CHRIST'S ATHENE
THE CULT OF ST CATHERINE

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THE CULT OF ST CATHERINE THEN AND NOW

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Cover: Medieval painting of St Catherine at Old Weston parish church, Northamptonshire

Frontispiece: 15th or 16th-century glass roundel now in Highcliffe Castle, Dorset

Throughout the text, reference to illustrations are in brackets thus: [1].

FOREWORD

Behind the shingle of Dorset's Chesil Beach, forever being scrabbled at by the waters of Lyme Bay, and behind the saltwater lagoon the Chesil creates, the Fleet, is golden-stoned Abbotsbury, a meander and a tangle of cottages and a right-angle road-bend perilous to every bus. To its south, Chapel Hill humps against the skyline. [1]

Chapel Hill would not be half as charismatic without its Chapel. It is *massive* – not huge, but massively *built*, its walls over a yard thick, its buttresses strengthening it further against the salt winds scouring over the hilltop. Its barrel-vault roof is surprisingly elaborate – someone was prepared to spend serious money on this place. Built in the 14th century, it probably survived the dissolution of Abbotsbury's Abbey in the Reformation because it was a useful landmark for seafarers. It is empty inside now, but never silent; the slightest sound reverberates around its walls, even when the pigeons aren't roosting there.

It is the chapel of St Catherine: the *omphalos* of the Jurassic Coast, a site of portents and auguries. It is of course not eternal, but speaks somehow of eternity more eloquently than naked rock would do. Of all the English places associated with the Saint of the Wheel, it is the most powerful, maybe second only to Mount Sinai itself – and there I have never been.

Was it Abbotsbury that drew me to St Catherine? I can't remember. My family have been going to the chapel since I was a child, but Catherine herself never impinged on my awareness, I think, until I was at university, and I don't know why that happened. She was the patron saint of my college at Oxford, Balliol, but it wasn't that. I had been more interested in the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon saints, especially St Cuthbert – *On a rock by Lindisfarne/ St Cuthbert sits, and toils to frame/ The sea-borne beads that bear his name* – but in about 1990, as I copied lyrics from the *Carmina Burana* which had some relevance to my researches into holy wells and the imagery surrounding them in the middle ages, I also wrote out a line from the lyric CB12*: *Christi sponsa Katharina/ virgo martyr et regina* … why did I do that? Perhaps it was her dramatic legend (not, in fact, anything like as bloody as those of some other virgin-martyrs), maybe just the fact that her feast day, November 25th, is closer to my birthday than St Cuthbert's Day is – but she moved almost unnoticed to take the central place in my hagiographic affections. And this is long before I was a Christian of any kind!

The figure of St Catherine, and that date, November 25th, have woven in and out of my life, a web of coincidences and connections. I now have a relationship with her which is something like the relationship medieval Christians had with their patron saints, in a way which has faded even within the Roman Catholic tradition: thinking of the Christian life, to an extent, in terms of her story and individuality, and how it reflects that of Christ himself. When I see her in a stained-glass window, unexpected in a cathedral or parish church, it's a special pleasure. And there are places I return to, the chapels and wells, to resume my acquaintance with Catherine – Abbotsbury not least. One day, I might even get to Sinai, and pick up the little ring that the brothers of the monastery issue to their pilgrim visitors. But there are other sites in the meantime. Here she is, my revered Friend in Heaven; and not just mine, it seems.

1. THE CULT OF ST CATHERINE

In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church was reaching the height of its enthusiasm for modernisation. Latin was in the process of being expunged from the liturgy, the altars were being dragged forward from the east walls of churches so priests could stand behind them, and fond devotions by which the faithful had been accustomed to express their piety were being discouraged by bishops who found them all a bit embarrassing. The calendar, too, was pruned of some of its picturesque commemorations, and a collection of long-revered saints found themselves purged, either removed entirely or demoted to local observances at best. Catherine of Alexandria was one of them.

This wasn't the first time the 'Great-Martyr' had come under negative scrutiny. As part of the Roman Catholic Church's counterblast to the advance of Protestantism in the 1500s, Pope Pius V had inaugurated a reform of the liturgy to peel off the accretions Protestants were most scornful of, and that included downgrading the feasts of a number of saints. 'I wish I could believe Catherine existed', St Robert Bellarmine admitted to Cardinal Baronius, who the Pope had charged with revising the accounts of the saints; Baronius agreed that 'Her history contains many things which are repugnant to the truth', yet she survived this particular purge, probably because she was woven too deeply into popular culture to extract neatly at that stage. Down went St Barbara and her tower, St Margaret forever bursting from the belly of her dragon, and St Ursula with her clutch of arrows, but Catherine stood still at the highest grade of feast. Intriguingly, when the nascent Church of England produced its own calendar around the same time, she was one of the very few non-Biblical saints to keep their places in it, too, probably for the same reason.

How did she advance to this point – this part-mythical holy woman who was yet so revered? Christine Walsh gives us the best account of how it happened, in her book *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Western Europe*, published in 2007 and based on her doctoral thesis written a few years before. Katherine Lewis, Gary Marker, Arthur Spears and Tracy Sands have all produced books looking at regional cults of St Catherine in England, Russia, Ireland and Sweden respectively, so we have a good deal of information now.

The story Christine Walsh lays out is, in short, as follows. Although Catherine's legend universally places her life and death at Alexandria in Egypt in the late third and early fourth century, the first positive evidence we have of her is a seventh-century list of saints now held in the Vatican Library but written in Syriac, and probably coming from the vicinity of Antioch. It

includes her as one of a group of 'holy women', and that's all. There must have been an account of her written in Greek some time in the late 8th century, but the first surviving version we have was a brief summary included by the Byzantine author Symeon Metaphrastes in his ten-volume compendium of saints' lives, compiled in the later 10th century: it's clearly abstracted from an older document. At around the same time images of Catherine started to appear in the churches of Cappadocia in what is now Turkey, and eventually in southern Italy.

But she was peculiar among her brethren saints in having no relics identified as hers. In fact the early manuscripts about her include a prayer she was supposed to have made just before her martyrdom that her body should be hidden and not split up, which was presumably an attempt to explain why no relics existed. But the manuscripts also related that after Catherine's death her body had been taken by angels to Mount Sinai. A monastery had existed there from the sixth century, but for most readers of Catherine's legend Sinai would have meant simply an impossibly remote and mysterious place, and that was probably why it was chosen. Yet, the mention of it created the expectation that, if Catherine's remains could be found *anywhere*, it would be there; and, lo and behold, it seems that something identified as her relics, at least a skull and possibly an entire body, was found at the high peak near Sinai now known as Jebel Katrin, 'Catherine's Mount', some time in the later 10th century. [2] By the year 1214 the remains had been removed to the monastery itself.

So by the year 1000 there was a saint of growing popularity with both a legend being repeated in more and more manuscripts, and artistic representations, and who possesed physical relics as well. In about 1030 the church of the Holy Trinity in the Norman city of Rouen was founded, and less than twenty years later it had acquired and enshrined some of St Catherine's fingers. A story was told about a monk from Sinai bringing them there but this probably covered up some more shady relic-dealing. At the same time, her name appeared in the calendar of Winchester Cathedral, and from there, gradually and slowly, the cult of St Catherine accelerated across England – first being included in the calendar of a cathedral or monastery, followed by an altar being dedicated to her, and thus encouraging more writing about her and more art depicting her. A Missal from Canterbury, written right at the end of the 11th century, includes, for the first time, a Collect for a Mass in Catherine's honour:

O God who gave the law to Moses on the summit of Mount Sinai, and in the same place through your holy angels placed the body of blessed Catherine, virgin and martyr; grant we beseech you, that by her merits and intercession, we may be able to reach the mountain which is Christ.

