

St. Catherine of Alexandria as a Feminine Paradigm of Christian Wisdom

The Theme of the Dispute between Saint Catherine
and Pagan Philosophers in the Renaissance Frescoes
of Masolino and Pinturicchio (15th century)

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Abstract: Although historical research in the last century questions the historical character of Saint Catherine, since the beginning of the third millennium the interest in the typology represented by her within the pre-modern Christian culture has known a constant increase. The cult of the saint, the significance of her history from a socio-cultural and gender studies point of view, but also her presence as a major theme of medieval, Renaissance and Baroque painting have been studied. The present study aims to analyze the theme of Saint Catherine's dispute with pagan philosophers, an essential episode of the legend of Saint Catherine in two of the most important painters of the *Quattrocento* period: Masolino da Panicale și Pinturicchio. Masolino was active in the first half of the 15th century and offers a sober composition, placing St. Catherine in a didactic posture (*Lehrtypus*). Pinturicchio's composition is more colorful and dynamic, and although he depicts the virgin Christian philosopher dressed in princely clothes, his placement in a discussion posture (*Diskussionstypus*) anticipates the tragic denouement of the *Legend*.

Keywords: St. Catherine of Alexandria, Women Philosophers, Renaissance, Christian Wisdom

1. Saint Catherine as a Christian representative of Alexandrian feminine philosophy

IN LATE ANTIQUITY, ESPECIALLY IN the Hellenistic metropolis of Alexandria, an interesting social and cultural phenomenon aimed at the emancipation

of women proliferated¹. The phenomenon is specific to both the pagan world, the case of the philosopher Hypatia (335-415) being the best known in this regard, and to the Christian world (St. Melania the Elder, St. Melania the Younger, St. Macrina, Paula, Eustochium, St. Monica, etc.). In the latter case, a significant role was played by the spiritual and cultural model that the Christian women saints followed, a model very often constituted by a family member – sometimes female like Melania the Elder for her niece Venerable Melania the Younger, sometimes (in fact, most of the time) male like Saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa for Saint Macrina, or Blessed Jerome for Paula and Eustochium, for whom he played the role of a mentor and a spiritual father.

Considered by today's historiography as a legendary figure created no earlier than the 8th century, Saint Catherine is presented in Christian hagiography as a martyr of noble origin who confessed her faith in Christ, being killed in the anti-Christian persecutions of the early 4th century. Known by a nickname of Arabic origin, Catherine meaning «Wise» in this language, she has been identified with Dorothea spoken of by Rufinus or with Damiana². Eusebius of Caesarea speaks in his *Historia ecclesiastica*³ of a courageous young woman and „very famous for her wealth, birth and education”, without revealing her name, who opposed the dishonest desire of Emperor Maximinus. Although the young woman in the church writer's story was not martyred, but only exiled, there is a striking similarity between the two women, who, moreover, fit into a typology of the learned and philosophically educated Christian woman in Alexandria at the beginning of the 4th century.

Beyond the attempts to historically identify this saint known to us today by an Arabic nickname or considered by a good part of contemporary church history as an «imaginary saint», from a philosophical and theological-systematic point of view, the typology of the emancipated Christian woman exemplified by the personality of this holy martyr is much more interesting.

In one of the lives of Saint Catherine, she confesses that she „learned every philosophical and rhetorical doctrine and other sciences”⁴, arguing polemically against classical culture that wisdom does not come from the gods, but is the gift of God, and that the rejection of pagan traditions is

¹ We analyzed this phenomenon in the study Ana Ocoleanu, “Women, Philosophy, and Violence: St. Catherine and Hypatia from Alexandria, or Being Women Philosophers in Alexandrian Late Antiquity,” *Diakrisis: Yearbook of Theology and Philosophy* 7 (2024): 53–61.

² Dimitrios Tsamis, “Introducere. Viața și martiriul Sfintei Ecaterina” [“Introduction: The Life and Martyrdom of Saint Catherine”], in *Martiriul Sfintei Mari Mucenițe Ecaterina* [*The Martyrdom of the Holy Great Martyr Catherine*], Romanian trans. Laura Enache (Iași: Doxologia, 2018), 7–19.

