieved direct visual access to the enactment of the Mass.' Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, p. 145.
[47] 'At 95[cm] x 241[cm] the altarpiece is considerably shorter in length than the 93.2 x 374.2cm Thornham Parva Retable, thought most likely to have been sited at the Dominican house in Thetford. The comparatively smaller size suggests that the Retable may have served as an altarpiece for the nun's enclosure or a chapel side altar, rather than as

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community of nuns – the inclusion of St Margaret across visual symbolism in the convent; the popularity of St Catherine of Siena; and the empathetic commitment to the Virgin Mary. All are hallmarks of Dartford Priory's reading and religious culture (as this article will go on to elucidate on much further), and so it may be supposed that an altarpiece so specifically focused on the spiritual connectivity and themes of these Dominican nuns should be for their altar, enabling and central to their devotional experiences. In their study about English Dominican art more widely, Alexander Collins supported this hypothesis. Through a comparison with other contemporaneous pieces, they suggest the nuns from wealthier or more socially important families might likely sit closer to the altarpiece, supporting their learned background, whilst the Retable might also offer a form of spiritual instruction 'in line with the Gregorian dictum that images were scriptures for the illiterate'.[48]

The daily schedule of the Dominican Order, as devised from the liturgy produced by Humbert of Romans and approved in 1256, referred to the friars or nuns bowing before the altar on entering the church, before taking their place in the stalls, as well as turning to face the altar and receiving a blessing before leaving.[49] Van Der Ploeg further stressed the later role that mendicants played in the proliferation of altarpieces from the thirteenth century onwards, pointing particularly to the reorganization of 'visual stimuli to foster a devotional attitude' that provided 'spiritual guidance of urban populations' through church decoration.[50] This repeated engagement with their altarpiece at moments of shared communal religiosity would place this Retable's imagery at the very heart of the beginning and end of their liturgical experience. As Gajewski and Seeberg summarize, these altarpiece images were designed to 'instruct communities… as an aid to meditation' and 'played an important role in consolidating their self-image'.[51] The iconography of the Retable and this repeated viewing, therefore, defined and extended the communicative memory of shared religious identity.

The circumstances surrounding the Battel Hall Retable's construction may well have been an intentional move to assert the identity of the community. In the early fifteenth century, the nuns of Dartford attempted to free themselves from the authority of Kings Langley Priory, a house of friars for whom Dartford had partly been a means of financial maintenance and to whom the friars had administered.[52] The dispute appears to have emerged over the spiritual adherence of the nuns to their confessors, which can be determined by a visitation to Dartford in 1415, 'for the increase of religion and reformation of due obedience'. This resulted in Pope Martin V's admonishment and enforcement of conformity to the Friars three years later.[53] These incidents followed a period of intense development of the physical community throughout the mid-fourteenth century and the growth of their community in both economic terms, from endowments, and in terms of numbers of nuns. By around 1410, at the latest point that the conservation project believes the Battel Hall Retable

a high altarpiece, although the scale of the high altar at Dartford is not known and the provenance is not definitive.' Straub and Wrapson, 'The Battel Hall Retable', p. 8.

[48] Alexander Collins, '"Do it well and thoroughly, for it will be shown to important people": art in the English Dominican province, c. 1221–1540', in Eleanor J. Giraud and J. Cornelia Linde (eds), *A Companion to the English Dominican Province* (Leiden, 2021), pp. 305–42, at p. 321.

[49] Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, pp. 26–7.

[50] Van der Ploeg, 'How liturgical', p. 114.

[51] Alexandra Gajweski and Stefanie Seeberg, 'Art in monastic churches of Western Europe from the twelfth to the fourteenth century', in Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin (eds), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 998–1026, at p. 1016.

[52] Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, p. 25.

[53] VCH, Dartford Priory, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=38217> [last accessed 20 March 2019].

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could have been completed, the convent had not only dramatically grown in stature, wealth and social standing but attempted a move away from the spiritual authority of the Friar house (however unsuccessful this attempt ultimately was) in only sixty years from its foundation.

As Lee argued, some of the years after the Retable's completion and presumable repeat viewing were marked by a distinct and dynamically autonomous leadership under Elizabeth Cressener. By the last decade before the Major Dissolution, 'the authority of the prioress over the monastery was extended further…[so that] she had become accustomed to appointing the president herself and combined this office with that of the confessor'.[54] With the loss of her authority with the King's Great Matter in the 1530s, and the accompanying upheaval, it is intriguing to imagine the Battel Hall Retable at the centre of external male pressure upon the monastery, mirroring and solidifying the communal identity with the community of before. The imagery upon it, as subsequent sections of this article will address, emphasized their female Dominican autonomy further. In this context of community foundation, development and moves for autonomy, the altarpiece focuses on predominantly female saints that speak directly to themes of female authority, Dominican identity and spiritual virtue.

The Battel Hall Retable's iconography

Frustratingly, the nuns of Dartford leave no record of commissioning this, or any other, altarpiece. We cannot, therefore, know if, or to what extent, any of the nuns were responsible for the patronage of the piece or the images on it. However, as this section argues, it is very plausible that these women were involved in the commissioning of such artwork, both when compared to the precedent set by their similarly wealthy and renowned contemporaries and in reference to the imagery on it. By exploring the altarpiece's iconography, the communal intersections of Dartford's identity become explicit and nuanced, supporting and developing ideas in scholarship that has focused on English female religious communities predominantly through texts.