We might compare Catherine with another virgin-martyr of doubtful historicity but with a colourful legend, St Margaret of Antioch. While Catherine ended with about sixty medieval English churches dedicated to her, Margaret, whose cult in England got going slightly earlier, amassed two hundred: by the time devotion to Catherine was growing at its fastest, most parish churches had already been dedicated, and her cult was reflected more in the names of chapels (within big churches, or freestanding like Abbotsbury's), altars, lights, and religious institutions of different sorts – even church bells. Where she scored over Margaret and other similar saints was that her story contained elements which could appeal to a very wide variety of people. She was a princess, so the nobility could identify with her. Her spotless virtue appealed to members of religious orders, especially women, and secular women too could feel a connection with her courage and tenacity. As her legend became more elaborate the physical elements included in it allowed her patronage to spread: anyone who in any way worked with wheels, from spinners to cartwrights, could look to her as their patron saint, and as she had exuded milk rather than blood on being beheaded, she acquired an interest in people involved in dairying. Most of all, unique among female saints, there was the emphasis her legend placed on her *learning.* She was *clever*. The incident of her debating with the fifty pagan philosophers sent by the Emperor to batter her into intellectual submission, but besting them instead, appears in the earliest versions of her narrative, and it made her the patron of all scholars and thinkers – influential people in medieval society – as well as a feminist *avant la lettre* and an icon of resistance to authority, if you wanted her to be. That was a lot to be concentrated in one figure.

And then there was the *wheel*. The earliest texts of Catherine's legend don't mention it, and nor do early images of her include it; it seems to have crept into the story some time in the eleventh century. The significance of the wheel as an instrument of torture is often misunderstood: in the legend, Catherine is neither attached to it, nor threatened with being burned on it. Instead, the purpose of the wheels – properly, there are two – is to carry razors around their rim to lacerate and flay her, and even then the villainous Emperor intends that she should be intimidated into renouncing Christianity by the mere sight of them, rather than their use. In the event, an angel blows the wheels apart, and they fly into bits causing no small amount of injury to the saint's tormentors. It's a very inventive and odd addition to the basic and more realistic details of Catherine's flogging and beheading, and where it came from is a mystery. But the point is that it made her instantly recognisable. The wheel is a bold and unmistakable visual symbol, as striking in its way as the Cross itself, and wherever we see it we can tell it is St Catherine who carries it or is depicted by its side. By the start of the 14th century, everyone in western Europe would

have known what the wheel meant and who it stood for, and it could appear on its own on inn signs and in heraldry with no further explanation needed. Had anyone devised it deliberately, we would describe it as a masterstroke of branding. [3]

My favourite example of the way devotion to St Catherine might attach itself to a new location – because it's so odd – is that of Tenby in Pembrokeshire. A short stroll across the South Beach there at low tide will bring you to St Catherine's Island, a jagged lump of rock with a 19th-century fort battened onto the top. It has over the last hundred years been a house, and, incredibly, a zoo, but is now managed by a historical trust. Long before the fort was built, there had been a chapel of St Catherine, hence the name – another one of the lofty locations echoing her presence on far-off Mount Sinai. There had been a resident hermit at some point, too. Until the fort was built in 1867, the ruins of the chapel were the only visible structure on the rock. [4] Those ruins were removed when the fort was constructed, and during the works three items were discovered: a human skeleton (possibly of one of the hermits); a scatter of Roman coins; and, of all things, an Ancient Egyptian *ushabti*, dating from the 17th century BC, one of the little figurines buried with the dead to act as their servants in the afterlife. The finds were taken to Tenby Museum where they remain. Now of course nobody knows how the utterly unexpected and inexplicable *ushabti* got to a medieval pilgrimage site in west Wales. But is there a connection? Could it be that some crusader, or other traveller, brought it back from the Near East, and that, coming from the vicinity of Alexandria, this indistinguishable statuette, so completely different from anything else anyone in the area would ever have encountered, was identified as an image of St Catherine? That's what they speculate on the Island, and I find it a not-unreasonable thought to have.

Medieval Christians conceived of the heavenly presence of God as something like an earthly monarch's court, and the saints as courtiers who could put in a good word with the Lord on behalf of the churches, institutions, professions, places, and individuals under their special patronage. But this underestimates the intense and emotional relationship that could develop between a Christian and their patron saint. In her book on late medieval devotion to St Catherine in England, Katherine Lewis quotes the example of Katherine Swynford. Perhaps she bore that name from being born on November 25th; it was a coincidence that her father Paon, a Belgian knight who moved to England to seek his fortune at the court of Edward III, was surnamed *Roet* – 'wheel'. Katherine de Roet made a good marriage to another knight, Sir Hugh Swynford, and became governess to the daughters of the king's son John of Gaunt – and, later, his mistress. They swore the liaison began after their respective spouses' deaths, but it caused grave scandal: one chronicler called

Katherine 'a she-devil' and 'enchantress'. She and Gaunt separated for several years, but were eventually married in 1396 after the death of his second wife, the Infanta of Castile. Now Duchess of Lancaster, Katherine adopted her own coat of arms, three gold Catherine wheels on a red field. [5] As Dr Lewis points out, this avoided any reference to either of her husbands and might well have been an attempt to defuse her morally suspect reputation by stressing devotion to her impeccable name-saint. Gaunt died only three years after their marriage, and Katherine lived out her last days in the Minster Yard of Lincoln Cathedral. On her own death in 1403 she lavished gifts on the cathedral, including a vast suite of copes and a full set of mass vestments, all in red velvet and woven with Catherine wheels in silver and gold. Perhaps Katherine felt her patron saint had vindicated her in the end: certainly in the imagery she chose there was no dividing line between the earthly aristocrat and her heavenly advocate.

Another devotee of St Catherine, at the other end of Europe, was Velislav the Canon, notary to both King John I of Bohemia and his son, the Emperor Charles IV. Between about 1325 and 1349 Velislav commissioned a *biblia picta*, a Bible in pictures, now held in the Czech National Library in Prague. Not all the images in the manuscript illustrate Bible stories, as there is a section at the end depicting incidents in the lives of the saints including St Lawrence being roasted on his gridiron. The very last picture shows Velislav himself kneeling before Catherine, who carries her palm and a tiny wheel and wears an unusual foliate crown: a scroll-caption emanating from Velislav beseeches the saint to 'hear the petition of your servant'. [6] One of the earlier drawings in the book shows the Antichrist having a group of scholars beheaded, so perhaps Velislav felt the perils of the intellectual life particularly keenly and wanted to enlist his patron's aid against them.

The *kind* of relationship St Catherine's medieval devotees had with her has virtually died out: even within the Roman Catholic Church it now can be found attached to the Virgin Mary and almost nobody else. Although her feast day remained in the calendar after the Reformation, eventually the representations of Catherine became a sort of *memory* of a cult rather than something deeply resonating in the lives of the faithful, paving the way for her deletion from the General Calendar in 1969. Nevertheless, her story is so compelling, and that symbol of the wheel so powerful, that people keep coming back to it, retelling it and reusing it, as we will see, *even though they know* that there is no historical evidence behind it. Somehow that doesn't seem to matter.

In 2002, something unprecedented happened. A new edition of the Roman Missal was published and, having been excised from the General Calendar a

generation before, St Catherine of Alexandria was put back in. She now enjoyed only a minor commemoration, admittedly, a far cry from the solemn feast with its own octave the Dominican Order had observed in her honour right through to 1962; but re-inserting a saint into the list in any way was highly unusual. The story goes that when Pope John Paul II visited the monastery at Sinai in 2000, Archbishop Damianos – the Abbot of Sinai also ranks as an Archbishop in the Orthodox Church – greeted him cordially, but refused to hold a joint prayer service with him (after all, we are heretics, we Westerners, in Eastern eyes). It was as a gesture in the direction of reconciliation towards Sinai, and Orthodoxy in general, that St Catherine's name was replaced in the Calendar. Or so it is claimed. John Paul himself said nothing about it.

