

Saint Catherine through the Lens of Feminism?

¿Santa Catalina bajo el prisma del feminismo?

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ABSTRACT: St. Catherine of Alexandria has been defined by modern scholarship as a «Ghost Saint», for the possible identification of her hagiographical figure as a hypostasis of the Late-Antique philosopher, Hypatia of Alexandria. Since Hypatia herself has been often interpreted as a “feminist” or “proto-feminist” icon, one could wonder if and to what extent a Female Studies’ perspective would be useful to let modern scholars understand Catherine’s figure in herself. The aim of this paper will be to propose some possible interpretations of St. Catherine’s functions through the lens of Female Studies, trying to disentangle in a diachronic approach some of the most significant moments of her literary and erudite representation, focusing in particular on the key-moment of its early modern reception.

KEYWORDS: St. Catherine of Alexandria, Hypatia of Alexandria, Caesar Baronius.

RESUMEN: Santa Catalina de Alejandría ha sido definida por la erudición moderna como una santa fantasma, por su posible identificación de la figura hagiográfica como una hipóstasis de la filósofa del tardoantiguo, Hipatia de Alejandría. Dado que la propia Hipatia ha sido interpretada a menudo como un icono «feminista» o «profeminista», cabe preguntarse si, y en qué medida, la perspectiva de los estudios sobre la mujer sería útil para que los estudiosos modernos comprendieran la figura de Catalina en sí misma. El objetivo de esta ponencia será proponer algunas posibles interpretaciones de las funciones de Santa Catalina a través de la lente de los Estudios Femeninos, tratando de desentrañar en un enfoque diacrónico algunos de los momentos más significativos de su representación literaria y erudita, centrándonos en particular en el momento clave de su recepción a principios de la Edad Moderna.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Santa Catalina de Alejandría, Hipatia de Alejandría, César Baronio.

Saint Catherine of Alexandria has been defined by modern scholarship as a «Ghost Saint»¹, at least since Anna Jameson, as a pioneer of Female Studies, proposed the identification of her hagiographical figure as a hypostasis of the Late-Antique philosopher, Hypatia of Alexandria: «It is a curious fact – Jameson wrote in 1874 – connected with the history of St. Catherine, that the real martyr, the only one of whom there is any certain

¹ See Ronchey (2022).

record, was not a Christian, but a heathen; and that her oppressors were not Pagan tyrants, but Christian fanatics»². The actual identification between the two figures is vigorously re-proposed by a significant part of recent scholarship³, while it still tends to be rejected as «problematic» or «not unequivocal» by other orientations, even though the historical existence of Catherine's figure still remains highly difficult to trace back in contemporary historical accounts⁴. In any case, a question arises in any further attempt at reconsidering the hagiographical figure of St. Catherine of Alexandria in the context of Late-Antique culture – and in her broader Byzantine, Medieval, and Modern afterlife. Since Hypatia herself has been often interpreted as a «feminist» or «proto-feminist» icon, one could wonder if and to what extent a Female Studies' perspective would be useful to let modern scholars understand Catherine's figure in herself, her possible duplicity, her possible continuity with Hypatia's legacy, the complex history of the creation of her hagiographical legend and of its disappearances and persistence in its further historical development. The aim of this paper will be to propose some possible interpretations of St. Catherine's functions through the lens of Female Studies, trying to disentangle in a diachronic approach some of the most significant moments of her literary and erudite representation. Hypatia was killed by Christian fanatics in Alexandria at the beginning of the 5th century (415 A.D.). According to the hagiographical legend (whose origins can be traced back not before the 6th or the 7th century), Catherine was martyred in Alexandria at the beginning of the 4th century, under the reign of Maxentius (or Maximinus Daia), one of the adversaries of Constantine during the tetrarchy. The two figures are presented in a very similar way in the surviving sources and accounts: both are known for their knowledge, their acquaintance with rhetoric, medicine, philosophy, for their eloquence and for the daring manner in which they spoke to the power. In any case, the description of the hagiographic tale seems to overlap with the one through which, for example, Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* VII, 15 ff., introduces the figure of Hypatia⁵.

The Greek hagiographic dossier⁶, in its various textual stratifications, seems to denounce the late and derivative nature of the origin of the hagiographic legend itself. First of all, in the three main channels of textual tradition of the legend, the oldest surviving manuscript witnesses do not appear to date back beyond the 10th century: this happens e.g. for the first text (A Viteau) with the ms. Pal. gr. 4; for the text B Viteau with the Vat. gr. 807, Par. gr. 1538 or with Sin. gr. 519; and, finally, for the text C Viteau with the mss. Par. gr. 1180 and Sin. gr. 526. On the one hand, the version of the so-called Imperial Menologium and, on the other, that provided by Simeon Metaphrastes also date back to the full 10th century. Moreover, some evidence of the late origin of the legend has also been

