St Catherine of Alexandria – the legendary saint

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Within Winchester Cathedral, there are at least three representations of St Catherine of Alexandria. There is an image in the Holy Sepulchre Chapel, a stained glass panel in the Joys of Mary series in the North Presbytery Aisle and a minor statue in the Great Screen. Outside and about a mile away, to the south east, is St Catherine’s Hill where the settlement of Winchester may have started in the Iron Age.

In this article, the story of this very popular saint of the Middle Ages will be explored along with the varied indicators of her popularity. In England, there are 70 churches with dedications to St Catherine ranging from Ventnor on the Isle Wight in the central south to New Brancepeth, near Durham, in the north east. The closest dedication to the Cathedral is only three miles distant at St Catherine of Alexandria church, Littleton. As well, 170 medieval bells, which are controlled by a wheel, were dedicated to her. [1]

Not only was St Catherine a popular saint in English church dedications, but the names Catherine, Katherine, Caterina and Catalina were also popular names of other saints. At last count, including a Korean woman, Saint Catherine Chong Ch’oryom (d.1846), sanctified in 1984 by Pope John Paul II, there are 11 saints with these names and another three with Blessed or beatified status. That’s 14 in all. Italy alone has four Saints Catherine – of Siena (the national saint), of Bologna, of Ricci and St Caterina Volpicelli of Naples.

Catherine’s legend started in the early fourth century around 305. According to a 10th century vita (Life) or hagiography, she refused to marry the emperor Maxentius as she had declared herself to be a ‘bride of Christ’. She was then persecuted as a Christian, gaol ed and was to be tortured on a mechanical wheel which would break her bones. When she (or an angel) touched the wheel, it broke, but she was later beheaded. From this imagery came the Catherine Wheel firework which, when lit, spins around showering sparks.

The legend says that angels collected her body, including her head, and took it to Mt Sinai. It was 200 years later that the Mt Sinai monastery was founded and a further 300 years before her body was adjudged to be incorrupt, as if she was asleep. Incorruption was considered as a heavenly sign of great sanctity. At this time in the 9th century the promotion of the cult of St Catherine began, aided soon after by the 10th century vita.

Modern scholars are highly skeptical as to whether St Catherine existed. Robert Bartlett refers to her as “largely legendary” and “entirely imaginary”. [2] David Farmer, editor of the Oxford Dictionary of Saints commented: “There is no ancient cult of the saint, no mention in early martyrologies, no early works of art”. [3]
One factor in the promotion of female saints like Catherine, who were known as ‘virgin martyrs’, is that their lives, and especially their torture and execution, were luridly told with “cruelties elaborated to an extraordinary degree.” [4] The narrative of these legends was standardised: a girl in her teens becomes a Christian or is converted; she is often sought in marriage and usually refuses; this decision (or decisions) elicits a strong negative reaction from her family; she may be beaten, stripped or faced with sexual humiliation; Roman officials are portrayed in negative roles as persecutors, potential husbands and/or would-be rapists; the girl is then tortured in a horrible manner, but often saved by angels; the virgin martyr accepts the torture as a test of faith; and then suffers a terrible death or violent humiliation. [5]

In Catherine’s legend, she was stripped, beaten with scorpions, put in gaol to starve but was saved by supernatural support by being fed with “heavenly food for twelve days”. On the day when an angel assisted Catherine to break the torture wheel, four thousand pagans were killed. After she is beheaded, milk flows from her head rather than blood. Bartlett comments that “these narratives … are fantastic tales”. [6]

These, however, are modern critiques. The cults of St Catherine and of other virgin martyrs thrived and spread throughout Europe. Relics of St Catherine came to Rouen in northern France in the 11th century in the form of three fingers and the cult soon crossed the Channel.

Winchester seems to have been the first religious centre in England to recognise the Alexandrian saint. In a kalendar, found in a Psalter dated c.1062 and attributed to the New Minster in Winchester, a feast for “Caterina v. & m.” (St Catherine, virgin and martyr) is listed for 25th November, her feast day. [7] This saint is listed in only two of the 26 Anglo-Saxon kalendars in existence, of which the Winchester instance was the first and thus indicated the New Minster’s acceptance of a new universal (as opposed to a local or native) saint for veneration.

Another local recognition was the church of St Catherine atop St Catherine’s Hill. There has been some debate about the reasons for its naming. In his 1953 book, Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald argued that the dedication was derived from the Anglo-Saxon ‘Kader Ryn’ (meaning the fort of the river), as “St Catherine was never a popular saint in Hampshire”. [8] That appears to be a specious and incorrect argument as St Catherine on the Hill was recorded as being in possession of the cathedral priory in the 13th century. Excavations in the first quarter of the last century found that there may have been a building on the site before 1100. [9] There were other instances of churches and places in the county dedicated to St Catherine which Vesey-Fitzgerald overlooked.