For my part, I am pretty sure there was a real Catherine, or Katerina, or Ekaterini, or whatever version of her name you choose – a holy woman who perhaps suffered and died in a time of persecution, enough for that name to be remembered somewhere in the vicinity of seventh-century Antioch. So that, when prayers are offered in the name of that uncertain figure, there is someone who hears them, in that place where fond legends, pious exaggerations, and tall stories don't matter, because all truth is finally known.

2. IMAGINING A SAINT

More than virtually all her saintly peers, Catherine's appearance has changed over the centuries. Her modern incarnations are extremely eclectic, but in the past she has worn a range of broadly similar guises.

i. The Byzantine Catherine

The oldest images of St Catherine depict her as a Byzantine princess. The very earliest of all that Christine Walsh could identify dates to the years around 910 to 920 and is in the rock-cut church of Tokali Kilise in Cappadocia. In this painting, Catherine has her left hand raised in blessing and, as a martyr, carries a cross in her right: she wears a richly embroidered purple cloak and a headdress. [7] The oldest Western images of Catherine, the 10th-century ones in the Catacomb of San Gennaro in Naples or the church of San Sebastiano alla Polveriera in Rome, are very similar. By the end of the 10th century, though, at least in the East, the saint was being depicted wearing the full ceremonial dress of the Byzantine court: her headdress had visibly become a crown, and she was shown wrapped in the *loros*, the embroidered strip of cloth worn only by the Imperial family and the highest rank of officials. Sometimes it looks as though she is holding a shield bearing a cross, but in fact it's the *loros,* worn by women with an upward fold tucked into the belt. This means that in illustrations like the *Theodore Psalter*, composed in the Constantinopolitan monastery of Stoudios in 1066, we're clearly intended to see her as equal in rank to her persecutor, the Emperor Maxentius, who also wears a crown and *loros*. The *Psalter* shows Catherine debating with the philosophers and the earlier *Menologion Basilianum* depicts her martyrdom, but generally in images from this time she is static and hieratic, standing like most Byzantine saints face-on, and doing nothing very much apart from signalling holiness and transcendence. She has no wheel, no sword, and no book. [8, 9]

ii. The Medieval Catherine

The expert on Byzantine iconography, Nancy Sevcenko, argues that the monastery at Mount Sinai was responsible for changing the way the Christian world thought of St Catherine visually twice. The first occasion, Dr Sevcenko argues, came in the early 1200s, around the time Catherine's relics were relocated from the mountaintop chapel of Jebel Katrin to the monastery itself. Previously church artists had shown little interest in the incidents of the

saint's life, notwithstanding the depictions in the *Theodore Psalter* and the *Menologion Basilianum*. But around the year 1200 a new innovation occurred in religious art: the *Vita* icon, in which a central image of a saint was surrounded by a border of smaller pictures showing episodes in their story. Sinai acquired – possibly from donors – *vita* icons of St Nicholas and St George around this time, and one showing Catherine almost certainly dates from the early 1200s too. In this image, she still wears the *loros*, but the wheel makes an appearance: this icon is stressing the journey the saint makes towards her martyrdom. [10] The *vita* icon very quickly caught on the west too, especially among the new preaching orders who used it to promote their own saints. A couple of decades after the Sinai icon was made, the Dominicans had their own version painted for their church dedicated to St Catherine in Pisa; in the small narrative images, Catherine appears in garb which is far more Western than that of the big figure in the middle (who wears a crown that *almost* looks like a bishop's mitre); there are *two* wheels; and the last picture shows the saint's body being taken to Mount Sinai. [11]

Catherine's legend was soon transferred from the *vita* icon to the walls of churches, becoming an immensely popular subject: for most medieval churchgoers, this would be how they would encounter the narrative. These sets of images could be very grand indeed, such as the frescoes painted for the church of San Clemente in Rome by Masolino de Panicale in the 1420s, but most were much humbler – and many have long since vanished, flaking off the damp walls of the churches where they were painted, or whitewashed over by those who disapproved of them. In England, fragmentary wall-paintings showing the Catherine cycle survive at Castor in Cambridgeshire and Sporle in Norfolk; the fullest set is at Pickering in Yorkshire, though these were heavily restored in the 1880s and 1890s and what we see now is not entirely what medieval worshippers would have. [12] This is also the case in the church of St Martin at Jenzat in the Auvergne region of France, which contains a 15th-century cycle of paintings including Catherine's 'Mystical Marriage' to Christ, an incident that became part of her story in the later 13th century. [13] Sometimes, as at Jenzat, she receives a wedding ring from the adult Jesus, but as time goes on it becomes more common to see her encountering him as an infant in Mary's arms, thus taking her even further away from any hint of a sexual nature. These visual lives of St Catherine advanced in tandem with the many, many written versions, more than any other medieval saint.

As well as the narrative cycles, images of St Catherine on her own or in the company of other saints kept being produced; produced, in fact, in overwhelming numbers. Her by-now established repertoire of symbols – the crown, the wheel, the sword, the book and the martyr's palm – embellish every

one, though not all are always present at once. The wheel, for instance, is virtually always there, but sometimes it is a broken fragment, and sometimes a small toy-like object Catherine carries in her hand. As time goes on, she frequently appears towering over, or even trampling on, a small male figure: this is her tormentor, the Emperor Maxentius, so the saint is very physically triumphing over tyrannical (and male) authority. A fine example is a statue sold at Sotheby's in 2017 and probably originating from the Troyes area in the early 1500s: a very tough-looking Catherine in a jewelled and quilted bodice and a long robe has book and sword in hand, her wheel behind her, and a diminutive and disgruntled Emperor at her foot. [14] Knowing that Catherine was a 'queen', and an exotic one, gave artists the opportunity to go to town with her clothing and accessories. Sometimes she wears simple gowns or cloaks, but a lot of the time her costume is as sumptuous as any real-life monarch's: she wears a lot of ermine even in the simplest manuscript illustrations. [15] Occasionally a turban replaces her crown. In common with medieval Western artistic habit, Catherine no longer appears facing us, but looking aside, as though we are observing her in the middle of some other action, rather than encountering her directly. Sometimes this is indeed the case: *The Very Rich Hours of the Duc de Berry*, made about 1410, show the saint reading in her study, as does an illustration by Taddeo Crivelli now in the Getty Museum, and the Dunois Hours in the British Library. In the 15th-century manuscript now known as the *Warburg Hours* Catherine sits *on top of* the Emperor Maxentius to read. [16] All of this demonstrates that the narrative of the saint's life was so familiar that it didn't need to be shown: everyone could read it from a couple of symbols.

Just occasionally an illustration steps outside the standard representation to make us think a little differently. In an early-13th century French depiction now in the Cleveland Art Museum, Catherine appears markedly older than Maxentius on the other side of the frame from the philosophers with whom she is debating: we seem to be able to glimpse grey hair under her coif. [17] Finally, in *The Madonna of the Rose Garden*, a 15th-century Italian painting in the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona, Catherine, keeping the Virgin and Child company, sits threading roses onto a string, while angels bring her more roses in a basket. Other angels carry her book and palm, and her sword and wheel lie on the herbage of the rose bower. [18] Even saints need a rest.

iii. The Orthodox Catherine

In contrast to the widely varied western depictions of Catherine, her images in the East continued to follow the Byzantine model: face-on, royally dressed,

and holding a cross and occasionally a globe as a symbol of God's dominion, an item missing from her western iconography; as the Middle Ages wore on, pictures in the Orthodox lands began to acquire some western characteristics, occasionally including the wheel, for instance, but they were in the minority.