2. See Jameson (1904²: 467-8).

3. See Ronchey (2022).

4. See e.g. Krippas (2020).

5. See e.g. Viteau (1897: 7): Γυνή δὲ τις εὐλαβῆς ὑπῆρχεν ἐν τῇ πόλει τῶν Ἀλεξανδρέων, θυγάτηρ ὑπάρχουσα μονογενῆς βασιλέως τινός. Καὶ τούτου μεταλλάζοντος τὸν βίον, κατελείφθη κόρη μόνη ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ τῶν γονεῶν αὐτῆς μετὰ πάσης τῆς οὐσίας αὐτῆς καὶ τῶν παιδῶν αὐτῆς καὶ τῶν κορασίων αὐτῆς, ὧν οὐκ ἦν ἀριθμὸς. Τὸ δὲ ὄνομα αὐτῆς Αἰκατερίνα ἐλέγετο. Cf. Socr. Schol., *Hist. Eccl.* VII, 15 and ff.: Ἦν τις γυνὴ ἐν τῇ Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τοῦνομα Ὑπατία. Αὕτη Θεῶνος μὲν τοῦ φιλοσόφου θυγάτηρ ἦν, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτο δὲ προὔβη παιδείας, ὡς ὑπερακοντίσαι τοὺς κατ' αὐτὴν φιλοσόφους, τὴν δὲ Πλατωνικὴν ἀπὸ Πλωτίνου καταγομένην διατριβὴν διαδέξασθαι καὶ πάντα τὰ φιλόσοφα μαθήματα τοῖς βουλομένοις ἐκτίθεσθαι. Διὸ καὶ οἱ πανταχόθεν φιλοσοφεῖν βουλόμενοι συνέτρεχον παρ' αὐτήν.

6. See e.g. Viteau (1897) and Bronzini (1960).

adduced on a more purely textual level: in 1902, in fact, Bidez highlighted how the so-called C version of the life of St. Catherine, published by Viteau, made extensive use of quotations taken *ad verbum* from John Malalas' *Chronographia*⁷ (or from a possible common source) in some of the saint's speeches, thus providing a possible element of dating, since the date of 540 would constitute a clear *terminus post quem* at least for the dating of C. Many of the concordances affecting the *Chronographia* of John Malalas and the *Passio Aecaterinae* are then also shared by the so-called Χρησιμοὶ καὶ θεολογίαὶ Ἑλλήνων φιλοσόφων, which later were merged into the *Theosophia Tubingensis*⁸. Furthermore, even with regard to redaction D, *i.e.* Simeon Metaphrastes' text, Harris also detected a series of unexpected convergences, on a purely textual level, between the text of the legend of St. Catherine and that of *Barlaam and Joasaph*; indeed, some consonances can also be found between the text of the so-called version C and the *Barlaam and Joasaph*⁹. The text here deals with an explicit reference to euhemeristic traditions, also mentioned elsewhere in the course of the history, evidently taken from the text of Catherine's *martyrion*. If the extensive concordances between the various texts initially led Rendel Harris to imagine that they depended on the model of a lost *Apologia* by Aristides, J. Armitage Robinson noted instead, more convincingly, that the passages (at least five) with *ad verbum* coincidences between Catherine's *Passio* and Malalas' text were mostly to be considered taken directly from Malalas' *Chronographia* or from a lost common source, possibly identifiable with Timothy, in any case to be considered not prior to the 6th century¹⁰. Moreover, it is at least in the 6th century that the drafting of the so-called *Theosophia Tubingensis* must also be placed – the text of the *Passio of Catherine* draws at least the two oracles

7. See *e.g.* *Passio Aecaterinae*, ed. Viteau (1897: 34): ... ἔδει σε κὰν τῷ παρ' ὑμῖν σοφῷ Διοδώρῳ γεγονότα πεισθήνιον τῆς τούτων λατρείας σεαυτὸν ἀποσπάσασθαι; ὅστις οὕτως ἐν ταῖς ἐαυτοῦ συγγραφαῖς λέγει περὶ αὐτῶν ὅτι ἄνθρωποι γεγονάσιν οἱ θεοὶ καὶ δι' εὐεργεσίας τινὰς ἀθανάτους αὐτοὺς οἱ ἄνθρωποι προσηγόρευσαν. Ἱστορεῖ καὶ ἰδίας ἐσχηκέναι ὀνομάτων προσηγορίας αὐτοῦς, ἄρξαντας καὶ χωρῶν τινῶν. Τοῦτο δὲ πεποιήκασιν ἀγνοία πλανηθέντες, φησὶν ≈ John. Mal., *Chron.* II, 18: περὶ ὧν ἐν ταῖς συγγραφαῖς αὐτοῦ λέγει καὶ ὁ Διόδωρος ὁ σοφώτατος ταῦτα, ὅτι ἄνθρωποι γεγονάσιν οἱ θεοί, οὐστίνως οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὡς νομίζοντες δι' εὐεργεσίαν ἀθανάτους προσηγόρευον· τινὰς δὲ καὶ ὀνομάτων προσηγορίας ἐσχηκέναι καὶ κρατήσαντας χώρας. τοῦτο δὲ ἐποίουν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἀγνοία πλησθέντες. See, then, *Passio Aecaterinae*, ed. Viteau (1897: 34): Οὕτω γὰρ καὶ τις ἄλλος τούτων σοφῶν ἱστώρων ἔφησεν ὡς ὁ Σεροῦχ ἐκεῖνος πρῶτος ἐξεύρηται τὰ τοῦ ἑλληνισμοῦ συνιστῶν διὰ τὸ τοὺς πάλαι γενομένους ἢ πολεμιστὰς ἢ τι πράξαντας ἀνδρείας ἢ ἀρετῆς ἐν τῷ βίῳ, ὡς μνημονεύεσθαι ἄξιον, ἀνδριάσι τιμῆσαι στηλῶν ≈ John. Mal., *Chron.* II, 18: ὁ Σεροῦχ· ὅστις ἐνήξατο πρῶτος τοῦ δόγματος τοῦ ἑλληνισμοῦ διὰ τῆς εἰδωλολατρίας, καθὼς Εὐσέβιος ὁ Παμφίλου συνεγράψατο, διὰ τὸ τοὺς πάλαι γενομένους πολεμιστὰς <ἢ> ἡγεμόνας ἢ πράξαντας τι ἀνδρείον ἢ ἀρετῆς ἐν τῷ βίῳ τοῦ μνημονεύεσθαι εἶναι ἄξιον, μάλιστα τοὺς ποιήσαντας διὰ δυνάμεώς τινος μυστήρια, ὡς ὄντας αὐτῶν προπάτορας ἀνδριάσι στηλῶν ἐτίμησαν. Cf. Bidez (1902), Rendel Harris (1923) and Armitage Robinson (1924).