There was a tradition in other parts of England and elsewhere that churches and chapels dedicated to St Catherine were built on hills or mounds in emulation of the Monastery of St Catherine on Mt Sinai. [10] The place of the chapel of St Catherine indicated that a deliberate decision was made to dedicate the hilltop chapel to her, rather than being transformed from ‘Kader Ryn’. The chapel was destroyed during the English Reformation by Thomas Wriothesley, one of Henry VIII’s Commissioners who had acquired it.
In the Cathedral’s Holy Sepulchre Chapel, on the south-western wall opposite the Chapel door, is a series of small images considered to represent the martyrdom of St Catherine. These are dated to the 13th century. [11] Crusaders would have been aware of her veneration in the Levant at the time of the crusades, particularly the Second Crusade from 1147-49 during the episcopacy of Henry of Blois, who may have commissioned artists working on illustration of the Winchester Bible to undertake the Chapel’s main fresco. An alternative period may be the Fifth Crusade (1217-21) when Peter des Roches, then Bishop of Winchester, led crusaders after the fall of Damietta. “Such an explanation would account for the presence of the earliest surviving cycle in England of the martyrdom of St Catherine of Alexandria, a saint popularised through the crusades”. [12] In all, 56 murals of the saint are recorded in English churches, of which 36 can still be seen.

St Catherine is shown, with a wheel and a sword (referring to her beheading), in the Joys of Mary glass series in the North Presbytery Aisle. These were installed in the episcopate of Richard Fox and are of high quality. [13] The St Catherine glass was restored recently by Holy Well Glass. A medieval glass panel of St Catherine can also be found at the east end of the nearby Church of St Cross.

A much more recent representation of the saint was installed on the Great Screen at the end of the 19th century when the statuary was renewed. A figure of St Catherine (second from left) was placed in a group of six female saints alongside the Holy Family and immediately above the High Altar, with fellow virgin saints Margaret, Anne, Agnes, Cecilia and Faith. [14]

St Catherine’s popularity and importance rose during the Middle Ages and is shown by two indicators. The first was in litany which Robert Bartlett considers to be “the essence of the cult of saints – the invocation of a name.” Litany was a list of saints’ names in a specific order. Each name was spoken and followed by the entreaty of “Pray for us”. Thus, the list of saints indicated local preferences and changes over time. [15]

St Catherine was listed in five litanies from the Priory of St Swithun – two from the late 12th century (c.1150 and c.1175-80), two from the beginning of the 13th
century (both c.1200) and one from the early 15th century (c.1410-25) as ‘Sancta Katerina ora’ (“St Catherine pray for us”). The saint was also included in four litanies at Hyde Abbey from the late 13th century (c.1275-1300) and the 14th century (c.1300-20 and c.1380-1400).[16]

Another less obvious indicator was the use of a saint’s name for a child’s first name. Research in the late 20th century tracked the association between the popularity of saints’ cults and the adoption of their names among the general public during the later Middle Ages. Saints’ names became more common in the Middle Ages displacing local names – ‘biblical saints’ such as John, James, Peter and Mary and the great universal martyr saints including Catherine and Margaret, as well as a select few confessors such as Antony and Nicholas “came to predominate”. [17] Also, new religious writing aimed at women at this time favoured saints such as Catherine, Juliana and Margaret.

Catherine’s festival on 25th November appeared frequently in the calendars of Books of Hours prayerbooks, and her life was promoted, with other virgin martyrs in the Golden Legend, a hagiographic compendium prepared by Jacapo da Voragine, an Italian Dominican, in 1258. The Golden Legend, which was added to over centuries, was the first ‘best-seller’ text of the Middle Ages and made the transition from monastery to general reader. [18] There are around 800 manuscript versions still in existence. It was also translated into almost every European vernacular language by the fifteenth century and was printed in an English version by William Caxton in 1483 and had nine editions by 1527.

Saints were a major feature of art throughout the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance. As well as narratives expressed in murals and frescos, the martyr saints were commonly portrayed with the instruments of their martyrdom. In Catherine’s case she bore the wheel that had been prepared for her torture. Later, she and many other saints were portrayed in a more visionary style. Raphael’s portrait in the National Gallery collection (right), dating from the early 16th century, captured Catherine with hand on heart and lips parted, looking heavenwards to a golden break in the clouds with her left arm resting on a spiked wheel. This style of portrait emphasised the ecstatic nature of faith rather than the earlier emphasis on martyrdom.

Although St Catherine’s festival was erased from the church calendar during the English Reformation, she is still celebrated in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths and remains a patron for the dying, young girls, students, philosophers and apologists, nurses (because milk instead of blood flowed from her severed head) and craftsmen whose work is based on the wheel. In Germany since the time of the Black Death, she has been one of the 14 Holy Helpers of the Roman Catholic tradition whose intercession is valued, especially for diseases. In her case, it is for sudden death and diseases of
the tongue. Catherine is also venerated by women seeking husbands and she had a marriage broker reputation, “as well as being a pinnacle of femininity, who was educated and courteous in her lifetime”. [19]

When you next look at St Catherine’s statue in the Great Screen, view the Joys of Mary glass, have an opportunity to see the narrative mural in the Holy Sepulchre Chapel or walk on St Catherine’s Hill, you can reflect on the legendary nature of this virgin martyr. Whether she existed or not, St Catherine’s endurance as a cult, and her importance to the Church and Winchester Cathedral should be celebrated.

Photographic acknowledgements
The photograph of the Holy Family and Six Female Saints on page 3 was taken by Simon Newman and is drawn from his Winchester Guides Image Library Cathedral. Raphael’s portrait of St Catherine of Alexandria is courtesy of The National Gallery.

References
[19] Hopper, Mothers, Mystics and Merrymakers, 112.