But then, just as the monastery at Mount Sinai pioneered a new iconography for Catherine in the early 1200s, four centuries later it did the same. We know when the oldest-surviving of these new images was made, and we know who made it, because it is signed and dated: Jeremias Palladas, a Sinai monk living at the time on Crete, painted it in 1612, a larger version of a prototype he produced for Sinai's daughter monastery at Heraklion. The bigger icon is now in the iconostasis in Sinai's abbey church. [19]

In this icon, and the very many based on it, Catherine is still arrayed in grand Byzantine court style, but she is seated, and gazes off to her left, her attention focused on a crucifix, a very foreign element to Eastern religious art. She now has a Venetian cloak on top of her Eastern regalia. She holds her wheel on the right of the picture, and scattered around her are symbols of learning – books, scrolls, and an armillary sphere which seems derived from the globe of earlier depictions. She holds her martyr's palm in her right hand, and in some versions her words extend as text towards the crucifix, expressing her willingness to give her life for Christ, addressed as her bridegroom in an allusion to her Mystical Marriage. This is an image which marries Eastern styles to Western iconography, but it also emphasises the saint's learning: it is, Nancy Sevcenko says, 'the image of Catherine as Christian humanist', fitting in with the concerns of Sinai at the time. In subsequent centuries the older model of the Catherine icon was never quite displaced (and in fact modern icons tend to turn to that version more than the 17th-century one [20]), but as the Orthodox iconographic tradition became more insistently conservative, it was this pattern, reproduced again and again almost without variation, which came to dominate it.

iv. The Post-Renaissance Catherine

It wasn't unusual for a Pope to have himself included in a painting by his court artist; it was a little outside the norm for him to want his illegitimate daughter immortalised, but then Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia, was no commonplace Pope. When Bernardino di Betto depicted the teenage Lucretia Borgia as St Catherine in about 1494 – her brother Cesare was in the picture too [21] – it wasn't the first time an identifiable individual had appeared in art as the model for a saint, not even St Catherine, but it marked a step in a process that would shift the way Catherine was depicted in the West well away

from the medieval mode. Botticelli, for instance, had portrayed Caterina Sforza as St Catherine as far back as 1475, but that profile portrait still had something of the hieratic, Gothic image of the saint about it. The treatment of Lucretia and its successors led elsewhere.

This was partly due to what was happening in Western European art overall, a growing emphasis on artistic realism and on the integrity of artistic endeavour as a discipline in itself, apart from whatever a particular work might be depicting; and partly due to a sense of individualism with which it was linked. The desire to keep discovering something new in old subjects and ideas couldn't be farther away from the kind of traditional conventions increasingly gripping the religious art of the Orthodox East, however often these paintings included St Catherine's established attributes.

Thus it was accepted that even images of the saints would be drawn from living models. In Spain, Zurbarán clearly used the same woman as the model for two of his St Catherines, and in 1620s Italy Simon Vouet painted his wife Virginia in the role repeatedly. [22] Female artists thus had a chance to cast themselves as St Catherine, a way of avoiding the vanity inherent in straightforward self-portraits. The most notable was Artemisia Gentileschi, who seems to have painted herself as the saint at least four times. It's reductive to see Gentileschi's art completely through the lens of her experience of rape and judicial torture, but equally hard not to read a self-assertive and feminist point into her apparent identification with St Catherine, another woman tortured and subjected to sexual threat. Certainly there is nothing delicate or idealised about Gentileschi's self-portraits. In the most polished of them, she looks straight at the viewer, wearing ordinary workaday clothing, the points of a crown above her turban the only hint of the saint's royal status, her hand firmly on the savage wheel. [23]

Gentileschi's direct and powerful painting is almost a religious image, but when artists depicted society ladies as St Catherine all spiritual meaning drained from the resulting pictures. In about 1665 in France, Claude Lefebvre painted the Marquise de Montaigne as Catherine, and even across the Channel in Protestant England Sir Peter Lely was depicting Countess Barbara Villiers in the same role at around the same time. [24] There was no religious feeling in any of these images: they were play-acting. Slightly earlier, Van Dyck's painting of Queen Henrietta Maria as St Catherine is a great portrait, but that's all it is.

Even where an artist's intentions were devotional, though, the emphasis on personality and realism moved the images away from the emphasis on eternity which had animated pictures of Catherine, and other saints, in the middle

ages. There was a greater sense of movement as opposed to stasis, and this too drew the image into a temporal rather than an eternal realm. Catherine was now usually depicted wearing masses of flowing drapery, and you can't help imagining the clothing moving and shifting about the very next moment. A good example is Michelangelo Anselmi's painting of St Catherine and St Jerome in St Francis's church in Parma, painted about 1534-40, or the 1615 painting by Bernardo Strozzi now in the Wadsworth Museum in Hartford, Connecticut. [25] In these pictures, Catherine looks as though she's moving, or about to move, even when she's sitting or standing still. As the 17th and 18th centuries drew on, even statues of Catherine adopted the same styles, with the same sort of result. [26] Summarising this process spiritually, we might say it amounted to a move away from depicting earthly realities in heavenly terms, to thinking of heavenly things in earthly terms.

The exception comes in regional traditions more closely allied to folk art. In Spain and the New World Spanish colonies, in particular, images of St Catherine tended to retain something of the static and the stylised. It's interesting that, with a couple of exceptions, Maxentius disappears from images of Catherine everywhere after the Renaissance, almost as though his miniscule and unhappy presence has become comic and therefore inappropriate – yet in Spain he stays. But he stays only as a decapitated head rolling at Catherine's feet, which is very odd indeed as Maxentius definitely keeps his head in the legend, while she loses hers. Sometimes she fixes it with her sword. The painting Antonio vela Cobo made in the 1660s for the Convent of Our Lady of Grace in Cordoba shows this very well: predominately black (and not even including the wheel), this is a up-to-date image of the saint, but not necessarily based on a living model, and certainly separated from space and time: she is caught in an eternal moment which expresses her heavenly nature. [27]

Finally, it's also worth mentioning the statues of St Catherine which can be found in some places in the Philippines, such as Balubad, Arayat Pampagna, and Carcar Cebu, as well as a few other sites in Spain or under Spanish influence. [28] These images look relatively modern to me and, as they seem to be taken outdoors in fetes and processions, probably get quite a lot of wear, but perhaps they are copies of older versions. They are often vastly grand and elaborate, rivalling any image of the Blessed Virgin, and in fact are dressed so sumptuously the Virgin would blush. There is nothing realistic about any of them, which, notwithstanding their richness, makes them vehicles for conveying Catherine's charisma and ongoing power.

3. RECALLING A SAINT – MODERN INCARNATIONS OF ST CATHERINE

i. The Memory of a Devotion

As we've seen, the Roman Catholic Church's Counter-Reformation experienced some embarrassment about the popular saints of the Middle Ages to whom generations of Western Christians had prayed for help and comfort. If saints were to be moral exemplars and intercessors, it would help if the details of their lives were known and historically provable; the colourful, semi-mythical figures of the distant past, therefore, fell out of fashion in favour of the pious men and women (usually clerics, monks or nuns) of more recent times.