8. On the *Theosophia* see recently Carrara, Männlein-Robert (2018). On the interrelationships between theosophical collections and Christian texts such as the *Passio Sancti Artemii* and the *Passio Sanctae Aecaterinae*, see Tissi (2018: 323-340). For a synthesis of the *loci paralleli* see Benvenuto (2023a: 61-62).

9. See, for example, the following passage, in which the learned Theudas addresses the young prince of the fairy tale, which shows very clear analogies with the quotes from Malalas in the text of C (Volk (2006: 332-333): Ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτῶν τῶν ποιητῶν, ὅσοι μικρὸν τι δεδύνηται τῆς πολλῆς ἀνανεῦσαι μανίας, εἶπον τὸ ἀληθέστερον, ὅτι οἱ λεγόμενοι θεοὶ ἄνθρωποι ἦσαν καὶ – διὰ τὸ τινὰς μὲν αὐτῶν ἄρξει χωρῶν τε καὶ πόλεων, τινὰς δὲ ἄλλο τι οὐδαμινὸν κατὰ τὸν βίον ποιῆσαι – πλανηθέντας ἀνθρώπους θεοὺς αὐτοὺς καταλέσαι. Κατ' ἀρχὰς μὲν γὰρ ὁ Σεροῦχ ἐκεῖνος ἱστώρηται τὰ τῶν ἀγαλμάτων ἐξευρεῖν. Τοὺς γὰρ ἐν τοῖς πάλαι χρόνοις ἢ ἀνδρείας ἢ φιλίας εἶτε τινὸς ἐτέρας ἀνδραγαθίας ἔργον μνήμης ἄξιον ἐπιδειξαμένους ἀνδριάσι λέγεται καὶ στηλαῖς τιμῆσαι. . See the parallel passage of text C (Viteau 1897: 45-47).

10. See Rendel Harris (1923) and Armitage Robinson (1924).

of Plato and Apollus which are printed, for example, on p. 53, l. 13 of Viteau's text (and which Bentley had printed in his notes to Malalas' text based on the collection of χρησμοί from an Oxford manuscript)¹¹. *Et Sinai collocatur in supremo culmine* – states a medieval hymn in honor of Catherine, which also simultaneously evokes the idea of height and eminence which is etymologically inherent in the name of Hypatia¹². Indeed, also the genesis of the legend of the *inventio* and the transport of Catherine's holy body to Mount Sinai and to its highest summit must certainly be considered late. The transport of the relics – to which the *Miracula* collections in the Latin medieval context also refer – must be placed, as Giovanni Battista Bronzini suggested, between the 8th and 9th centuries, if (as the scholar noted) «il silenzio dei pellegrini che si recano al Sinai, fino “almeno” all'820, ci fornirebbe d'altra parte, un termine *a quo* abbastanza sicuro. Nell'ambiente monastico del Sinai, pur così favorevole alla conservazione di pie tradizioni, non si ha notizia di S. Caterina prima dell'VIII o del IX secolo»¹³.

But in any case, the relation between the two has been generally described by scholarship as a kind of «oppositive analogy»: Hypatia-Catherine has been often spoken of as an «oppositional parallelism», an «oppositive analogy» or «an analogy by contrast»¹⁴. Yet, in this oppositional logic, for example, one could consider, just over a decade after Jameson's words, the opinion of Paul Lejay, who reviewed Hermann Knust's work on St. Catherine: «[...] Une femme a joui à Alexandrie d'une renommée toute semblable à celle dont le nom de Catherine a été entouré plus tard. C'est Hypatie. Le désir d'avoir à opposer à l'illustre paienne une Chrétienne aussi versée dans la sagesse profane a dû aider au développement de maigres éléments fournis par l'histoire»¹⁵. Giovanni Battista Bronzini stated that Catherine figure was the result of a process of inversion: «Tali accostamenti, se non hanno illuminato di verità storica il personaggio, pongono un'ipotesi, nient'affatto scartabile, sul processo di nascita e di sviluppo della leggenda di S. Caterina d'Alessandria: la quale non è improbabile che sia sorta sul ceppo della storia famosa di Ipazia, con un procedimento di inversione ben noto agli studiosi di novellistica, che si spiegherebbe col desiderio di opporre all'illustre pagana una cristiana versata anch'essa nella scienza profana»¹⁶. If it is possible that Catherine's story was born, by successive sedimentations, starting from and on the model of that of Hypatia, there is however no reason to believe that it was born in opposition to that of Hypatia, that is to create a Christian counterpart to the figure of the late ancient scholar. But, as a kind of projection, continuation, prosthesis, or Christian extension of Hypatia's figure. The cult and hagiographic legend of St. Catherine of Alexandria were, in fact, undoubtedly born in the East, in that learned Byzantine East which – as highlighted in the last decade by the fundamental research by Silvia Ronchey – preserved a vivid memory of the wisdom of Hypatia and also simultaneously received the stigmatization and condemnation of the actions of the Bishop Cyril of Alexandria (as witnessed *e.g.* by the passage of Michael Psellos in which «the Egyptian», that is Hypatia, is associated with the great Pythagorean woman Theano)¹⁷. Therefore, it is not