In late medieval and sixteenth-century European convents, women religious played a vital role in the artist–patron relationship, 'fashioning, furnishing and using their own liturgical spaces', as well as using artistic choices to communicate their identities, memories and social standing, to their members and to those in the secular community.[55] Recent scholarship suggests, overall, a marked degree of agency on behalf of enclosed women as patrons or as artists themselves. As previously discussed, the early fifteenth-century context of the Battel Hall Retable suggests a time of turbulence for Dartford, as the nuns stood in opposition to the male authority of the King's Langley friars, so it is not unreasonable to suggest that they were equally able and willing to exercise their own choices in terms of artistic commission.

Contemporary textual and visual evidence also suggests a compelling case as to the nuns' involvement in the altarpiece's creation. As noted above, the Romsey Reredos features one of the abbesses of the convent within the altarpiece, echoing a community building themselves into their visual culture. Syon Abbey, similar in status, finances and prestige, demonstrated autonomy in at least some areas of the patronizing of the images that would illuminate their religious spaces. In the late fifteenth century, the Bridgettine nuns commissioned a new altar for the Lady Altar, intended to feature ten stories of images of the Virgin on it (although whether or not this was adequately

[54] Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, pp. 38–9.

[55] Corine Schleif and Volker Schier, 'Views and voices from within: Sister Katerina Lemmel on the glazing of the cloister at Maria Mai', in Rüdiger Becksmann (ed.), *Galsmalerei I'm Kontext: Bildprogramme und Raumfunktionen* (Nuremberg, 2005), pp 211–18, at p. 211.

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completed by those who had been commissioned to carve it, Elizabeth Makowski concluded, is up for debate).[56] Caroline Barron and Mary C. Erler have put this legal case in a wider context of Bridgettine art and altarpieces, arguing that an impressive mid-fifteenth-century altarpiece at the Swedish motherhouse of Vadstena could plausibly have inspired the acquisition and potentially design of the altarpiece, which their lawyer John Brown lamented was incomplete due to 'a full deceitful occupation… whereby many a person is deceived'.[57] The 'stories' of the Virgin's life would fulfil a didactic function, showing the nuns as engaged in not only the decorative elements of their convent but also in the importance of their community's continuing spiritual education (and, perhaps, the interconnection between the two). The Dartford nuns, at a similar time and in similar financial circumstances, could exercise similar agency in wanting to employ artistic choices in their visual and religious surroundings.

Straub and Wrapson make a tentative case for the Retable being the result of the financial contribution of a nun within the convent. The inclusion of both St Katherine of Alexandria and St Catherine of Siena has led Straub and Wrapson to the conclusion that it might well have been a wealthy nun, such as Catherine de Breous, who resigned the lordship of Sculthorpe in Norfolk on joining the convent in 1378, and who may have wished to replicate her namesake(s) on the altarpiece.[58] The challenge of identifying the figure on the far right as St Catherine of Siena will be discussed below, but that the altarpiece was commissioned by a wealthy nun, and in particular, a relatively newly enclosed one, seems very plausible. The Battel Hall Retable conservation project discovered that there were two Kent-based artists, John Somerby and John Reyner, who would have been likely to be behind the altarpiece's creation, further emphasizing a geographically local connection to the convent.[59]

The inclusion of female saints such as Margaret of Antioch and Katherine of Alexandria similarly fit within patterns of English female spirituality but also suggests a Dominican sensibility. Both saints are also pictured together in the Dominican Thornham Parva altarpiece, created in the early fourteenth century and belonging to the monks of Thetford, suggesting an Ordered affinity.[60] Lewis's discussion of St Katherine as attractive to educated women, and women of noble or royal birth, as a woman of rank and status herself, might have made her especially attractive to women of a similar background joining Dartford.[61] The inclusion of specific female-centric iconography here speaks to aspects of the lives of the nuns of Dartford Priory that further support the possibility of the altarpiece being commissioned, patronized or in some way influenced by women within the convent.

The inclusion of three prominent virgin martyr saints also suggests the likelihood of influence from the nuns themselves. Karen Anne Winstead convincingly argued for the complexities in what these virgin martyrs might have represented to women

[56] Makowski points out that the case ended up in the Court of Chancery because, as the legal records state, 'a great part of the said stories of images is not yet done nor finished and some of them not yet begun.' See Elizabeth Makowski, *English Nuns and the Law in the Middle Ages: Cloistered Nuns and their Lawyers, 1293–1540* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 116–17; her transcription is modernized here.

[57] Makowski, *English Nuns*, p. 116; Caroline Barron and Mary C. Erler, 'The making of Syon Abbey's altar Table of our Lady, c. 1490–96', in John Mitchell (ed.), *England and the Continent in the Middle Ages: Studies in the Memory of Andrew Martindale* (Stanford, CA, 2000), pp. 318–35, at pp. 320–32.

[58] Straub and Wrapson, 'Battel Hall Retable', p. 8.

[59] Art Newspaper, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/beheading-of-saints-just-the-start-of-medieval-altarpiece-s-tribulations> [last accessed 12 April 2021].

[60] See Park, 'Form and content', p. 38.

[61] Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria*, p. 97.