But – equally as we have seen – Catherine remained in the Church calendar and some of her popular associations lingered. This meant that she continued to be referred to, and occasionally asked for help, even though the intensely personal relationship so many medieval Christians like Katherine Swynford or Canon Velislav had had with her no longer featured. Her persistent presence on devotional cards through the 19th and early 20th centuries is very telling, as these are cheap and demotic, and represent more of a popular tradition than the other religious art that features her. Examples can be found from both East and West and some cards include prayers to the saint. A German card produced by the Abbey of Beuron presents us with a virtually *Jugendstil* treatment of St Catherine; [29] one nice French neo-Gothic card which must date from the 1930s highlights Catherine's patronage of 'young women, wheelwrights, ropemakers, potters etc. … and seamstresses', which was a new and very contemporary addition to her portfolio. Here, the saint sports a very smart page-boy haircut. [30]

That French card reflects perhaps a very particular manifestation of the cult of St Catherine: in early 20th-century France custom and capitalism combined to produce something new. The saint's patronage of young and especially unmarried women was a longstanding one. Around the turn of the 20th century, postcards of St Catherine's Well at Lisors in Normandy circulated, some calling poetic attention to a fabled ability of the well:

> Good St Catherine
> Has a very fine selection of husbands –
> Brown-haired, chestnut and redheads,
> Both the very serious and the very sweet.

Young lady, if you're sad
At not finding one to your taste,
Come and place near her
The hairpin tradition suggests,
And, without fail, within the year,
Your Prince Charming will pop up –
He for whom your heart is waiting. [31]

Although there's no hint of it from the Middle Ages, St Catherine's role in sourcing marriage partners is found across Europe, from England to Ukraine (and there it wasn't just women who traditionally sought her help, but men as well). In France the custom grew up of girls making or donning a ceremonial bonnet at the age of 15 to indicate their marriageability (and sewing is, of course, the marketable feminine skill *par excellence*), known as *coiffer St Catherine* – both to wear St Catherine's hat and to 'do St Catherine's hair'. But carry on doing her hair past the age of 25 and you ran the risk of ending up on the shelf. Suddenly, around 1900, the new technology of the picture postcard allowed a new way of enforcing this social expectation: cards sent on a young woman's birthday by her friends, once she approached or passed the critical age, warning her of the urgent need to choose between 'a husband or a hat' before it was too late. If you received one, the message was clear no matter how humorous the card: you were a *Catherinette* and had better get a move on. [32]

Then something odd happened. The provincial girls moving in droves to Paris to work in the fashion business took all this over. The focus shifted, first to the *hat* as an artefact in which its makers took pride, and then via that celebration of female skill to a celebration of female *singleness*, exactly the opposite of the intention of the old folklore. By no very clear process the colours yellow and green came to be associated with the headgear, and throughout the French fashion industry November 25th became a day when the lowly seamstress and milliner had their own way, when bosses and designers reluctantly threw parties for their female workers. The final stage has been for the festival to morph into 'Old Maid's Day' or 'La Fete des Catherinettes', still marked not only in France but in Francophone regions of the world, and beyond the fashion trade: a festival of female friendship, symbolised by women very clearly choosing huge and dramatic hats in green and yellow. A long way from St Catherine herself, who has disappeared almost completely from the modern event – and yet carrying forward the feminist implications of her cult: 'O maid without a man fulfilled'. To be a Catherinette is no longer a matter of shame or embarrassment, but a bit of a triumph. [33]

In England the 25th of November was observed by a variety of craftspeople under St Catherine's patronage, from the ropemakers at Chatham dockyard to the lacemakers of the east midlands; the festivities followed a pattern typical to saints' days of this kind, with processions, begging customs, and feasting. However, as this was a Protestant nation *St* Catherine tended to be reinterpreted as *Queen* Catherine (of Aragon, usually), or disappeared completely in the abbreviation *Cattern*, used to describe the nexus of calendar customs whose origin its participants had forgotten. For the lacemakers, November 25th (or in some areas, the 30th, St Andrew's Day) had a very practical, social significance as the day they began to work by candlelight, gathering in groups to share light and heat – even if the saint herself had been left behind. These observances all tended to decline with the eclipse of the small craft industries they served, being occasionally revived after that as self-consciously folkloric events. Sometimes museums, as the custodians of their areas' history, do this: we did so at Wycombe Museum, because lace-making had once played an important role in our district. We treated visitors to traditional Cattern Cakes, among other delights.

The Catholic movement in the Anglican Church revived the depiction of saints in paintings, stained glass, and (more rarely) statuary, and Catherine regularly occurred, often among groups of virgin martyrs or general saints as well as alone; so at the same time as she was tending to disappear from Roman Catholic settings, she returned to Anglican ones. These images mostly followed the traditional iconography of the saint, but occasionally there's some welcome eccentric variation. One early 20th-century window in Salle in Norfolk shows Catherine wearing what looks for all the world like an Edwardian lady's driving hat, tied under her chin with an ermine-patterned kerchief so it doesn't blow away. In a window at Abbotsbury Parish Church, St Catherine looks like a 1930s movie star, dating that image quite clearly. [33-36] St Catherine's School at Bramley in Surrey was founded in 1885 to educate girls and had a predominately Anglo-Catholic religious ethos, so it is no surprise that the school's chapel contains a variety of representations of its patron saint – in glass (courtesy of the illustrious Kempe workshop), wood, embroidery, and stone. The sign of the wheel, understandably, is everywhere. [37-40]

Modern icons of St Catherine, including small home-made items advertised on the Etsy website, show a tendency to turn back to the early Byzantine model; [41] an interesting exception is the chaste, magisterial example produced by icon-maker Aidan Hart which tries to re-imagine the saint as she might have really been, assuming she existed at all – a Roman woman in white *stola* and *palla* and a simple headdress. [43] Other versions of the saint include wooden peg-figures or key-rings, tattoos and felt toys. [42, 44]

With the exception of the Hart icon, all these images are not really devotional items; rather, they draw on a memory of the reverence with which Catherine was once regarded. Specifically artistic images use that memory in the same way, producing interpretations of the saint with varying degrees of seriousness. Beatrice Offor's gentle Edwardian treatment is definitely serious, even if it has nothing challenging about it. [45] St Catherine's role in the visions of St Joan of Arc is highlighted in several pictures, including Logan Chitwood's 2016 digital painting showing a very contemporary Catherine in black slacks, while Matteo Alfonsi's mid-2000s Gothic sequence of re-interpreted martyr saints includes a mildly fetishistic Catherine with a circular saw blade as her halo behind a crown made from blood-red studded leather. [46, 47]

ii. The Uses of an Image

These versions of St Catherine bend and adapt her traditional imagery, but they're all still recognisable. A different category of artistic images dismantles her altogether and uses the remains to interrogate the tradition as a whole. Interestingly two examples occur in museum contexts.

In 2018 the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid was able to restore Caravaggio's portrait of St Catherine and celebrated with a special exhibition examining the picture, the work and the techniques; I'm not sure whether the museum ever actually produced and sold the t-shirts I have a layout picture of, but the image is striking, taking the figure of Catherine from the painting and replacing her head with the wheel. [48] Michael Landy went even further for his 'Saints Alive!' exhibition at the London National Gallery in 2012-13. Commissioned to reinterpret the images of saints in the gallery collection, Landy found himself struck by the more gruesome aspects of the holy people's legends, and constructed a series of mechanical sculptures which not only called attention to those stories but made visitors participate in them: pressing pedals and levers made St Jerome beat his breast with a hideous rock, or St Apollonia yank her teeth out with pincers. St Catherine, however, disappeared as an individual completely, and was represented only by a gigantic wheel decorated with her legend in gold letters, which gallery-goers could crank round to tell the story. Mr Landy also produced a paper artwork, the 'St Catherine Wheeldump', a bewildering collage of all the wheels from paintings of the saint he could find. [49]

Why Reg Butler chose to call a 1959 bronze sculpture of a female acrobat 'St Catherine' is a mystery!

iii. The Persistence of a Legend

The modern equivalent of the medieval written saint's life seems to be the graphic novel produced for Christian children and teens, and Catherine's story is so very exemplary – especially for Christian girls – that the authors and illustrators of such works haven't been able to resist making strips about her. Of course they're aware that none of the details are provable – how could they not? – but they cope with this by pruning off the miraculous elements in which medieval Christians took such an interest, and major instead on her heroic resistance to violent authority.

