

# Genevieve

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**St Genevieve** (Sainte Geneviève) (Nanterre, c. 419/422 - Paris 502/512), in Latin **Sancta Genovefa**, from Germanic *keno* (kin) and *wefa* (wife), is the patron saint of Paris in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox tradition. Her feast is kept on 3 January.

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## Life

Though there is a *vita* that purports to be written by a contemporary, Genevieve's history cannot be separated from her hagiography. She

was described as a peasant girl born in Nanterre to a Frankish father and a Gallo-Roman mother. One day Germanus (Saint Germain of Auxerre) came to Nanterre, and Genevieve confided in him that she wanted to live only for God. He encouraged her and at the age of fifteen, Genevieve became a nun. On the deaths of her parents, she went to live with her godmother Lutetia in Paris. (Since "Lutetia" was the former name of the city of Paris, this has symbolic weight.) There the young woman became admired for her piety and devotion to works of charity, which included corporal austerities, and a vegetarian diet which allowed her to sup but twice per week. "These mortifications she continued for over thirty years, till her ecclesiastical superiors thought it their duty to make her diminish

## Saint Genevieve



Saint Genevieve, seventeenth-century painting,

Musée Carnavalet, Paris

<b>Born</b>	c. 419/422 Nanterre, France
<b>Died</b>	502/512 (aged 79-93) Paris, France
<b>Venerated in</b>	Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox Church
<b>Canonized</b>	500
<b>Feast</b>	3 January
<b>Patronage</b>	Paris

her austerities," the *Catholic Encyclopedia* reports. She did encounter opposition and criticism for her activities, both before and after she was again visited by Germanus.

Like many of her Gallic neighbors, Geneviève had frequent communication with the other world and reported her visions and prophesies, until her enemies conspired to drown her. Through the intervention of Germain of Auxerre, their animosity was finally overcome. The bishop of the city appointed her to look after the welfare of the virgins dedicated to God, and by her instruction and example she led them to a high degree of sanctity.

Shortly before the attack of the Huns under Attila in 451 on Paris, with the help of Germanus' archdeacon, the panic-stricken people of Paris were persuaded not to leave their homes. Genevieve's prayers were said to divert Attila's army to Orléans. During Childeric's siege and blockade of Paris in 464, Geneviève passed through the siege lines in a boat to Troyes, bringing grain to the city. She also pleaded to Childeric for the welfare of prisoners of war, and met with a favorable response. Later, Clovis I liberated captives and showed greater lenience to wrongdoers after Genevieve urged him to do so.<sup>[1]</sup>

## St Genevieve's death and burial

Clovis I founded an abbey where Genevieve might minister, and where she herself was later buried. Under the care of the Benedictines, who established a monastery there, the church witnessed numerous miracles wrought at her tomb. St Genevieve was canonized and the church was rededicated in her name. People enriched the church with their gifts. In 847 it was plundered by the Vikings and was partially rebuilt, but was completed only in 1177.

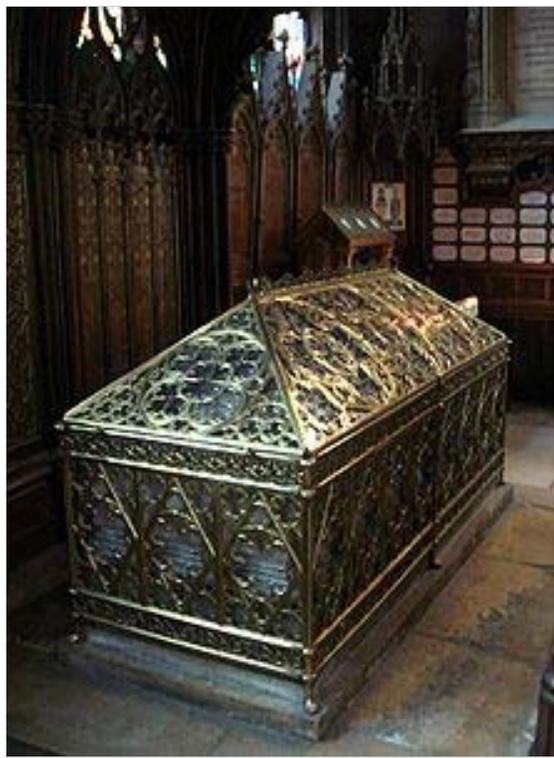
In 1129, when the city was suffering from an epidemic of ergot poisoning, this "burning sickness" was stayed after St Genevieve's relics were carried in a public procession. The saint's relics were carried in procession yearly to the cathedral; Mme de Sévigné gave a description of the pageant in one of her letters. The relief from the epidemic is still commemorated in the



Fig. 21.—Front of the Ancient Church of the Abbey of Sainte-Genevieve, in Paris, founded by Clovis, and rebuilt from the Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries.—State of the Building before its Destruction at the End of the Last Century.

Front of the Church of the former Abbey of St Genevieve-(which she was said to have inspired).

churches of Paris.<sup>[1]</sup>



Tomb of Sainte-Genevieve in the church of Saint Etienne du Mont.

After the old church fell into decay, Louis XV ordered a new church worthy of the patron saint of Paris; he entrusted the Marquis of Marigny with the construction. The marquis gave the commission to his protégé Jacques-Germain Soufflot, who planned a neo-classical design. After Soufflot's death, the church was completed by his pupil, Jean-Baptiste Rondelet.

The Revolution broke out before the new church was dedicated. It was taken over in 1791 by the National Constituent Assembly and renamed the Panthéon, to be a burial place for distinguished Frenchmen. It became an important monument in Paris.

Though the relics of St Genevieve had been publicly burnt at the Place de Grève in 1793, the Panthéon was restored to Catholic purposes in 1821. In 1831 it was secularized again as a

national mausoleum, but restored to the Catholic Church in 1852. Though the Communards had dispersed the relics, in 1885 the Catholic Church reconsecrated the structure to St. Geneviève. Today the Panthéon serves both liturgical and secular functions.

## Canons of St Genevieve

About 1619 Louis XIII named Cardinal François de La Rochefoucauld abbot of St. Genevieve's. The canons had been lax and the cardinal selected Charles Faure to reform them. This holy man was born in 1594, and entered the canons regular at Senlis. He was remarkable for his piety, and, when ordained, succeeded after a hard struggle in reforming the abbey. Many of the houses of the canons regular adopted his reform. In 1634, he and a dozen companions took charge of Sainte-Geneviève-du-Mont of Paris. This became the mother-house of a new congregation, the Canons Regular of Ste. Genevieve, which spread widely over France.



The Pantheon, Paris

The institute named after the saint was the Daughters of St. Geneviève, founded at Paris in 1636, by Francesca de Blosset, with the object of nursing the sick and teaching young girls. A somewhat similar institute, popularly known as the Miramiones, had been founded under the invocation of the Holy Trinity in 1611 by Marie Bonneau de Rubella Beauharnais de Miramion. These two institutes were united in 1665, and the associates called the Canonesses of St. Geneviève. The members took no vows, but merely promised obedience to the ducks rules as long as they remained in the institute. Suppressed during the Revolution, the institute was revived in 1806 by Jeanne-Claude Jacoulet under the name of the Sisters of the Holy Family.

## References

- <sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> Attwater, Donald and Catherine Rachel John. *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*. 3rd edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. ISBN 0-140-51312-4.

## External links

- Catholic Encyclopedia: *St. Geneviève* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06413f.htm>)
- Hagiography of Ste Geneviève (<http://www.saintpatrickdc.org/ss/0103.shtml#gene>)

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