³ Eusebiu de Cezareea, *Istoria bisericească* [*Ecclesiastical History*], in *Scieri*, Partea I [*Writings, Part I*], PSB 13, trans., introd., notes, and commentary by Pr. prof. T. Bodogae (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1987), VIII.14, 334.

⁴ *Martiriul Sfintei Fecioare Mucenițe Ecaterina* [*The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgin Martyr Catherine*], în *Martiriul Sfintei Mari Mucenițe Ecaterina*, Romanian translation by Laura Enache (Iași: Doxologia, 2018), 24–43, here 27.

based on the discussion of „true and strong arguments”⁵. This fact makes her exponential for the entire medieval Christian culture, in which she comes to be considered „ain bewärte maistrin in den/ sieben höchsten künsten” (a master in the seven highest arts)⁶, showing that she had received an education in the seven liberal arts that formed the medieval university curriculum.

St. Catherine enjoys a special devotion among nuns in both the East and the West, many of the nunneries being named after St. Catherine of Alexandria. Anne Simon, author of a work on the cult of St. Catherine in the German city of Nuremberg in the late Middle Ages, shows how important it was for medieval nuns that this learned saint subordinated her doctrinal opponents, who were, in heated polemical discussions, men and pagans alike, at a time when German women, and not only them, were denied access to the few universities in Europe⁷.

This also explains the enormous success enjoyed by St. Catherine even in the post-medieval era, when among the multitude of holy women venerated in the Middle Ages, they are still popularized in books about the lives of saints and, in general, in artistic representations, especially the Blessed Virgin Mary, Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, followed by Saint Lucia of Syracuse and Saint Margaret of Antioch⁸.

Even though starting with the 19th century, interest in St. Catherine experienced a setback to the point that in 1969, after the Second Vatican Council she was excluded from the Roman Catholic synaxarion⁹, given that her historical existence came to be contested, after entering the new millennium, the personality of the holy philosopher from Alexandria returned to the present¹⁰ as an ideal projection and typology of the cultured Christian woman in the Middle Ages, but also in the Renaissance and at the dawn of modernity, eras in which, moreover, women were constantly denied access to attending university courses.

⁵ *Martiriul Sfintei Fecioare Mucenițe Ecaterina* [*The Martyrdom of the Holy Virgin Martyr Catherine*], 30.

⁶ Anne Simon, *The Cult of Saint Katherine of Alexandria in Late-Medieval Nürnberg* (New York: Routledge, 2016; first published 2012 by Ashgate Publishing), 10.

⁷ Anne Simon, *The Cult of Saint Katherine of Alexandria in Late-Medieval Nürnberg*, 10.

⁸ Pamela M. Jones, “Female Saints in Early Modern Italian Chapbook, ca. 1570–1610: Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Catherine of Siena,” in *From Rome to Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy, ca. 1550–1650*, ed. Pamela M. Jones and Thomas Worcester (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2002), 94–95.

⁹ Dimitrios Tsamis, “Introducere. Viața și martiriul Sfintei Ecaterina” [“Introduction: The Life and Martyrdom of Saint Catherine”], 11.

¹⁰ Among the studies published recently, we specifically mention: Peter Schill, *Ikono-graphie und Kult der hl. Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter. Studien zu den szenischen Darstellungen aus der Katharinenlegende* [*Iconography and Cult of St. Catherine of Alexandria in the Middle Ages*], Inauguraldissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie an der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (München, 2005); Christine Walsch, *The Cult of St. Katharine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe* (Altershot, 2007); Cynthia Stollhans, *St. Catherine of Alexandria in Renaissance Roman Art. Case Studies in Patronage* (Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 8.

Probably also due to this revival of interest in the personality (legendary or, perhaps, still insufficiently documented historically) of the holy martyr philosopher known in history by the Arabic-origin nickname of «Ecatarina», the saint's name was reintroduced into these Western synaxaria starting in 2002¹¹.