The earliest example seems to date to 1965, *St Catherine of Alexandria* by Br Flavius CSC, part of a series 'In the Footsteps of the Saints' published by Mary's Books, all written by brothers of the Community of the Holy Cross and illustrated by Carol Lee Jagodits; the book was reissued in 2012. To judge by the cover, Catherine looks a very 20th-century saint. [50] Catherine is included in 2001's *The Big Book of Martyrs* by John Wagner, the writer responsible for much of *Tammy*, *2000AD*, and some of the most violent and grim work ever seen in comic strip form, which may have been why he was drawn to create the book; the illustrations by Robin Smith dance along a line between the gruesome and the romantic. Coming from an Orthodox perspective, meanwhile, the US-based family company Potamitis Publishing produced a book (with accompanying CD) on St Catherine, sumptuously illustrated in the manner of Greek icons, in 2008: 'What is the real meaning of life? Where shall we look for it? In pleasure and entertainment? In knowledge? In riches? In travelling? In beauty? See what answer the wise, rich and beautiful princess Saint Catherine of Alexandria has to give you in this book'. Finally, Gabriel Wilson's gorgeous full-scale all-colour graphic novel *The Broken Wheel: the Triumph of St Katherine* (2020) 'is written to inspire children and adults' and is given out by one Orthodox gift company as part of its Easter present sets. Here, C(K)atherine is a combination of philosopher and non-violent freedom fighter, and there's no mistaking the anti-authoritarian message: 'It was a cruel invention -- this wheel … A wheel that forced submission from those beneath it. It continued to roll, as many feared its power … and few challenged it … But when too many are crushed, at some point that wheel will break'. In Wilson's story, the wheel is not made in order to torture Catherine uniquely, but others too: by this alone, she becomes the champion of all tyranny and cruelty's victims. [51]

This is also the kind of saint envisaged in the most ambitious modern retelling of Catherine's legend – but one that went dreadfully wrong. If ambition is in itself laudable, the 2014 movie *Decline of an Empire* is to be lauded for that, anyway. It was an attempt to take the Catherine story out of

pseudo-history and insert it into the realities of the early fourth century. Here, Katherine, an inexplicably and precociously intellectual Egyptian peasant girl, is seized by loopy Emperor Maxentius and grows up in his palace in Alexandria. In adulthood she sends apparently innocent but in fact incendiary poetry out across the Empire inciting the barbarian peoples to throw off the Roman yoke, a sort of Katniss Everdeen of the mind. Tangled with her protest against imperial power is her rebellion against the Roman gods, and the decision of insurgent Emperor Constantine – confusingly her childhood friend and anxiously searching for her – to abandon the old ways too. It's just as much pseudo-history as the legend it's re-imagining, but you can see how this potentially makes for rather a powerful story. And there is one point where the film achieves a genuinely iconic image. Katherine sits before a group of senators dragged in to debate with her, the narrative's parallel for the legend of her converting the fifty pagan philosophers, propped against a crutch after her ankles have been smashed, a crutch which echoes the cross. Battered, filthy and yet luminous, she calls the gods of Rome 'mists and fallacies', lies and liars, and with its gods goes all the authority of Rome. Here is a glimpse of what might have been, something genuinely radical and grand. [53]

But that was not what happened. Despite that image, despite some fine scenery, despite the presence of some great 'name' actors including Peter O'Toole giving his all to his final role, the movie is awful. Its editing and timing are awry, its script delivers one wordy scene after another, it is crushingly tedious, and at the centre is the beautiful Nicole Keniheart (or Cernat, or Madjarov) as the saint, a Romanian actor who very much looks the part but nothing else, called on to deliver ridiculous, gnomic lines with barely a flicker of expression. No wonder she's never ventured in front of a camera again.

Although producer-director-writer Michael Redwood was keen to tell anyone who would listen that *Decline* was the achievement of a life's ambition driven by fascination with the Catherine legend, suggestions have been made that its complete commercial tanking was not entirely unanticipated. The Financial Conduct Authority found that 'Katherine of Alexandria Ltd' had been illegally managed, but that it wasn't in the interests of investors for it to take any action – though they were free to sue if they thought it worth their while. The investments were managed by a British Virgin Islands-registered company called Hanwood Holdings, which had a track record of promoting films that were never made, and Hanwood Holdings' agent was the notorious money-laundering law firm Mossack Fonsecca; an ancient story producing a depressingly modern tale.

4. FINDING A SAINT – CATHERINE PLACES

Christianity is an *embodied* religion: it may insist that there is a spiritual aspect to our existence, but also that our physical selves are an indispensable part of who we are, and that the one cannot be understood, apprehended, without the other. There are physical locations which particularly help us to meditate on the saints, our friends in heaven who, after all, were once living, breathing human beings; on their lives, their examples, and their relationship with God; and, if we're inclined, to ask for their prayers. So far as blessed Catherine is concerned, there are many such places. I'll look merely at my home county of Dorset, and at Surrey, where I live now.

i. St Catherine in Dorset

If I were ever able, I would ask my great musical idol PJ Harvey whether she knew about St Catherine's Chapel at Abbotsbury [53] before she sang about it on her 1998 album *Is This Desire?* Growing up fifteen miles or so away, she might have done, as I did, coming from the other side of the county. I remember the shock of buying that recording (on *cassette tape*, imagine that) and listening to it for the first time. The third track is 'The Wind'. It begins with a blush of synth and then a quiet, insistent rhythm, before Harvey's voice enters in a whisper: *Catherine liked high places – high up in the hills.* The hair stood up on my neck, and still does. *She built herself a chapel – with her image – her image on the wall.* She's singing about Abbotsbury, I thought, and so it was. Harvey re-imagines Catherine as a lonely ascetic on her hilltop, seeking rest but finding isolation: *She was once a lady/Of pleasure and high-born/A lady of the city/But now she sits and moans/And listens to the wind blow. Patron saint of nothing,* she calls her. She takes the folklore associated with the chapel, of young women visiting to pray to Catherine for a husband, and inverts it, imagining praying instead that Catherine herself might find someone to love.

The publicity the Chapel got from PJ Harvey coincided with Abbotsbury gearing up to celebrate the Millennium, and it featured heavily in that, too. The village supported a music festival, produced a booklet about the cult of St Catherine to accompany it, and commissioned a musical setting of John Dryden's 17th-century play based on the legend, *Tyrannick Love.* Villagers made a new set of kneelers for the parish church (not dedicated to Catherine, but to St Nicholas), and the embroidery often showed the chapel, Catherine herself, or wheel designs; [54] for a while, Mary-Clare Buckle's gallery in

Abbotsbury sold little silver pilgrim badges to visitors. [55] It was around the same time that the niches in the wall of the chapel became filled with what you might call a 'votive deposit' – prayers and small offerings in the form of stones, shells, feathers, or less natural objects, left by visitors. I have kept an eye on these artefacts over the years and they are both fascinating and often very moving. The written prayers are sometimes addressed to God, very often to nobody in particular, and occasionally to St Catherine herself; clearly people often come prepared to leave a prayer, but sometimes they are written on scraps of paper, shop receipts and the like, as though visitors have only decided to leave one once they arrive and see the others. On one occasion the chapel seemed to have been visited by a group of German teenagers who left a collection of prayers. Over the years, I've seen stones painted with loved ones' names became more popular, and have found a baby's dummy, a rock crystal necklace, a half-full glass of white wine, and, in Spring 2022, stone peace-hearts painted in the Ukrainian colours of yellow and blue, all tokens of someone's desire, regret, hope, or thanksgiving. English Heritage, who manage the chapel, have no option but to clear them away (and they really don't appreciate visitors lighting candles), but they always return. [56-58] This never used to be the case when I was a child. Nor were there services in the chapel, but there are now, about five a year. On St Catherine's Day 2018, to mark the centenary of the Armistice, the hill was illuminated with a 'wheel of light' – a great circle of electric tealights in decorated paper bags. [59]