11. See above n. 8.

12. See *e.g.* Byrnes (1943: 376).

13. Bronzini (1960: 414).

14. See *e.g.* Tollo (2015: 16).

15. Lejay (1890: 171).

16. Bronzini (1960: 296).

17. Ronchey (2021: 186-187).

at all presumable that the cult of St. Catherine was originally born as a deliberate attempt to contrast the figure of Hypatia with that of a Christian scholar, virgin and saint. That a «crypto-Christian» cult was paid to Hypatia *post mortem* seems to be attested by an epigram of Palladas (late 5th century), which, according to Enrico Livrea's reconstruction, can be fully understood in the light not only of the catasterism of the pagan philosopher, but also of the fact that the epigram had been conceived «come epigrafe su una tomba o un cenotafio, che si immagina collocato in un tempio pagano, oppure, meglio, in un'istituzione educativa (ad es. di impronta neoplatonica) ad Alessandria»¹⁸. In this regard, Livrea also wrote that «il carattere cristiano della terminologia del poema [...] si spiega ancor meglio come volontà di contrapporre alla cultura dominante una “santa” pagana: non a caso, sull'opposto fronte, la leggenda cristiana di S. Caterina d'Alessandria mutua tratti molteplici della pagana Ipazia, della quale la mitica santa cristiana costituisce una sorta di ipostasi»¹⁹. Moreover, it is in the full 6th century – that is, in conjunction with the first attestations regarding the cult of St. Catherine – that a precious, albeit false, testimony is given regarding the Christianization and even the conversion to Christianity of Hypatia herself, attested by a false Latin document, which is essentially a letter from Hypatia, purported to be written on the occasion of the Council of Ephesus (431), fifteen years after her death (which occurred in 415), through which Hypatia would have explained to Cyril the Christian, albeit duophysite, doctrine of Nestorius²⁰. Hypatia herself became, therefore, an expression of a Constantinopolitan Christianity antithetical to the Alexandrian one of Cyril – *i.e.* monophysite and monarchic²¹. The false epistle, already known in the late 17th century, tells us a lot about the positive reception of Hypatia in Byzantine culture, an orientation that critics have recently recognized with ever greater clarity even in sources contemporary to the facts. If the production of the forgery takes place, in fact, in the context of a retrospective defense of the dictates of Chalcedon – the council of 451 which had marked the defeat of the monophysite doctrine which had its own heresiarch in Cyril, Hypatia herself is defended by Byzantine historiography, including ecclesiastical ones, which is not inclined to accept the monarchical model of Cyril's episcopate. The real contrast was not between paganism and Christianity, but between different models of Christianity. Therefore, if there was a stratification, a sort of sedimentation of the figure of Catherine on the pre-existing one of Hypatia, there is no reason to believe, net of the Christianization of the character, net of the process of «inversion» which is undoubtedly observed in their stories, that Catherine was born in contrast to Hypatia, but almost as a sort of extension of her. One of the most astonishing witnesses about the idea of the continuity between the two figures is that provided, at the beginning of the 20th century, by Vasileios Myrsilidis, who claimed to have participated, in the ancient city of Laodicea to some celebrations of Hypatia's memory²².

18. See Livrea (1997: 101).

19. See Livrea (1997: 100).

20. The text is edited in Schwartz (1922-23: 240); see Blaudeau (2016) and Manchon (2020).

21. Ronchey (2021).

22. Myrsilidis (1926) and Spetzieris (1973-1974: 418-420); see Ronchey (2021: 117) and Krippas (2020). Still, some researchers believe that Myrsilidis' account is totally groundless, since much of the evidence he quotes has been lost in any case during the Greek-Turkish war of 1922. But, in any case, Myrsilidis account is probably not so important in order to propose the actual identification of Hypatia and Catherine, but to suggest the idea of a continuity between the two figures.