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in this period: the increasing privacy and internalized devotion of the late medieval world seems at odds with the 'spectacle, confrontation and transcendence' of virgin martyr narratives.[62] Yet these stories also 'embodied the kinds of paradoxes that were central to Christianity… where instruments of torture designed to erase identity are used to proclaim identity'.[63] In the Battel Hall Retable, these stories are very literally embodied in the depictions of Katherine, Margaret and Agatha. Their ability to sit at the centre of medieval contradictions between virtue and sexual violence, material wealth and the piety of poverty and of holy and earthly marriage makes their inclusion into the altarpiece all the more relevant, when their potential audience is engaged in political challenges and attempting to maintain their own agency. These virgin martyrs likely caused their Dartford community to reflect upon the intersections, and perhaps contradictions, of their identities as English women of various life stages as nuns and as former lay women.

Despite the timing of the altarpiece's early creation, it is very possible that Catherine of Siena is the right-hand figure on the Retable, as well as being a namesake of a patron. This is not a clear-cut conclusion however. Catherine of Siena had not yet been canonized at the time of the altarpiece's creation, and yet the figure on the far right definitely features the same halo as the other figures, and as such, some ambiguity remains. Alexander Collins argued that the figure was St Peter Martyr, a twin pillar of the Dominican Order, because both male saints 'were required by Dominican churches'.[64] This would follow a pattern seen in the Thornham Parva, where saintly figures are flanked by these two male saints. Yet similar early Continental depictions demonstrate that Catherine of Siena might be viewed at this time as a saint. In the eighty years between her death and canonization, Catherine's cult grew rapidly. This gained particular momentum through convents, as her *vita* grew in readership, and her relics expanded in distribution, leading scholars to cautiously suggest that it is certainly possible that Catherine of Siena might be portrayed as a saint at this time.[65] Robed in black and white, and demonstrating the hint of a nun's wimple beneath the iconoclastic defacement of later years, the Battel Hall Retable figure's iconography is reflective of more traditional Catherine of Siena imagery as seen in Figure 2. Catherine herself was a Dominican tertiary, though not a nun, and her cult borrowed from existing visual depictions and in the altarpiece mirrors, in both colour and artistic positioning, the incontrovertible iconography of St Dominic.

The link between the convent's devotional reading material and the saints depicted on the altarpiece, furthermore, emphasizes the connectivity between what the nuns read and the imagery with which they engaged. This further underlines the strong possibility of conscious choice in the artistic decision. Dartford Priory's nine surviving manuscripts have received, relatively, the most sustained attention in studying the history of the convent, with these books offering windows into the piety of the women in the convent and their communication with the outside world. David N. Bell's authoritative work on collating the remaining manuscripts of English nunneries draws attention to the links between lay and convent spirituality, the influences of Continental and English piety and the emphasis on emotionally intense, empathetic

[62] Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), p. 10.
[63] Ibid., p. 12.
[64] Collins, 'Art in the English Dominican province', p. 320.
[65] Straub and Wrapson, 'Battel Hall Retable', p. 37; George Ferzoco, 'The processo castellano and the canonisation of Catherine of Siena', in Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco and Beverly Kienzle (eds), *A Companion to Catherine of Siena* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 185–203, at pp. 189–90.

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Figure 2 Close-up of the (likely) figure of St Catherine of Siena, shown nimbed. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Leeds Castle Foundation.

devotion in the reading.[66] All findings from this limited evidence point to a devotional culture reflective of, and engaged with, the iconography in the altarpiece.[67]

Across English convents, saints' lives, especially those of women, remain a large part of the remaining traceable libraries. Dartford Priory held a vernacular copy of the *Lyf of Saint Katherine of Senis* (which does not survive), which instructs readers that they can 'lerne ther-by holy examples and doctrynes the whiche our lorde hath shewed in suche a vessell', which, as C. Annette Grisé has argued, is a means to 'teach, instruct and advise the audience'.[68] Lee's research into Dartford's reading material asserted that they had in their collection a copy of the *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend) bequeathed by Cecily, Duchess of York, in 1495. Featuring, among others, the lives of Agatha, Katherine and Margaret, the book reasserted the importance of specific saints to the religious experiences of the Dominican women. This reinforced the connection to the visual reality of the Retable. A *memoria* of St Christina, another virgin martyr of the early Church, is found within a book belonging to Emma Wynter, a nun at Dartford in the fourteenth century.[69]

The community-enforcing aspect of these works is further emphasized in another Wynter-owned devotional text, inscribed with a request for the book to pass to specific sisters before stating 'and so to abide in the sham hous of the none of Dertforthe for euere'.[70] Lee also found evidence that these book donations were in line with the

[66] David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1995), pp. 130–4.
[67] See Sandy Gale, 'The meditations and prayer of nuns at Dartford Priory in the late 15th Century', *The Downside Review*, 137/3 (2019), pp. 126–50.
[68] C. Annette Grisé, 'Continental female mystics and the English mystical tradition', in Edward Alexander Jones (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 83–96, at p. 89.
[69] Bell, *What Nuns Read*, p. 131.
[70] Ibid., p. 130.