There is another, less celebrated ancient chapel of St Catherine in Dorset. A 12th-century building at the end of a path through the woods, looking down on the site of grand Milton Abbey, this is the physical opposite of the Abbotsbury one. It is long, low and narrow, and now rarely open. [60] Why is it here? Its function is even less clear than Abbotsbury's. A stone built into the exterior records, in Lombardic script, an indulgence of 110 days apparently awarded to pilgrims who made it there, which is an extraordinarily long time for such a tiny and disregarded site; there is a story that it marks the place where King Athelstan received a vision that he would triumph over the Danes in his campaign of 933, but that's not all that much of a miracle. If you do manage to get inside the chapel, you will find it dark and a little neglected. In the 1950s housing estate on the top of the hill above the old village, there's a street called St Catherine's Well. There's no other evidence that there was ever a holy well here, though maps show a pond at the edge of what will become the road before the houses were built; but it's very odd that it should have been given that name if there wasn't.

Elsewhere, St-Catherine's-by-the-Sea is a chapel perched on the cliffs at Holworth above Ringstead Bay, where you can park and take a mile-long walk along the cliff path which looks demanding on the map, but which is fact

milder than you might think, to find it. Abbotsbury's and Milton Abbas's chapels are of course ancient, but the Holworth one is modern. How it came to be here at all, looking out over the Channel with no more than a scattering of houses nearby, is a tangled story. Holworth was once a far more extensive village, part of the original foundation grant to Milton Abbey by King Athelstan in 933, and seems to have disappeared in the 1400s. This settlement was inland from where the chapel is now. In 1887 Holworth House was bought by Revd Robert Linklater, Vicar of Holy Trinity, Stroud Green, as a holiday retreat, and he was clearly fascinated with its history. Even though the area had been united with Owermoigne parish in 1880 (a more practical arrangement than belonging to Milton Abbas, miles away inland) he insisted on sending, so the story goes, an annual basket of prawns to the Vicar of Milton Abbas to recognise the historic connection between the two places. It was Fr Linklater's widow who built St Catherine's-by-the-Sea some time after 1926, setting up a Trust to look after it once she'd sold Holworth House. Of course the dedication makes sense given the chapel at Milton, but perhaps there was also a church dedicated to Catherine at old Holworth. The chapel on the cliffs was made of wood and by 2012 needed complete rebuilding. [61] During this work, a broken medieval floor tile was discovered: it had been sent from St Catherine's at Milton Abbas when St Catherine's-by-the-Sea was built to mark the link between them. There it still is, a ‘relic’, as a label tells you. The church has an almost colonial feel inside, full of the aroma of wood and, if you’re lucky, you can just about hear the sea crashing far below.

Finally, on the eastern margin of the county, in what was Hampshire until the mid-1970s, is another Catherine site, St Catherine’s Hill outside Christchurch. The hill is a mixture of pinewoods and heathland, some of which is encroached on by more trees and undergrowth. The crown contains an old gravel pit, now filled by a pond, and though it isn’t that high - at 45 metres slightly more than half the elevation of its little counterpart at Abbotsbury - it offers wide views over the countryside around. There is definitely something uncanny about St Catherine’s Hill: I think of it as a sort of east-Dorset equivalent of Alderley Edge, that charismatic Cheshire landscape that features so largely in legend and fantasy. Its features include Bronze Age barrows, a Roman signal station, the site of the chapel of St Catherine (excavated to somewhat frustrating effect in 1968 - the finds are lost), gravel and clay workings, the remains of 19th and 20th-century military activity, sandstone bluffs, hollow ways, allegedly ruins of cottages, brutal concrete reservoirs, radio masts and a trig. pillar.

On one visit I wanted to locate what I’d seen described as a ruined cottage with a bell which might once have been a chapel, ‘hidden in the trees in the southeast corner’. There are plenty of trees there, dense and difficult, clumps

of small hazels and birches over the slopes and a mix of older trees about the bottom, between the lanes. I couldn't find anything, apart from an abandoned tent which had clearly been someone's home at some time. Scratched and discouraged, I made my way back along the lane – and found myself looking straight at the object of my search, a ruinous wall with a bell in a tiny gable. [62] It didn't look like a cottage, and while its Gothic doorway lent it more of a chapel-like appearance, I had my suspicions about it. These doubts were confirmed when I worked out in whose garden it was, and the owners told me it was no more than twenty years old, a folly which was just one of the embellishments they'd made to the property over the decades. The bell came from France! So this was not a kind of spiritual heir to the lost medieval chapel which once occupied the hilltop. I tried to work out exactly where that had been, too, but it turned out to be a far from easy task. There is a square earthwork – perhaps Roman – between the rifle range and the concrete mass of the southern reservoir, and the chapel was there, possibly at the little flat platform pierced by five oaks and pines, but it's hard to discern. Far busier than the hill at Abbotsbury, which has only ever been used for its chapel and for livestock, the Christchurch one maintains a greater mystery and lost-ness beneath its gorse and pines.

ii. St Catherine in Surrey

Surrey really has only one Catherine site, a chapel on a hill south of Guildford just off the A3100. It's a ruin, but the layout is almost identical to Abbotsbury's chapel, albeit a less ambitious treatment of the theme. There was a chapel here from at least 1230 (what we have left of the building dates from about a century later) and a well of St Catherine, mentioned in the 15th century. [63, 64] For centuries a fair was held at the bottom of the hill, though not on St Catherine's Day (an inconvenient time of the year for a fair) but St Matthew's, September 21st. Every year, whatever the weather, the local parish church holds a service of Mid-day Prayer on St Catherine's Day in the chapel. [65] There is a legend of a pair of sister giants who lived here, and on St Martha's Hill some miles away, and who built the respective chapels, throwing the tools to each other across the valley.

So much was well-known. But in the Spring of 2020 our knowledge changed., The railway line had been closed some while before owing to a landslip: the hill is composed of relatively soft sandstone, as opposed to the chalk that forms the Hog's Back and the rest of the North Downs ridge that extends through the middle of Surrey, and the heavy rains earlier in the year made the slope right next to the Portsmouth line collapse. While clearing the sand away,

workers inspecting the surface just below the hilltop (by ropes, as it was the only way to reach it) noticed a recess with what appeared to be markings cut into the stone. The contractors called in a team of archaeologists who identified a small 'shrine' in the form of a Gothic arch, a cross, initials and other markings, all within a cave which survived to head height but which was probably originally much larger, this small bit of it being all that remained after the railway was driven through the hill in the 1840s. The idea that the remains represent ritual activity going back into pagan times based on the hill's earlier name of *Drakehull* – 'dragon's hill' - seems a bit fanciful to say the least. But this is a numinous place: the chapel on the hill, the holy well at its foot. This decorated cave, whatever it was, lies just west of the chapel and there are other caves, including a very dramatic one you can see from the road, burrowed into the friable sandstone. There are marks which suggest fire pits and soot from lamps, and the little arched niche must have had something in it, all suggesting a period of use rather than transient sacred medieval graffiti. Was the cave the remnants of a hermit's cell, or - if the chapel had its own hermit dwelling there, like the one at Abbotsbury probably did - was this some subsidiary and home-made holy place, a further hallowing of the hill?