Catherine's arrival in the West can be traced back to between the 11th and 12th centuries and a key figure in her journey is that of St Symeon of Trier, a Normand monk active in the Middle East in the first part of the 11th century, which visited Sinai and is believed to be linked with the arrival of Catherine's relics in Rouen²³. One could mention *e.g.* also the figure of a Southern-Italy Norman count, Alexander of Conversano, which adopted at least since the 40s of the 12th century the image of St. Catherine of Alexandria on his personal seals²⁴. But, even in its translation into the Western world, the cult of Catherine somehow maintained her original role, still being a kind of projection of Hypatia's figure, naturally assuming a kind of special patronage on culture and on learned men. One could mention *e.g.* her official election to patron of the Sorbonne University in Paris, since the charm of the saint was also felt and cultivated by cultural circles, in particular by universities: the stamp of the Sorbonne University bears, in fact, her effigy and her celebration was considered a special occasion for the defense of degree theses which, precisely in honor of the saint, were called *catherinettes*²⁵. This therefore explains how since the 12th century some legal and theological faculties of various European universities took Catherine of Alexandria as their patron: Bologna (founded in 1088), Sorbonne (ca. 1165), Padua (1222), Siena (1246), Pavia (1361), Wien (1365), but also the Salerno Medical School (end of the 11th century). The same applies to the special devotion paid to St. Catherine by the mendicant orders and by the learned Augustinians²⁶. But even in the West, the figure of Catherine would have been spontaneously linked to the survival of pagan wisdom or its exhumation, so to speak, in a broadly Christian context. Even in new dress, even wearing this Christian *redingote* – if I may say so – Catherine's figure continued over the centuries to function as a kind of projection of Hypatia's figure, as a kind of prothesis, or extension, in which Hypatia's heritage could still survive. There was no real cut between the two figures, there was no actual distinction, there was on the contrary a clear line of continuity which made they function like twins, in a process of continuous overlap. They were no rivals to each other, but siblings.

When and how and why did it happen, therefore, that the two figures no longer became the extension and continuation of each other, but we began to understand them in an oppositional framework or even in terms of an actual clash? When did the logic of the opposition between the two figures replace that of continuity and projection? Since Leon Clugnet wrote in 1908 the lemma St. Catherine of Alexandria for the *Catholic Encyclopedia*²⁷ (later reproposeed by the lemma St. Catherine in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*²⁸) it is commonly believed, on the one hand, that the Maronite scholar Joseph Simon Assemani was the first to propose the actual identification of Catherine's figure with a royal and wealthy lady of Alexandria who is mentioned by Eusebius and Rufinus during Maximinus Daia's persecutions and, on the other, that «so late as the 16th century, Bossuet delivered a panegyric upon her, and it was the action of Dom Déforis, the Benedictine editor of his works, in criticizing the accuracy of the data on which this was based, that

23. Chronopoulos (2006: 72 ff.), but see also Walsh (2007) and Chronopoulos (2021).

24. Benvenuto (2023b: 25), with further bibliography.

25. See *e.g.* Tollo (2015: 85).

26. See *e.g.* Tollo (2015: 65, n. 43) with further bibliography.

27. See Clugnet (1908).

28. See *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, V, 1911, p. 524.

first discredited the legend. The saint's feast was removed from the Breviary at Paris about this time, and the devotion to St. Catherine has since lost its earlier popularity»²⁹. Both Joseph Simon Assemani (1687-1768) and Jean-Pierre Déforis (1733-1794) represented a crucial step in the modern reception of St. Catherine's figure – in a moment in which Hypatia's figure herself was rediscovered – but without any doubt they were not the first ones to point out with different arguments Catherine's presumed historical consistency or inconsistency.

In her recent book on Hypatia, in fact, Silvia Ronchey has clearly showed that Cardinal Caesar Baronius, while following Synesius in celebrating Hypatia's wisdom and calling her «the greatest philosophical mind of her time», countered Flacius Illyricus' deductions by attempting to alter the accounts of Cyril's policies and insinuating doubt about the reliability of the sources – in particular Socrates Scholasticus – from which these accounts are taken³⁰. Baronius' *Annales ecclesiastici* were definitely the starting point of the following catholic approaches about Hypatia's murder and Cyril's further reception in Roman Catholicism³¹. Ronchey has pointed out that the discrediting introduced by Baronius, of the oldest Christian testimony on the vicissitudes of Hypatia, Socrates Scholasticus, was handed down through this wing of historiography over the centuries, up to the item Cyril of Alexandria which even in the mid 20th century lived on in the *Enciclopedia cattolica*: «It is not possible to impute to Cyril this assassination, despite the insinuations of Socrates, who is not impartial»³². If, as it has been highlighted, we examine the great scientific repertoires of 20th century Catholicism, from the *Ecclesiastical Dictionary* by Angelo Mercati – according to which Hypatia was «killed during a public riot» and the «guilt of Saint Cyril of Alexandria» was «never proven» – to the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* and the *Histoire de l'Église* by Fliche and Martin³³, we find that the line inaugurated by Baronius will last until the 19th-century Catholicism, which raised Cyril to the status of Doctor of the Church. The title *Doctor Incarnationis* was conferred on him in 1882, almost one thousand five hundred years after his regrettable episcopacy, by Pope Leo XIII, «a pope obsessed by the new Paganism represented by the Freemasonry», as it has been written, «and by the fiercely anticlerical liberals that dominated in Rome at his time»³⁴. Thus, Baronius' *Annales ecclesiastici* represent, as it was recently highlighted, the actual turning point in the modern reception of the figure of Cyril of Alexandria and Baronius was «the great puppeteer» of the Catholic reception of the figure of Hypatia³⁵.

It is generally under-esteemed and under-studied that Baronius' *Annales* were also, as far as I know, the first philological attempt at providing St. Catherine herself with an actual biographical profile. The first concern of Baronius reconstruction was, of course, that of giving Catherine's figure and biography, as transmitted by the hagiographic dossier, a plausible historical consistency and to give biographical consistency to the legendary figure itself. In the same work, in fact, while proposing to minimize Cyril's responsibility, Cardinal Baronius also proposed for the first time to identify Catherine with the martyr Dorothea,

29. *Ibid.* See later n. 36.