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specific religious connection between house and saint. Cecily, Duchess of York, left her Dominican granddaughter a book of the life of Catherine of Siena and another Bridgettine granddaughter at Syon Abbey a book of the Revelations of St Bridget.[71] The specific framing of Dominican (or otherwise) religious identity with their reading material further strengthens the theory that visual material would also reflect this relationship and held specific devotional and communal relevance to the women in the convent.[72] Therefore, it is strongly probable that the figure is the suggested Catherine of Siena, despite the early date.[73]

Dominic and Catherine of Siena's hands, their free palms raised facing up and outwards towards the five female figures of the altarpiece, mirror each other's stances. They appear turned openly towards the figures as well as the audience, as if in representative dialogue. The teacherly posture of both Dominican figures allows for a visual representation of their undoubtedly cherished positions within the Order but also performs an important visual metaphor – on both sides of the altarpiece, the figures of St Dominic and St Catherine of Siena literally frame the other biblical and virgin martyr figures in the Retable, enclosing them in a Dominican space and offering mirror images of foundational (for the former) and growingly influential (for the latter) symbols for the women of the Order. The artistic structure of the Retable's figures between Dominican icons has precedent elsewhere, too – the Thornham Parva Retable's positioning of St Dominic and St Peter Martyr at opposite ends, in the same stance, for another reasonably contemporary Dominican audience, suggests that this visual depiction could very well have inspired a convent of Dominican women to reflect on the strength of their Ordered identity through didactic visual depiction.[74]

The Battel Hall Retable's inclusion of virgin martyr saints such as Margaret of Antioch, who predated the Dominican order by centuries, nevertheless indicates an important role in the creation and continuation of communal identity for Dartford's women religious. As Veronica O'Mara and Virginia Blanton argue in their study of MS Additional 2604, the collation and choice of saints' lives articulate 'institutional concerns, hierarchical agendas, national histories, gender politics, local interests, and individual choices'.[75] MS Additional 2604 was likely created and read in a convent in East Anglia, which is reflected in the choice of saints whose lives feature: They share characteristics of being royal, and of monastic profession, and frequently hold a specifically East Anglican and Kentish popularity.[76] Female-focused hagiography offered nuns, therefore, an opportunity to engage with and consolidate their monastic and gendered identities. As we see in the Battel Hall Retable, the saints featured might represent several important intricacies of Dartford Priory's community identity.

The popularity of St Margaret, for example, was firmly rooted in her ability to represent overcoming particularly 'female' frailties; for both pregnant women and for women religious, her vita represented both the physical and spiritual suffering inherent to common female life experiences. Analysing the Old English version of her life in which the heroine asserts, 'Leave my virginity alone!' when faced with a man-shaped devil and having already beaten a dragon in combat, Carole Hill has suggested

[71] Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality*, p. 169.
[72] Graves summarizes: 'Thus the religious orders, distinct in origins, intent and spiritual emphasis, often championed particular views or held particular theories within their spiritual canon'. C. Pamela Graves, 'Sensing and believing: exploring world of difference in Pre-Modern England; a contribution to the debate opened by Kate Giles', *World Archaeology*, 39/4 (2007), pp. 515–31, at p. 520.
[73] See Jeryldene M. Wood 'Penitents, ascetics and mystics' in Margaret C. Schaus (ed.), *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (London, 2006), p. 355.
[74] Park, 'Form and content', p. 38.
[75] Veronica O'Mara and Virginia Blanton (eds), *Saints' Lives for Medieval English Nuns, 1: A Study of the 'Lyves and Dethes' in Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 2604* (Turnhout, 2023), p. 160.
[76] Ibid., p. 202.

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that Margaret 'is the personification of the struggle that must exist between human physical responses and appetites and the pursuit of a highly developed and dedicated inner spirit that was the goal of the religious or the pious lay person'.[77] Hill's analysis draws further parallels between the symbolism of the late medieval dragon and her battle with it as 'heavy with sexual nuance', with the dragon representative of her female 'vulnerability in her own normal sexual impulses [with that which is] perceived as threatening and dangerous to a vowed virginity'.[78] St Margaret's presence in the Retable, as can be seen in Figure 3, is one of the most demonstrably active in quite literally fighting against forces representative of anti-celibacy and immorality.

The specificity of St Margaret's appeal to women religious can be seen elsewhere in visual culture too as Jenny Bledscoe's work on the nuns of Tarrant Crawford asserts. The wall paintings in their church point convincingly to the didactic purpose of bodily suffering, using 'St Margaret as a model for their own behaviour, as her isolation from mainstream society and commitment to virginity would have appealed to their own positions as ascetic, religious women'.[79] As Beldscoe has argued, when the series of images of St Margaret's physical tortures was viewed by the Cistercian nuns, there was not just the ability to see their own eventual spiritual rewards but also 'a more positive, empowering interpretation of the power of the suffering female body than the church hierarchy normally presented to women'.[80] The inclusion of a dragon-slaying St Margaret on Dartford's two surviving monastic seals builds this female patron saint, and the active nature of the battle against the dragon, further into the every-day symbolic language that Gilchrist deemed an embodiment of their collective identities. This was not replicated across the seals of other male Dominican English houses, further suggesting the importance of St Margaret to Dominican women in particular.[81]

Stylistically similar to other contemporary depictions, this depiction of Margaret in the Battel Hall Retable is not emerging from the dragon or standing on its corpse (nor is she beating up the Devil, spinning or tending sheep as in other English representations).[82] Plunging a cross-topped sphere into the dragon's upturned, bright red, teeth-baring mouth at her feet, with her defaced head inclined downwards to face it, St Margaret of the Battel Hall altarpiece is forever suspended *in* the act of killing the dragon. As Dresvina has articulated, this type of image of Margaret and an often-serpentine dragon was 'expected to be read not only literally but allegorically'; this not only portrays her triumph against evil but also as 'an allegory of the usefulness of the cross as a symbol or talisman'.[83] The cross is the tool with which Saint Margaret symbolically fights to 'keep her spiritual and physical integrity at all costs'.[84] Therefore, this deeply considered visual metaphor, of a battle without end or opportunity for passivity, fought literally with the cross, is an appropriate and meaningful one for Dartford's women religious. It is not difficult to imagine this as an influential allegory for defiance and perseverance, seen in the context of Dartford's disputes.