2. St. Catherine in Western Ecclesiastical Art

Although until the early 1930s it was assumed that the oldest representation of St. Catherine was a fresco in the Catacombs of Cyriaca in Rome, assessed as dating from the 4th century by Abbot Charles Narbey (1899), Edmund Weigand (1937) argued that this dating was unfounded¹², a reassessment of which was „problematic, since the painting is now lost”¹³. Another fresco depicting St. Catherine in the Catacomb of St. Gennaro in Naples, originally dated by Hans Anselmi (1936) to shortly after 763, is placed by recent research about two centuries later, starting from the heortological considerations advanced by Edmund Weigand and taking into account the discoveries regarding the layers of painting, under the fresco in question being „visible remains of an older layer, which continues above the niche in a baptismal image. Since this baptismal image could only have been created after the foundation of the baptistery under Bishop Paul II (763-765)”, the image in question must be attributed „to a later period, recent research arguing unanimously for the 10th century”¹⁴.

However, specialist research admits the dating of a fresco depicting St. Catherine, discovered in 1948 in the church of *San Lorenzo fuori le mura* in Rome, to the 8th century. It is the oldest known and reliably documented representation of the saint. „Unfortunately, her figure is damaged from the middle section, at the level of the hands, down, as well as on the upper part of the head and on the right side of the face, so that only the upper part of the figure, up to the fingers of the right hand and the crown held by the veiled left hand, is recognizable. The inscription to her right identifies her as [SCA] CATERINA. The donor and the artist who executed the decoration are also identified”¹⁵.

Later, representations of Saint Catherine would proliferate in the East in the Byzantine Empire (starting with Cappadocia, in the 10th century),

¹¹ See Ana Ocoleanu, *Women, Philosophy, and Violence. St. Catherine and Hypathia from Alexandria or Being Women Philosophers in Alexandrian Late Antiquity*, 58.

¹² Argument articulated in a review of Anselmi and repeated in: Edmund Weigand, “Zu den ältesten abendländischen Darstellungen der Jungfrau und Märtyrin Katharina von Alexandria,” in *Pisciculi. Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums*. Franz Joseph Dölger zum sechzigsten Geburtstage dargeboten von Freunden, Verehrern und Schülern, ed. Theodor Klauser (Münster, 1939), 279–290, here 279–282.

¹³ Peter Schill, *Ikongraphie und Kult der hl. Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter*, 71.

¹⁴ Peter Schill, *Ikongraphie und Kult der hl. Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter*, 72.

¹⁵ Peter Schill, *Ikongraphie und Kult der hl. Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter*, 73.

so that in the West, the spread of veneration of the saint from Alexandria can be dated from the beginning of the 13th century¹⁶.

From the point of view of manuscript tradition, the oldest illustrated manuscript that has survived to us regarding the life and martyrdom of Saint Catherine is in the Vatican. It is ms. 807, which represents the *Menologion* written for Emperor Basil II (976-1025). In itself, the *Menologium Basilianum* seems to be a book of illustrations accompanied by text, since, within it, only 16 lines of text are allocated to each saint¹⁷. Regarding St. Catherine, the manuscript's depiction of St. Catherine's debate with pagan philosophers, symbolizing the successful defense of Christianity, is notable.

In the Middle Ages, a collection of saints called the *Legenda Aurea*, compiled by the Dominican monk Jacob de Voragine, circulated throughout the West from 1263. Chapter 160 of this collection contains the text of the life and martyrdom of Saint Catherine. Voragine's book is a useful reference point, as it was the most popular compendium of the late Middle Ages, surviving in over 500 manuscripts and also in over 150 editions and 50 translations produced in the first century after printing¹⁸.

In the Western Middle Ages, Saint Catherine became the most venerated of the saints, after the Blessed Virgin Mary. In fact, along with Saints Barbara, Dorothea, and Margaret, she was one of the four virgins called „virgines capitalae“.