30. See Ronchey (2021: 87-92).

31. See Ronchey (2021: 87-92). On the reception of Cyril's figure in Catholic historiography see Canfora (2010).

32. Jugie (1950).

33. Ronchey (2021: 90).

34. Ronchey (2021: 88).

35. *Ibid.*

whose account is provided *e.g.* by Eusebius of Caesarea' *Historia Ecclesiastica* VIII, 14 which provides the interesting account of an Egyptian lady, that some other sources (see in particular Rufinus) called Dorothea, who was a potential candidate for the identification with Catherine³⁶. The two figures – Catherine and Hypatia – are, in fact, clearly placed next to each other in the same pages of Baronius' *Annales*, although the cardinal is keen to clarify that Hypatia's case is here mentioned only as a proof of Dorothea's actual existence, as a well-known example of another noble and wise woman from Alexandria. What immediately follows in Baronius' account, in fact, is a comparison with Hypatia's own life: «Quod quidem haud mirabitur, qui alteram feminam itidem Alexandrinam, Hypatiam nomine, insignem eruditione, perspectam habuerit, quae claruit (ut tradit Socrates) sub Theodosio Iunior, ex quo hæc modo pauca referimus: hæc tantos in litteris fecit progressus, ut omnes philosophos sui temporis longe superaret; ac non modo in scholam Platonicam a Plotino deductam succederet, verum omnes philosophorum omnium præceptiones & disciplinas omnibus, qui eam audire volebant, explicaret: quapropter quotquot philosophiae studio incedebantur, undiqye ad illam confluebant. Hæc & alia de ea Socrates, atque Suidas: sed & celebris est nomen Hypatiæ apud Sinesium insignem philosophum, qui eam magistram appellat. At hæc a nobis exempli causa tantum adducta sunt».

«Exempli causa tantum»: the final clause makes it clear that Baronius himself had in mind (and was worried about and embarrassed by) the analogies between Hypatia's murder and Catherine's martyrdom. It wasn't necessary at all to wait until the full 18th century, when the Maurine scholar Jean-Pierre Déforis accused St. Catherine to be a Ghost. This can be proven with some further evidence. For instance, Antonio Gallonius, a scholar contemporary to Baronius, informs us in his treatise about martyrdom, *Trattato degli instrumenti di martirio* (published in Rome, 1591), that he would have soon provided a “defense” of the historicity and the actual existence of St. Catherine's figure which was questioned by some contemporaries, while announcing the publication of his *Historia delle sante vergini forastiere*, following the *Historia delle sante vergini romane* (Roma, 1591): «l'istoria di questa gloriosa martire (mutate alcune poche cose) difenderemo noi, piacendo a Dio, contra alcuni, che della verità sua van dubitando, nell'opera delle Sante Vergini forestiere, la quale pensiamo fra alcuni mesi di stampare»³⁷. Gallonius' defense of St. Catherine's historicity has never been published, and indeed the manuscript itself of the *Historia delle sante vergini forastiere* has been completely lost, as Giuseppe Finocchiaro has shown in a recent research³⁸. Nevertheless, the passage shows that at

36. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VIII, 14, 15 ff. (Bardy 1958: 35-36) states, indeed, that the Emperor Maximinus Daia had an insane passion for a noble lady of Alexandria, who was famous for her wealth, education and virginity, but when the lady refused his advances he exiled her: μόνη γοῦν τῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ τυραννοῦ μεμοιχευμένων Χριστιανῶν τῶν ἐπ' Ἀλεξανδρείας ἐπισημοτάτη τε καὶ λαμπροτάτη τὴν ἐμπαθῆ καὶ ἀκόλαστον Μαξιμίνου ψυχὴν δι' ἀνδρειοτάτου παραστήματος ἐξενίκησεν, ἔνδοξος μὲν τὰ ἄλλα πλούτω τε καὶ γένει καὶ παιδείᾳ, πάντα γὰρ μὴν δευτέρα σωφροσύνης τεθειμένη· ἦν καὶ πολλὰ λιπαρήσας, κτεῖναι μὲν ἔτοιμος θνήσκειν ἔχουσαν οὐχ οἷός τε ἦν, τῆς ἐπιθυμίας μᾶλλον τοῦ θυμοῦ κατακρατούσης αὐτοῦ, φυγῆ δὲ ζημιώσας πάσης ἀφείλετο τῆς οὐσίας. Moreover, Rufinus *ad locum* also provided the details that the saint lady was exiled to Arabia.

37. Gallonius (1591: 161).

38. Cf. Finocchiaro (2019: 23-28) which deals with reconstructing the editorial history of his hagiographic writings, and in particular of the *Historia delle sante vergini forastiere*, in whose title the adjective *forastiere* indicated that the saints in question had origins and came from outside Rome, that is, the city that for Gallonius it was the «sacred space par excellence». This text, originally conceived as part of a larger collection of Lives of the Saints, to be created in subsequent sections, was ultimately excluded from publication, and

Baronius' time the actual historicity of St. Catherine figure was indeed already debated, probably under the stimulus of the accusations of the Reformers. Even though Gallonius' defense never saw the light, it is interesting to see that, in a few years, Catherine's defense would have been conducted by another key-figure of 16th-century Rome and of Catholic Counter-Reformation, namely within the *Annales ecclesiastici* of Caesar Baronius. We do not know to what degree Baronius could have received and incorporated some of Gallonius' own materials in defense of St. Catherine, but the actual point is that Baronius' *Annales* also have a crucial role in the modern reception of both Hypatia's and Catherine's account.

