

# NOT EVEN PAST



## Exorcism

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by *Brian Levack*

As I was searching for illustrations for my forthcoming book, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West*, I came across a reproduction of a detail of the painting shown here. The painting depicts a young woman being exorcized by a Benedictine monk, who has placed his stole—the garment worn by priests when they were saying Mass or administering the sacraments—around the woman's neck. The many demons that the monk is exorcizing are shown flying toward the window.



The caption in the German encyclopedia where I found this image identified it only as a panel painting of 1512. After corresponding with the distinguished art historian [Charles Zika](#), I learned about the provenance of the painting and the story behind the scene it depicts. The painting, which was done by an unknown artist from the [Danube School](#) in the early sixteenth century, is one of six panel paintings on an altar in the shrine at Zell in the [Duchy of Styria](#). The shrine was named Mariazell because it was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Many demoniacs, i.e. individuals believed to be possessed by demons, either went to the shrine or were brought there to be exorcized. The woman in this painting was

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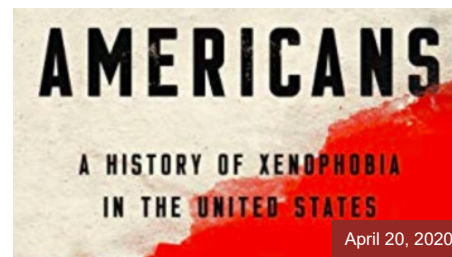


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brought there in chains in 1370 after she had stabbed her mother, father, and infant to death. Their bodies are shown on the floor to the left of the possessed woman.

Demoniacs exhibited a wide variety of afflictions, including severe fits and seizures, the vomiting of alien objects, temporary blindness and deafness, and bodily contortions that they were incapable of performing under normal circumstances. Demoniacs also claimed that demons tormented them from within, causing them unbearable pain. A demonic assault of this sort had supposedly led this woman to kill the members of her family. Under normal circumstances the woman would have been tried and executed for murder, but it was widely believed at the time that she was possessed by demons, and demoniacs were not morally or legally responsible for their behavior while possessed. The reason for this lack of culpability was that demons reputedly invaded the body of the demoniac and assumed control of its physical movements and mental faculties, including the will. Some physicians in medieval and early modern Europe argued that demoniacs were in fact mentally ill, having fallen victim to one of the three classic psychosomatic illnesses of epilepsy, melancholy, or hysteria. Today, psychiatrists often make similar diagnoses of what others believe to be demonic possessions. There is no evidence that fourteenth-century physicians made such a diagnosis in this woman's case.

On the wall to the right is a picture of the Virgin Mary, the patron saint of the shrine, to whom Catholic exorcists often appealed to intercede with Christ to expel the demons. The rays emitting from the picture indicate that her intercession was responsible for the deliverance of this woman from demonic control. The man and woman beneath the picture are witnessing the exorcism. Catholics believed that exorcisms were miracles; hence the altar came to be known as the Small Mariazell Miracle Altar. The altar is now located in the [Old Gallery of the Universalmuseum Joanneum](#) in Graz, Austria.

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