Depending on the artistic trend of the time, the images that reproduced the saint's face, individually or in dispute with philosophers, present different techniques and styles. In general, two main ways of representing Saint Catherine of Alexandria are known in Christian iconography. In one of them, the saint is depicted as a young, beautiful virgin, with long, wavy hair, wearing a crown on her head and holding a book in her hand. Another iconographic variant is the one in which the saint is depicted as a martyr and carries with her the insignia of martyrdom, such as the spiked wheel and the sword¹⁹.

The iconographic cycle dedicated to St. Catherine, including both the history of the dispute with the emperor and the philosophers, and the martyrdom of the saint, will later be represented by numerous painters: Stefano da Zevio illustrated the cycle of St. Catherine in the church of St. Giorgio in Padua, Masolino da Panicale in the church of San Clemente in Rome, Mattia Pretti in the church of San Pietro a Majella in Naples, Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, and Guglielmo Borremans in the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in Cosenza²⁰. In addition to these, the scenes of St. Catherine's dispute with the philosophers and her martyrdom were also depicted by famous painters such as Coreggio, Van Dyck and Albrecht

¹⁶ Peter Schill, *Ikongrafie und Kult der hl. Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter*, 67.

¹⁷ Christine Walsh, *The Cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe*, 64.

¹⁸ See Pamela M. Jones, "Female Saints in Early Modern Italian Chapbooks, ca. 1570-1670," 99, n. 37.

¹⁹ Julia Koszalka, "Depiction of Catherine of Alexandria in Initial Miniatures on the Pages of Liturgical Chant Books," *Edukacja Muzyczna* 19 (2004): 53.

²⁰ *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, vol. 2 (Rome, 1949), col. 1140.

Dürer. The most famous paintings of St. Catherine as a martyr are those by Carravagio and Artemisia Gentileschi. Both representations depict the saint alone.

An attribute of the saint is the ring worn by the Infant Jesus, a sign of the mystical marriage with Christ the Savior. In an altar from the years 1475-1479, Hans Memling depicted a scene from the saint's hagiography that refers to the mystical marriage with the infant Jesus. This is in Bruges and is known as the altar of St. John. The same theme of the mystical marriage is also painted by the Dutch painter in a work that is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Here, alongside the Virgin Mary and St. Catherine, St. Barbara is also painted. A variation of this theme is the triptych painted by the same painter and which is at the National Gallery in London.

3. The Theme of St. Catherine's Polemic with Pagan Philosophers at Masolino (Basilica of San Clemente, Rome) and Pinturicchio (Borgia Apartments, Rome)

Analyzing the theme of the dispute between St. Catherine and the pagan philosophers in the history of Western medieval representations, Peter Schill identifies two types of iconographic representation of it, based on the standard representations of the life cycle of Jesus at the time. On the one hand, there is what he calls the „Diskussionstypus (= Typus1)“, respectively the „type of discussion“, in which „the teacher and the disciples stand or sit face to face“²¹. On the other hand, we would have the so-called „Lehrtypus“, meaning the „didactic type“, in which the master sits enthroned in the circle of his disciples or gives them a lecture²².

Within the Italian Renaissance we have original interpretations of the two models presented above. Two of the most interesting such interpretations of the theme of the polemic between St. Catherine and the pagan philosophers are offered by Masolino (ca. 1383-ca. 1447) in the first half of the 15th century and Pinturicchio (1454-1513) at the end of the same century.

Born in the last quarter of the 14th century, Masolino da Panicale (c. 1383 - c. 1447) is first mentioned in 1423 as a member of the *Florentine Guild of Painters, Physicians and Pharmacists*, and was probably also an assistant to Lorenzo di Bartoluccio Ghilberti²³ on the gates of the Baptistery in Florence at the beginning of the century. „For four years, between 1423 and 1427, he was to play a decisive role, occupying at the meeting of two styles a

²¹ Peter Schill, *Ikongrafie und Kult der hl. Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter*, 151–62, here 154.

²² Peter Schill, *Ikongrafie und Kult der hl. Katharina von Alexandrien im Mittelalter*, 155–156.