[77] Carole Hill, '"Leave my Virginity Alone!": The cult of St Margaret of Antioch in Norwich' in Christopher Harper-Bill (ed.), *Pursuit of a Pragmatic Piety in Medieval East Anglia* (London, 2005), pp. 225–45, at p. 228.
[78] Carole Hill, '"Here be dragons!": the cult of St Margaret of Antioch and strategies for survival', in T. A. Heslop, Elizabeth Mellings and Margit Thofner (eds), *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: From Prehistory to Present* (London, 2012), pp. 105–16, at p. 107.
[79] Jenny Bledscoe, 'The cult of St Margaret of Antioch at Tarant Crawford: the saint's didactic body and its resonance for religious women', *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, 39/2 (2013), pp. 173–206, at p. 189.
[80] Ibid., p. 186.
[81] See Roger H. Ellis, *Catalogue of Seals in the Public Record Office: Monastic Seals* (London, 1986).
[82] Dresvina, *A Maid with a Dragon*, pp. 45–6.
[83] Ibid., p. 49.
[84] Ibid., p. 147.

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Figure 3 Close-up of the figure of St Margaret of Antioch, killing the dragon as in her legend. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Leeds Castle Foundation.

The figure on the second left, next to St Dominic, is a female martyr figure identified by Straub and Wrapson as St Agatha, who can be seen in Figure 4. Another virgin saint notable for her sexually violent martyrdom, which included her breasts being cut off, she is invoked as a model within works such as the *Ancrene Wisse* and amongst female saints such as Margaret and Catherine. Agatha was used as a model for medieval (English) women, especially as encouragement of stoicism in the face of physical suffering, framed through the symbolism of her often-explicitly depicted breast removal.[85] Easton has convincingly drawn attention to the context of

[85] Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs*, p. 36.

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Figure 4 Close-up of St Agatha, with a sword through her breasts as a symbol of her martyrdom and holding a blood-soaked book. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Leeds Castle Foundation.

Agatha's arrest and subsequent torture in the fourteenth-century English illuminated manuscript, the Queen Mary Psalter, where these images appear alongside scenes of being miraculously delivered from imprisonment, of Christ's humility and of the garden of Gethsemane. There is, as Easton has argued, 'no direct similarity between these scenes from Gethsemane and the life of Agatha, although there is certainly a correlation between Christ's prayers for strength before the Crucifixion he is about to suffer and the saint's suffering from torture'.[86] An English reader or viewer might be familiar enough with the moral of Agatha's hagiographical story to fill in these didactic blanks. Tracing the development of St Agatha's cult elsewhere, Liana De Girolami Cheney has also drawn attention to the legal dimensions present in Agatha's legend through historical precedent – suggesting that, during the early Roman period, 'women of legal age could defend themselves when an *actio popularis* (public offence) was committed against them', and that in doing so, 'her intelligence and eloquence during the trial attest to her intellectual and cultural training as a *nobil donna*'.[87] The choice, then, of the eloquent, demonstrably intelligent and still victimized Agatha may further have spoken to and even led to her image being commissioned by the Dartford nuns.

Late medieval nuns not only commissioned art for a specific spiritual purpose but for a political one, too. Andrea G. Pearson argues in her work on the Renaissance, post-reform imagery at the Cistercian convent of Flines that the nuns presented an image to counter the charges of 'total ruin' of their convent's reputation, and the political necessity of this artwork mirrors the political potential of the Retable in Dartford as an object that emphasized their specific female autonomy in the face of

[86] Martha Easton, 'Saint Agatha and the sanctification of sexual violence', *Studies in Iconography*, 16 (1994), pp. 83–118, at p. 90.
[87] Liana De Girolami Cheney, 'The cult of St Agatha', *Women's Art Journal*, 17/1 (1996), pp. 3–9, at pp. 3–4.

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male authority.[88] A female saint representative of appealing against male authority, however unsuccessfully, may have resonated with women religious eager to assert themselves as they underwent their own disputes with men in positions of authority over them.

What is even more striking about the depiction of St Agatha is the specific presentation of her image. On the Battel Hall Retable, her dress is pulled low over her ribcage to reveal a sword without a plunging hand to hold it, entering the side of her right breast, passing through it to the other, until it comes out of her left breast on her left-hand side. Blood seeps from below the wounds, onto a book that she holds beneath her bosom. This contrasts somewhat to other contemporary images, which often depict her graphically, as a semi-naked or completely naked figure, with torturers holding pincers to her chest in the moment before amputation, or the bleeding wounds of her chest left exposed.[89] Robert Mills argued that the punctuation or excision of St Agatha's right breast 'make a typological connection with the wound in Christ's side', yet, as with other virgin martyr saints who suffer similar breast-focused violence, she is rarely depicted with her breasts 'actually removed from her body'.[90] Paintings in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries depict an increased focus on objects around her martyrdom – flames, to represent her ordeal by fire, pincers or shears, and palms, a symbol of her sainthood – as well as a more 'triumphant' moment after her martyrdom, such as her presenting her severed breasts on a plate in front of her, whilst fully clothed and without visible injury.[91] Larisa Tracey, in her study of torture depictions of both male and female saints in Old English hagiographies, pointed to depictions of Agatha expressing milk, rather than blood, as a result of her torture.