Who were those doubting about Catherine's existence and historicity? One would immediately think of the Reformers. And indeed, we can find that Catherine was accused by some of the Reformers to be an imaginary figure, and a non-existent one, even a monster-Saint or a Ghost-Saint. For instance, a quotation from Jean Calvin (1509-1565) may provide some suggestions about the role that an imaginary figure such as Catherine played in the broader context of the view adopted by the Reformers on the cult of saints: «Multa porro sunt templa Catharinae dicata [...] vel aliis fictitiis nominibus. Catharinae [...] precibus ut juvetur plebs huius loci a Domino postulabit. Itane cum Deo ludetur ut qui nulli unquam fuerunt obrudantur ad Deum exorandum patroni? Talibus monstris, qui fomenta suppeditant, gestumne aliquem unquam habuisse credendi sunt seriae sinceraeque Dei invocationis?»³⁹. In this passage, Calvin sheds some doubts on the actual historical consistency of the figure of St. Catherine, which is even explicitly called and depicted as a hagiographical *monstrum*. Calvin's violent passage shows that the 16th-century controversy on Catherine is linked to the cult of saints more generally, but it is especially aimed at countering those hagiographic *monstra* that particularly lent themselves to Protestant criticism. It is probably in the wake of this Protestant criticism that doubts about Catherine's historicity began to spread throughout 16th-century Europe. In any case, this makes finally clear that Baronius reconstruction of St. Catherine aimed at countering the rumors about her actual existence, which were already spreading and circulating in the Reformed world; while his judgment on Cyril's role in Hypatia's murder was countering – as we have seen – the critics of another great member of the Reformed world, Mathias Flacius Illiricus, who was the first to defend Hypatia's memory. Thus, more than a mere conjecture, more than a hypothesis, Baronius' historical and philological device, employed in his *Annales ecclesiastici*, was most definitely a fake. The two passages on Catherine and Hypatia in Baronius' *Annales* constitute the two sides of a single coin, a device conceived *ab origine* to defuse the danger, even if only potential, of both the figures. The two passages, therefore, must still be read together today – because in fact they constitute a hendiadys – otherwise there is a risk of not understanding the strategy that clearly underlies both of them. It was a wise and complex operation which, on the one hand, had to minimize Cyril's responsibility in the murder of Hypatia and, on the other, at the same time, dispel even just the suspicion that the Holy Roman Church had continued to venerate for centuries the philosopher and martyr of Late-Antique Alexandria. Baronius' account is thus possibly the first moment in which the two ladies were put in war with

indeed its manuscript itself, which we also know must have been almost ready for publication. printed in parallel with Gallonius' *Historia delle sante vergini romane* (Rome, 1591), not only was it never published, but it was even lost.

39. Calvin (1549: 174); see Chronopoulos (2006: 19).

each other, the first moment in which the continuity, the overlap, the transfer between Hypatia and Catherine is replaced by the model of contrast and opposition or opposite analogy, since, in Baronius' perspective, giving existence to Catherine and at the same time absolving Cyril, is the right way to de-activate Hypatia. And indeed, from Baronius' onwards any further attempt at giving Catherine historical and biographical concreteness and reality, has coincided with some de-activation of Hypatia's figure.

Thus, could the modern parable of St. Catherine of Alexandria be read through the scheme and approach of a gender perspective? A careful re-reading of Baronius' *Annales ecclesiastici* allows us to trace a conscious and deliberate erudite and philological operation which aims, on the one hand, to absolve Cyril from the responsibility of Hypatia's murder and, on the other, to make the figure of St. Catherine as concrete as possible, in order to counter Hypatia's one. In both cases, the primary objective is to undermine the danger of Hypatia. From this perspective, the model of continuity, which sees in Catherine an extension of Hypatia herself, is here finally replaced by that of opposition, which wants to understand Catherine as a Christian counterpart of Hypatia, as well as her nemesis. The historical-philological device (most definitely a fake) conceived by Baronius, at the same time aiming at mining the judgment of Socrates Scholasticus on Bishop Cyril and the non-existence of St. Catherine, appears thus in both cases fundamentally aimed at defusing the "problem" Hypatia. And, indeed, it seems that the erudite operation set up by Baronius was functional, in short, to silence the Egyptian lady once and for all. Baronius could perhaps hope to exclaim in turn, as we read in Cyril's *Easter Homilies*, that *σεσίγηται ἡ Αἴγυπτία*, that the wise Egyptian woman had been silenced.