²³ Giorgio Vasari, *Viețile pictorilor, sculptorilor și arhitecților* [*Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*], vol. 1, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and notes by Ștefan Crudu (București: Editura Meridiane, 1968), 314–15.

position similar to that occupied by Pisanello in the north"²⁴. In Florence, he later collaborated with Masaccio on the decoration of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, later leaving for Rome, around 1430, to execute the frescoes at the church of San Clemente, including the Legend of St. Catherine, which some specialists, starting with Giorgio Vasari himself, the biographer of Italian artists, erroneously attribute to Masaccio²⁵. A student of Starnina, Masolino remains on the one hand „linked to the «international Gothic»", while at the same time spreading, „and this even in Venice, the innovations of Masaccio. (...) There is no doubt that in this way he contributed, at a crucial moment, to maintaining contact between contrasting concerns, without which neither the clear world of Domenico Venetiano nor the superior balance of Piero della Francesca would have existed"²⁶.

Masolino's composition *The Legend of Saint Catherine* from the church of San Clemente in Rome is remarkable for its sobriety and austerity. The scene of the dispute between Saint Catherine and the Greek philosophers is particularly striking. The saint stands, gesticulating sovereignly, in front of some old philosophers, who sit like students seated on benches. Masolino's composition clearly falls within what Peter Schill calls the „didactic type" (*Lehrtypus*). But, at the same time, in the image we also have the so-called „Diskurstypus" depicted through an artifice by Masoloni, through which he places on the wall behind the saint a painting in which the saint is depicted talking with the same philosophers, this time in the flames of hell. The authority of the preacher of Christian philosophy is expressed through her sober attire and clothing: Saint Catherine wears a black dress, austere and authoritative, in contrast to the brightly colored garments of the philosophers.

It is noteworthy that the emperor's clothing, depicted as if in a painting or in a niche in the background of the composition, is also black, which also expresses authority, although of a different kind. It is not a spiritual authority, but a political authority. If it were not integrated into a cycle of frescoes that recount the entire history of the martyrdom of Saint Catherine, the scene of the dispute between the Christian philosopher and the pagans could be interpreted as one of her persuasion of her students. Masolino's message, however, goes beyond the actual story and transmits a prophetic idea related to the superiority and triumph of Christianity over pagan religion and philosophical doctrines.

As for Pinturicchio (1454-1513), he was a younger collaborator and, to some extent, a disciple of Perugino in Rome, where he would return, probably after 1485, when he executed several works that would make him famous, including the decoration of the Borgia apartments in the Vatican, a task entrusted to him by Pope Alexander VI and executed in a very short

²⁴ *Enciclopedia picturii italiene* [*Encyclopedia of Italian Painting*], Romanian trans. of *Dictionnaire de la peinture italienne* (Paris: Hazan, 1972; București: Editura Meridiane, 1974), 144.

²⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *Viețile pictorilor, sculptorilor și arhitecților* [*Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*], vol. I, 318.

²⁶ *Enciclopedia picturii italiene* [*Encyclopedia of Italian Painting*], 145.

period of time (1492-1494)²⁷. Here, Pinturicchio would also paint the scene of the dispute between St. Catherine of Alexandria and the pagan philosophers.

Unlike Perugino, Pinturicchio, who in his youth was influenced by Benazzo Gozzoli and Bartolomeo Caporali, „will prolong until the 16th century the taste for a sumptuous, gilded, picturesque art, expressed without reservations - after the episode of the more moderate frescoes in the Sistine Chapel - in the apartments of Alexander VI in the Vatican”²⁸. Vasari will see in this specific style of Pinturicchio a shortcoming of his artistic creation, exemplifying it even with the scene of Saint Catherine’s polemic with the pagan philosophers: „In order to please certain people who were not very skilled in this art, Bernardino (Pinturicchio – n.n.) often used to decorate his paintings with relief ornaments, gilded with gold, in order to give them more brilliance and to be more striking, which in painting is a real rudeness. Executing in the rooms I mentioned above (n.n. Borgia Apartments) a scene from the life of Saint Catherine, he depicted the triumphal arches of Rome in relief, while he painted the characters; for this reason, the characters being in the foreground, and the buildings behind them, the things that seem to shrink are in front of those that the eye sees growing; in our art, however, this is a heresy as great as could be”²⁹.