These accounts offer a trope that also extended to other virgin martyrs such as St Christina, 'tying their sacrifice not only to the sacrifice of the virgin body, but also to the sacrifice of their potential motherhood'.[92] Anne Ashton traced the development of Agatha's imagery into the sixteenth century, asserting that not only do the visual depictions of Agatha move to focus more squarely on the torture on her breasts and away from her other torments (she suffered on the rack and on hot coals) but that 'when she appears in a single manuscript illumination, in a group of saints… [or] on the main panel of an altarpiece… her identifying attributes are her severed breasts, usually on a plate, or the instruments of the forced mastectomy'.[93]

For this depiction of St Agatha, as with the other virgin martyrs on the altarpiece, there is no nudity nor men present to deliver torture upon her. She is neither holding her disembodied breasts for the audience to marvel at nor symbolically lactating milk. Here, as with St Margaret of Antioch's battle against the dragon, St Agatha has been depicted at a precise moment within her legend: in this case, that of her *undergoing* the sexual violence inherent to her narrative. It is neither depicting her before nor after having her breasts removed. Here, she is instead *being* tortured, perhaps viscerally demonstrating the artist's understanding of the torture or, otherwise, attempting to echo more explicitly the enduring pain of this moment for an audience that would have found it particularly affecting and visually arresting. Easton suggested that

[88] Andrea G. Pearson, 'Nuns, images, and the ideals of women's monasticism: Two paintings from the Cistercian convent of Flines', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54/4(2) (2001), pp. 1356–402.
[89] Girolami Cheney, 'The Cult of St Agatha', pp. 5–6; See also Sheila Delany, *Impolitic Bodies: Poetry, Saints and Society in C15th England: The Work of Osbern Bokenham* (Oxford, 1998), p. 106.
[90] Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London, 2005), p. 60.
[91] Cheney, 'The Cult of St Agatha', pp. 5–6.
[92] Larisa Tracey, *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature: Negotiations of National Identity* (London, 2012), p. 59.
[93] Anne M. Ashton, 'Interpreting breast iconography in Italian art, 1250–1600' (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2006), p. 171.

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Agatha often stood in for the Passion imagery in religious paintings (the Thornham Parva's bloody depiction of St Sebastian arguably performs the same role in the male Dominican altarpiece). Here, with the Battel Hall Retable otherwise devoid of Christ's suffering, it feels appropriate that a specifically female sense of bodily pain would stand in for Christ himself. [94]

St Agatha is shown in the Battel Hall Retable without male figures performing the torture, which fits with the singular figures in altarpiece iconography as argued by Ashton. Coupled with this and the prominence of the visceral, pain-centred image, it is perhaps notable for a female religious audience – the female autonomy that other elements reflect and speak to is visually asserted, even if this is hardly demonstrative of an empowered female image. It is worth noting too that another surviving piece of archaeological evidence of Dartford Priory is a sacred heart carving. Often demonstrative of a commitment to Christ's blood and representative of his bodily pain, the carving provides further evidence of a visual connection to this theme of suffering, of swords or knives piercing flesh and heart.[95] Though the image is unusual, a fairly contemporary parallel can be found in fifteenth-century English visual culture. A stone carving from St Lawrence's Church in Lechlade, Gloucestershire, features a similarly beatific St Agatha with a sword horizontally skewering both of her breasts, which might well have been a contemporary depiction to the Battel Hall iconography; the image potentially pre-dates the existing church after it was rebuilt in 1476.[96] This further emphasizes both the geographical and spiritual connectivity of the image with the Dartford nuns. Exposure to St Agatha's image on this Retable had the potential of imbuing in the audience a very real sense of shared gendered and religious empathy.

The inclusion of St Agatha's wounded and bloody breasts could also have had a second meaning – albeit a meaning that remains much more speculative. The post-medieval links between nuns, breast cancer and the potential treatment of this disease, and the contemporary affiliations between certain saints with certain bodily ailments, might offer an insight into why St Agatha is depicted in such a painful, violent way. Despite acknowledging a lack of detailed work into the field, Sarah E. Owens has proposed that in the eighteenth century, the cultural understanding of a link between nuns and breast cancer was not only prevalent but also crossed national borders. As evidence, Owens has cited a Paduan medical practitioner in 1713 who, after a visitation to a convent, said 'tumours of this sort are found in nuns more often than in any other women'.[97] Emma Nicholls has further argued that in convent necrologies in the sixteenth century onwards, breast cancer and other illnesses were not just used to make sense of a worldly battle between good and evil, literally embodied by them and their illnesses, but also reinforced nuns' social role in the dispensation of health care.[98] Writing about medieval gynaecology, Monica Green has emphasized that medieval surgeons 'were rarely optimistic that any effective treatment for breast cancer might be possible, though some believed that excision

[94] Easton, 'St Agatha', pp. 83–118.

[95] 'Careful dressing by the stone-mason had left the main motifs in bold relief. A shield forms the main background and onto this is carved the highly symbolic Crown of Thorns encircling the Bleeding Heart. These very basic Christian themes were sometimes used on a variety of materials,' in Garrod, 'Important find from Dartford' *Kent Archaeological Review*, 61 (1980), pp. 19–20.

[96] An image can be found in the 2021 inventory of St Lawrence's Church, accessible here: <https://stlawrencelechlade.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/L101-Inventory-of-monuments-etc-25-May-2021.pdf> [last accessed 2 July 2025].

[97] Sarah E. Owens, 'The cloister as therapeutic space: breast cancer narratives in the Early Modern World', *Literature and Medicine*, 30/2 (2012), pp. 319–38, at p. 322.

