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# 18, Martyrdom of St. John the Evangelist

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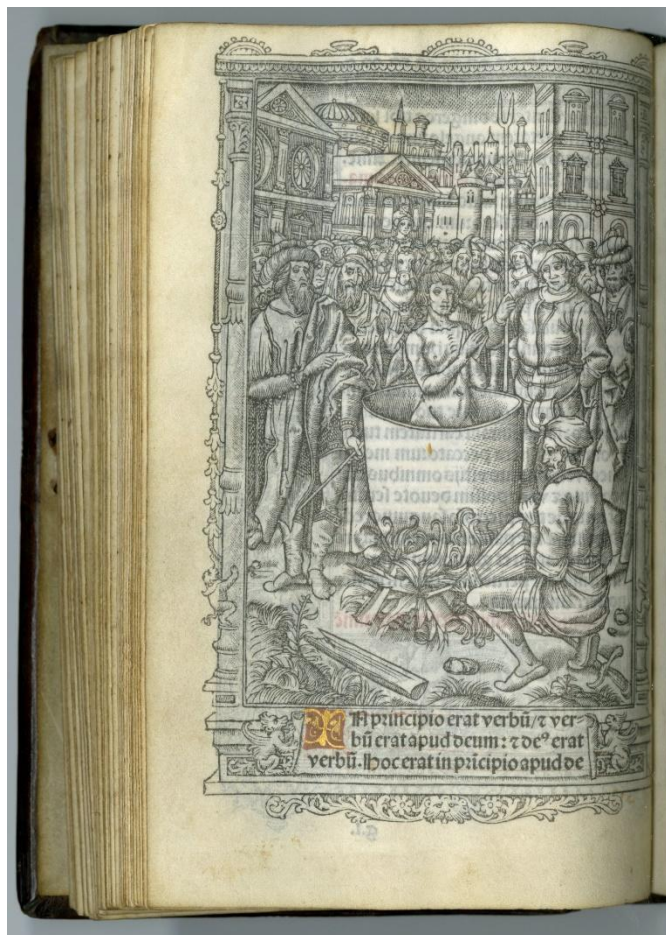
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*Martyrdom of St. John the Evangelist*  
David Powers



This engraved image comes from Portland State University Library Special Collections' Book of Hours printed by Thielman Kerver, folio g1v. It contains the image of Saint John the Evangelist in the act of prayer while standing in a heated cauldron. Engraved by Jean Pichore and printed in 1507, "Martyrdom of St. John the Evangelist, in Boiling Oil" depicts the story of Saint John being boiled alive in oil and miraculously surviving through prayer and faith. The scene is represented as taking place in Rome with the chapel of

San Giovanni in Oleo depicted in the background, and Roman emperor Domitian shown on horseback.<sup>2</sup> The location of John's martyrdom is uncertain, however, as some historians have argued the city could also be Ephesus, his place of birth.<sup>3</sup>

The image illustrates John as a young man with a clean-shaven face, which was more consistent with the western European imagining of him, as opposed to the bearded and elderly depiction of him in the Byzantine region. The chosen image in this Book of Hours was selected

<sup>2</sup> Hall, "John the Evangelist."

<sup>3</sup> Badham, pp. 730-1.

over an alternative martyrdom story in *Acts of John* in which John is challenged to drink a cup of poison to demonstrate his faith, and contains the iconography of a chalice and snake.<sup>5</sup> Both



versions contain the motif of John's survival of his martyrdom through faith, but one emphasizes his act of prayer and the other the snake symbolizing Satan.

Stories like Saint John's martyrdom could romanticize a person's suffering as an act of faith. Being a martyr was described in a positive manner, reinforcing the ideal of self-sacrifice for one's beliefs and encouraging such acts and displays of sacrificial faith.<sup>6</sup>

This printing of the Book of Hours emphasizes Saint John's martyrdom by including it twice, initially in the full-page image and again using a similar picture in the margins.

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<sup>5</sup> Hall, "John the Evangelist."

<sup>6</sup> Ryan, 1.

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