However, the originality of these settings that Pinturicchio creates cannot be disputed: „the «grotesques», whose first systematic use we have here, frame enchanting and brightly colored scenes; we have, for example, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, in a dress strewn with flowers, among orientals (Prince Djem on horseback appears on the right of the composition) or hermit saints, in a desert of palm trees”³⁰.

Beyond these eminently stylistic aspects, it is very interesting how Pinturicchio understands to construct the scene of the polemic with the pagan philosophers in which St. Catherine takes part. She, standing and dressed in a magnificent starry dress with a red cape, stands opposite the multitude of philosophers, also standing, around the throne of the pagan emperor. Some of these philosophers wear oriental clothes, turbans or Turkish berets, a fact that emphasizes their paganism and their hostility towards Christianity. Catherine is depicted gesticulating, as if in the middle of her argumentation of Christian truth. Her attire is majestic and calm, while the motley gathering of philosophers seems to be disorganized and heterogeneous.

The emperor pays attention to Saint Catherine’s speech, leaning his torso slightly towards her. In the other half of the composition, we also have a motley gathering of listeners, many of them also dressed in oriental clothes. In the background, under the semicircle at the top of the wall, reigns a triumphal arch slightly protruding in relief (the defect that Vasari complained about in Pinturicchio’s style), above which sits the statue of a bull that

²⁷ *Enciclopedia picturii italiene [Encyclopedia of Italian Painting]*, 178.

²⁸ *Enciclopedia picturii italiene [Encyclopedia of Italian Painting]*, 179.

²⁹ Giorgio Vasari, *Viețile pictorilor, sculptorilor și arhitecților [Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects]*, vol. II, 149.

³⁰ *Enciclopedia picturii italiene [Encyclopedia of Italian Painting]*, 179.

probably refers to the cult of Jupiter. Below it, in gilded capitals, an inscription adorns the pediment of the temple: *Pacis cultori*, to the worshippers of peace.

It is a message with bitter irony, because the pagan religion proclaims peace through this, but does not hesitate to persecute a wise virgin who is about to overcome the errors of ancient philosophy through “solid and true arguments”. If we were to integrate Pinturicchio’s composition into the typology outlined by Peter Schill, then it would fall into the „discussion type” (*Diskussionstypus*), unlike Masolino’s composition from the church of San Clemente, where, as we have seen, Saint Catherine is depicted according to the „didactic type” (*Lehrtypus*), as a true teacher who teaches philosophers seated politely on chairs. Unlike Masolino’s fresco, Pinturicchio’s composition is much more extravagant and colorful. Even Saint Catherine is depicted in Masolino in a sober, black dress, which contrasts with the princely attire in the fresco in the Borgia Apartments.

Although the scene painted by Pinturicchio is much more mobile and dynamic, Masolino’s fresco provides additional information, as we have already seen, by placing behind the saint a painting depicting her in front of the group of philosophers, who are burning in the fires of hell, this time located in a front that falls within the already mentioned *Diskussionstypus*. Furthermore, Masolino’s emperor, unlike Pinturicchio’s, has almost no materiality. He is depicted in the background, in the style of a two-dimensional image, with an absent figure.

If in Pinturicchio the slight inclination of the emperor’s body, as well as the agitation around the maiden-philosopher and the decidedly pagan decorations have in themselves something threatening, anticipating her martyrdom, in Masolino, the sober virgin dominates the entire composition. The pagan philosophers stand myrrh-bearing like students, seeming impressed by the prospect of eternal torments depicted by Saint Catherine, and the emperor watches impassively from a dark painting placed in the background. Masolino thus conveys not only the message of the superiority of Christian doctrine over paganism, but also that of the victory of Christianity over paganism, which will inevitably prevail in the near future.

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