[98] Emma Nicholls, 'Breast Cancer in a Renaissance Book of the Dead', *The Lancet*, 19/8 (2018), pp. 1023–4. Available online: <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S1470-2045%2818%2930368-1> [last accessed 20 February 2020].

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might be efficacious if performed early enough'.[99] Though, as Lewis has asserted, saints like Agatha, Appollonia and Lucy were often 'prayed to by those afflicted in the part of the body by which [they] were tortured, the breasts, teeth and eyes respectively', there is no specific evidence that St Agatha, depicted as she is in the Battel Hall Retable or not, was a patron of those suffering with breast cancer, and similarly no evidence remains of patronage of the altarpiece.[100] But it is intriguing to consider that perhaps St Agatha's visual inclusion here spoke to the female religious viewers in moments of painful vulnerability. The altarpiece, once more, articulated and perpetuated a specific female and enclosed identity.

The fact, too, that St Agatha holds an open book in the altarpiece, diverges from her original hagiography, fitting instead within a late medieval context of reading for women religious. Whilst a common motif might have been St Anne teaching the Virgin to read, late medieval depictions of virgin martyr saints also start to exhibit reading as a virtue, and a symbol. Andrea Hopkins has pointed out that Saints Katherine of Alexandria, Mary Magdalene, Barbara and Agnes are often depicted as reading, despite, in the cases of the latter two, neither having any reference to reading or books in their legends.[101] The central position of St Scholastica, holding a book, in the Romsey Reredos further suggests that nuns prized imagery of women reading in these contexts. As seen in depictions of other virgin female saints previously discussed, such imagery often reinforced the identities and concerns of audiences at the time, and so it could be suggested that Agatha's book here represents a conscious statement on the importance of reading, and for our Dominican nuns in particular, this visual portrayal might have been especially significant. As David Bell has argued in an exhaustive study on convents and libraries, Dartford Priory 'was well known locally as a place of education and was certainly offering instruction in Latin as late as the last decades of the fifteenth century'.[102] The reputation of Dartford as a place of learning and education is constructed even beyond the nuns themselves, extending to the daughters and even sons of local gentry.[103] For a convent so noted for learning and literacy, depicting her in this way might have made her all the more relevant and inspiring to a Dartford audience.

What is more, evidence from the literature once belonging to the community mirrors not only the spiritual icons on the altarpiece but also the very bodily empathy sought to be elicited through the images of violence and blood. *MS Douce 322*, a book primarily focused on *ars moriendi* texts compiled in the later fifteenth century, echoed the Dominican theological focus on good deaths through particularly visual and painful compassionate imagery:

> he faught for me / Wounded he was and bytterly bledde / Hys precious blode full grete plede / Ful pituously for me he shedde / Hys sydes full blo and blody were / That somtyme were ful bright of ble / Hys hert was pershed with a spere.[104]

The explicit references to the brightness and repetition of Christ's blood in this passage echo St Agatha's depiction in the altarpiece. The book in Agatha's hand likely

[99] Monica Green, 'Gynecology' in Margaret Schaus (ed.), *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 339–42, at p. 341.
[100] Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria*, p. 81.
[101] Andrea Hopkins, 'Female saints and romance heroes: feminine fiction and faith among the literate elite', in Rosalind Field, Phillipa Hardman and Michelle Sweeney (eds), *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 121–38, at pp. 121–2.
[102] Bell, *What Nuns Read*, pp. 62–3.
[103] Ibid., p. 63.
[104] Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Douce 322, fol. 7; letters that are underscored are abbreviated in the manuscript and have therefore been filled in here.

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references the enclosed Dominican audience's focus on reading for pious purposes, and dramatic passages like this support an interconnected reading of textual and visual culture.

As Easton has suggested, 'the paradoxical nature of these images of virgin martyrs ostensibly created for religious contemplation, but depicted half or fully nude, often in the throes of torture, means that a singular visual response to them is unlikely'.[105] For the nuns of Dartford Priory, these connections between St Agatha's representative female autonomy, her viscerally depicted torture, a symbolic gesture towards their reading, and a potential sense of real-world threat might all have occurred to these women religious on repeated viewings, further connecting each nun with the others' religious and embodied experiences. Taken together, the depictions of these female saints link together analysis of their religious imagery as both 'didactic tools' and 'exemplars of virtues' for late medieval English nuns, focusing exclusively on these themes in being a 'constructor of corporate identity'.[106]

These saintly images, proliferated on the altarpiece, focus on a shared understanding not simply of their Dominican identity but at the intersections between their identities as Dominican women and Englishwomen. Their English identity, especially when compared to the French women of their original foundation, can also be asserted through specifically English visual conventions. The cults of St Katherine of Alexandria and St Margaret of Antioch were heavily propagated in medieval England across both lay and enclosed women.[107] Lewis has traced Katherine of Alexandria's popularity in late medieval England throughout lay and enclosed female spirituality, and Bledsoe similarly demonstrated the popularity of Margaret of Antioch's life throughout Europe, and especially in England, suggesting that the focus within her cult on bodily pain was particularly popular with women in childbirth.[108] The popularity of this depiction of the Virgin with these two saints, even down to the placement of Katherine on the left and Margaret on the right, demonstrates their resonance in English Gothic art.