But there is an interesting aspect of the afterlife of Baronius' reconstruction: if it is true that Baronius' negative judgment on the accountability of Socrates Scholasticus and the re-habilitation of Cyril's figure had the power to give its imprinting – as we have seen before – on the further development of Catholic reception of Cyril's figure in the following centuries, the attempt at identifying Catherine with Eusebius' and Rufinus' Dorothea of Alexandria was not so lucky in its further erudite, historical and philological reception. Despite having accepted Baronius' considerations on the reliability of Socrates' account (which *ipso facto* entailed a sort of exoneration of Cyril and his acquittal from the accusations relating to the murder of Hypatia), Catholic historiography, contemporary and subsequent to Baronius, would have refused to accept the hypothesis of Catherine's historicity. In fact, Baronius' reconstruction of the actual identity of St. Catherine of Alexandria was mainly rejected by modern hagiographical studies. The fifth volume of Baronius' *Annales ecclesiastici* had been published in 1602. Shortly afterwards, for example, Jean Bolland, in the third volume of the *Acta Sanctorum* (1658) rejected Baronius's falsification as a *solertis coniectura*: «Solertem viri magni coniecturam, nulla tamen vetustiori auctoritate, ac solida satis ratione firmatam haud est cur leviter amplectamur [...] Dorotheam Eusebius exilio multatam scribit, Ruffinus, qui primus prodidit nomen, quod Aegyptum obeundo fortassis didicerat, non ignorasset e fuga retracta fuisset, itaque immaniter excarnificata»⁴⁰. Likewise, Louis-Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont also forcefully rejected Baronius' conjecture, in turn accepting Bolland's judgment: «Comme l'histoire de cette Sainte a quelque rapport avec ce qu'on dit de Ste Catherine, et qu'il peut paroistre étrange que ni Eusebe, ni aucun des anciens, n'ait parlé d'une Sainte aussi celebre que l'est aujourd'hui celle là, Baronius a cru que ce pouvoit

40. *Acta Sanctorum februarii*, Antperviae 1658, p. 777.

être la même que cette St. Dorothee d'Alexandrie, qui aura eu l'un et l'autre nom. Mais il ne peut pas même faire approuver son sentiment à Bollandus, qui trouve que ses pensées sur ce point et sur le nom de la Sainte ne sont pas bien soutenables. Après tout, il n'y a aucun rapport entre ces deux Saintes, sinon qu'on les fait toutes deux vierges d'Alexandrie, nobles, riches, savantes [...] Nous sommes contraints d'avouer que nous n'avons pas un seul point de son histoire que nous puissions dire être assuré. Il ne se peut rien voir de plus judicieux que ce que Baronius dit sur cela»⁴¹. The refusal of the Jansenist Tillemont to endorse the Dorothea-Catherine identification proposed by Baronius is particularly significant, since elsewhere in the *Mémoires*, as it has been noted, Tillemont himself turns out to be rather inclined to accept the other line of Baronius' reconstruction, that is, the acquittal of Cyril, showing himself in the *Mémoires* themselves to be «prudent and justificatory towards Alexandrian Christianity»⁴², maintaining that «the massacre of Hypatia not only “appeared odious to Christian souls”, but also “it was a great grievance for their bishop”, who must be exonerated “of that which the enemies of our religion say”»⁴³. One could compare *e.g.* the severe words written by Antoine Pagi: «Verba Eusebii quae Baronius explicat de certamine sanctae Catharinae Virginis & Martyris, de ea intelligi non possunt, alioquin ea martyrium sub Maximino non consumasset, quod tamen Baronius adstruere intendit [...] Mulier vero, de qua loquitur Eusebius, exilio tantum mulctata est»⁴⁴. In 1855, the doubts expressed by Pagi would have been included in the second volume of the *Collezione di leggende inedite* di Francesco Zambrini e Giovanni Bastia. But this idea – *i.e.* that Baronius was in bad faith in trying at all costs to provide a basis in the sources that would guarantee the historicity and existence of Catherine – reached, within the Catholic context, even 20th-century criticism. In this regard, one could see the authoritative judgment of Hyppolite Delehaye, following in the footsteps of *Bollandus noster*: «Baronius quidem in Annalibus ecclesiasticis, ut alicui saltem fulcro applicaret haec Acta, quae fumo et umbra constare videntur, coniecit S. Catharinae passionem veluti appendicem fuisse confessionis sanctae Dorotheae virginis Alexandrinae, quae ab Eusebio et Rufino laudata fuit. [...] Sed difficultatis exitum hunc fallacem esse perspexit Bollandus noster, cui modeste et erudite, ut solet, adstipulatus est Tillemontius. Utique hagiographus qui Aecaterinae gesta primus commentus est, e S. Dorotheae historia sumpsisse videtur figuram nobilis virginis, quae ingenii acumine et sapientiae non minus quam robore animi tyrannum superavit. Verum haec litteraria fraus est imitatoris qui aliunde etiam surrepta ornamenta narrationi suae intexuit. Sic, ut alia omittamus, expilasse videtur Passionem sive S. Artemii, sive S. Pansofii, sive quamlibet ex iis in quas inducitur Vergilius poeta»⁴⁵. The Catholic attempt at providing an oppositional framework in order to de-activate both Catherine's and Hypatia's figures, thus aiming at opposing the two figures, failed over the centuries within Catholic historiography itself. The model of continuity prevailed and Catherine and Hypatia continued to be – and to be considered – not as enemies, but likewise twins.

41. Tillemont (1698: 447).

42. Ronchey (2021: 94).

43. Ronchey (2021: 94).

44. See n. 16 in Theiner (1864: 481).

45. Delehaye (1940: 544); see Bronzini (1960: 296).

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