Park further notes the English provenance of the iconography of Mary Magdalen on the Retable, depicted not only holding her vessel but also holding her long hair, with which she wiped Christ's feet, but as Straub and Wrapson have articulated, this was only the final stage in an artistic process, with an earlier version, identified beneath the finished paint, depicting Mary as holding a sceptre.[109] This depiction of Mary as the Queen of Heaven corresponds with the high–late medieval rise in popularity of this iconography associated with the Virgin, with roots in English mystery plays and popular songs, so was demonstrative, perhaps, of a conscious effort to replicate more contemporary English understandings of the Virgin in visual form.[110]

What caused this change of artistic heart, with the sceptre replaced by a cherry tree branch, can only be speculated, but it is tantalizing to wonder if the nuns themselves had a say in determining how their patron saint was depicted.[111] As

[105] Martha Easton, '"Was It Good for You, Too?" Medieval erotic art and its audiences', *Different Visions: New Perspectives on Medieval Art*, 1 (2008), pp. 1–44, at p. 7.
[106] Ibid., p. 6; Marylin Dunn, 'Convent creativity', in Allyson M. Poska, Jane Couchman and Katherine A. McIver (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon, 2013), pp. 53–75, at p. 56.
[107] Catherine Pearce, 'The cult of St Margaret of Antioch', *Feminist Theology*, 6/16 (1997) pp. 70–85; Wendy R. Larson, 'The roles of patronage and audience in the cults of Sts. Margaret and Marina of Antioch', in Samantha J. E. Riches and Sarah Salih (eds), *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe* (London, 2002) pp. 23–35.
[108] Lewis, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria*; Bledscoe, 'The cult of St Margaret of Antioch', pp. 173–206.
[109] Park, 'Form and content', p. 38; Straub and Wrapson, 'The Battel Hall Retable', p. 9.
[110] Ibid., pp. 9–10.
[111] Ibid., p. 9.

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previously mentioned, Schleif and Schier discovered that sixteenth-century nun Katerina Lemmel of the Germany convent Maria Mai had strong and specific feelings about the iconography her cousin was paying for in the redesign of their convent space. Similarly, the legal case regarding the Life of the Virgin imagery for Syon Abbey attests, it is not without precedent in a late medieval English context. After being founded with French nuns, the women of Dartford in the years afterwards may have wanted specifically English religious iconography and religious figures that reflected their monastic and their previous lay, tastes and communal identities. The inclusion of Edward III on their monastic seals, holding up their church, is not remarkable in terms of monastic seal iconography for royal foundations but does further show the nuns' desire to stress their nationalist loyalties.[112]

Conclusion

By the sixteenth century, the community of Dartford Priory was proven to be stronger than all English female religious houses save Syon Abbey. Their specifically Dominican, English identity was flagged up by their Prioress at the Minor Suppression as a point of pride and status as the only female house of their order, and their commitment to each other is demonstrated in their collective return in a smaller number in the 1550s and subsequent collective exile. These intersections of their communal identity – that of religious, national and gender identities – were central to this survival and have been previously historiographically explored through education, relationships to their localities, shared piety and patronage. In the Battel Hall Retable, however, these intersections of communal identity are visually and boldly demonstrated, offering crucial evidence that Dartford's community was created, maintained and offered connection, not just through textual evidence but through and within imagery, too.

This article has shown that the community bonds of Dartford Priory were built and maintained through, at least in part, shared visual imagery at the very heart of their religious experiences. The potential commission of the altarpiece at a time of initial community development from a house of French nuns to their asserted status as the only Dominican women in England, in a context of political disharmony with their male superiors, spoke to the relevance that such a piece can have held, and was aimed at holding, in the minds of the female religious viewers and potential commissioners. The English-centric iconography not only emphasizes the national placement of the Retable but perhaps too the nuns' sense of taste, piety and autonomy. Contextual evidence suggests that they might have played a role in designing or patronizing the altarpiece; the inclusion of iconography that reflected trends for both lay and religious women in this English context was arguably aimed at creating and maintaining a coherent sense of identity, no matter the life stage of individuals within the convent.

Arguably seen through communal worship at their altar, the choice of imagery of a pre-canonized Catherine of Siena not only placed their audience amid a more widely understood context of Dominican female piety across Europe, but it specifically framed their religious understanding within Dominican figures of fundamental importance. The altarpiece demonstrates that they were, almost certainly, predominantly focusing on female inspirational figures within their Ordered understanding. The iconography and positioning of Saints Margaret of Antioch and Katherine of Alexandria not only reflected a late medieval English piety that linked and sat at the intersection of enclosed and lay female experience but symbolized

[112] Ellis, *Monastic Seals*, p. 29.

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the perpetual struggle against worldly temptation, especially for women of noble birth. The visceral and brutal iconography of St Agatha's martyrdom attested to and didactically emphasized the very female-centric nature of the convent community. This figure offered a Passion alternative for contemplation that focused specifically on bodily pain and cultural associations meaningful to a female audience. Last, the choice of these female martyr saints as such predominant figures in the Battel Hall Retable once again suggests a singular, autonomous identity in a context of male authority. These religious, female and national facets of identity are all present within Dartford Priory's reading material and other contextual material culture. The viewing of the altarpiece, as part of a devotional whole, emphasized both implicitly and explicitly these devotional, English, female foci on each viewing.

The Battel Hall Retable provides the twenty-first-century viewer a window into the varied responses to, building of and engagement with a late medieval convent community in ways that are otherwise unknowable. It is through this window of visual culture that the survival of their community might be identified and through the Battel Hall Retable that we can access the intersections of what created such a community.

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