5. LIVING WITH A SAINT - A PERSONAL DEVOTION

She means a lot to me, the saint of the wheel. She's become part of the weave of my belief and practice, part of the way I understand and think about faith and where the God I believe in might be leading me. I know that the truth about who she may have been (assuming there was a real 'she' in the first place) is disconnected from the legends, the places, and the images that make up who she is now, regardless of strained attempts to get behind them. But that doesn't matter: they are meditative tools.

I may never make it to Mount Sinai, but there are small pilgrimages I can go on that might take only an afternoon. From where I live now, I can take a walk along the canal towpath, which I know very well indeed but which always presents a subtly changed appearance, until it reaches St Catherine's Hill just beyond the lock and footbridge. I try to remember to bring a coin to cast into St Catherine's Well as it flows out of the hill's foot (silver seems appropriate – even a 5p is all right) and feel a little embarrassed if I haven't. I will cross myself with the water and perhaps sit on the little stone seat provided by whoever it was who converted the spring into a romantic feature, with or without sandwiches and a flask of tea. From there the hill is just steep and far enough to be rewarding without being exhausting, and, though you can't access the chapel unless you happen to have the combination to the lock on the gate, you can walk around it and be grateful you are there. Zooming down to Abbotsbury takes more organisation, but I still try to visit a couple of times a year. The first sight of the chapel is always a thrill. Again, the hill is always different, either because of the weather, or its temporary animal inhabitants, cows or sheep, or none, and sometimes the pigeons make it inside the chapel, which makes a difference to the usual aroma of sand and damp. [66] On one misty visit in 2016 I found the building not only messy with birds but also sad, with no sign of active prayer and the west window blocked up by an ugly board, making it cold and unwelcoming. But English Heritage were true to their word (sent me by email), and the window was repaired. I sing the Office Hymn to St Catherine, and leave a prayer, knowing that this is, in some way, my home. It will outlive me, at any rate. I do feel that, in some way, the blessed Great-Martyr is here, *listening to the wind blow*. If I can remember my wheel pilgrim badge, which I found in one of the shops at Walsingham, all the better. [67]

The *octave* of St Catherine – her feast day of November 25th and the seven days after it, so it concludes on the same day of the week it began – is the main time when I remember my patron saint. Across the octave, I have eight prayers to

shape my thoughts, each focussing on a different aspect of the life of faith which Catherine exemplifies. I try to say a mass on the day itself, and so far my kind parishioners have always turned up to be there with me. Some years ago I had a set of Catherine vestments made by the church tailoring firm J&M from Newcastle: they sent me a sample of a beautiful vermilion fabric woven with flaming hearts and crowns of thorns, very Gothic. I'd posted off a tiny, rough sketch with a couple of measurements and they said that was all they needed: 'Don't you worry about a thing, Father'. I only usually use them *on* November 25th, but one day I will pass them on: like the chapel at Abbotsbury, they will outlive me. I like to think they are the only set of St Catherine vestments to have been made in the Church of England since the Reformation (and maybe not only the Church of England). [68] I've commissioned two images of St Catherine, too, one from the Catholic artist Matthew Alderman; and the other from my Goth sister-in-the-spirit Cylene who I briefed to be as bloody and extreme as she wanted if that was where inspiration led her. But it didn't: 'I just kept thinking of strength and grace', she told me. [69, 70]

And I look out for the saint, too. Whenever I visit a church, there is a chance that she may be there. A medieval cathedral with lots of stained glass is quite likely to have a representation of St Catherine somewhere, but she surprises me in much humbler churches quite often. Easily the most striking example of this was discovering the wall-paintings at Pickering which, although they've been mucked about with, still startle: to the consternation of all the other visitors, I'm sure, in what was quite a busy church that bright October morning, I stood gazing upward at the images and nearly weeping. When I called in at Puttenham church in Surrey, I realised that the figure on the painting forming the altarpiece which the church identified as St Catherine of *Siena* was in fact of *Alexandria* instead; and at the Victorian jewel of Hascombe, not far away, I found her among the crowd of saints around the altar, right down at floor level, just head, shoulders, and one segment of a wheel to identify her. I literally had to lie on the floor to take a photo. [71] Even my friends know to look out for St Catherine on my behalf; in this way I was tipped off to a modern icon of the saint at Cumberland Lodge, the home of a royal educational trust near Windsor. She is their patron, as well. [72]

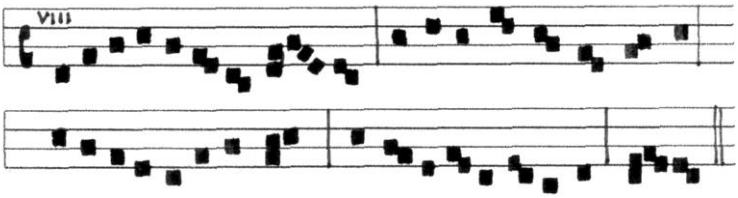
The achievement I'm most pleased with in this respect was to take the Latin text of one medieval sequence in Catherine's honour from the 14th-century *Codex Las Huelgas* and turn it into an English hymn, in a loose but hopefully not wayward translation. The tune was intended to be plainchant, but it's really more like a medieval carol, looking at it generously!

Ex illustri nata prosapia, Catherina,
candens ut lilium, et nobilis,

dono mundicie, crystalina gemma,
lux virginum, sponsa Christi, lux in ecclesia,
rosa rubens propter martirium.

Virgo fulgens et nobilissima,
et devincens falsa sophismata,
bona docens et viri nescia,
fit residens in Dei gloria.
Sponsa Christi, lux in ecclesia,
rosa rubens propter martirium.

Virgo vernans, sed viri nescia,
pellens a te viri consorcium,
te rogamus, ut tua gracia roget illum,
cuius imperium sine fine regnat in secula,
quod det nobis celi palacium.



O Catherine born of splendid line,
The lily's likeness you outshine:
The noble gift of virtue yours,
Your gemlike holiness endures.

Unto Christ wedded, you became
The light of virgins, and your fame
To holy Church Christ's light still shows;
Your death was rubied like the rose.

This noble virgin shining bright
All falsehoods conquers with the right
Of all good teaching, virtue whole,
And in God's glory dwells her soul.

O maid without a man fulfilled,
To earthly goods you would not yield,

But drove away unworthy love
And scorned the wheel for Him above.

Blest Catherine, gracious, now we plead
That you with God will intercede:
Whose endless reign can never fall,
May grant us his celestial hall.

To God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit, three in one,
Be honour, praise and majesty,
Now and through all eternity. Amen.

I call her my friend in heaven; and whatever the truth about her life may have been, what she has become is much of what I would like to become. Like all the saints, in Christian thinking, her virtues are only the light of Christ shining through her, and would that I could be transparent to the Holy Spirit too.

Fig.1 St Catherine's Chapel, Abbotsbury, from the west, with Chesil Beach and the Isle of Portland in the background

Fig.2 The Chapel of St Catherine at Jebel Katrin, Sinai, built over the bare rock of the mountain where the saint's body was discovered

Fig.3 A medieval wooden carving of a Catherine wheel; internet sources say it comes from West Parley church in Dorset, though I haven't been able to prove this

Fig.4 St Catherine's Island at Tenby, from an early 19th-century print

Fig.5 Katherine Swynford's coat of arms

Fig.6 Velislav the Canon and St Catherine, from his biblia picta

Fig.7 From Tokali Kilise church

Fig.8
From the
Theodore
Psalter

Fig.9 *An early icon from the monastery at Sinai*

Fig.10 *The first great* Vita *icon of St Catherine, from the monastery at Sinai*

Fig.11 The Vita *icon from Pisa*

Fig.12 Part of the painted legend of St Catherine from the church at Pickering, Yorkshire

Fig.13 St Catherine's Mystical Marriage to Christ, from Jenzat church in France

Fig.14 Early 16th-century statue from the Troyes region of France

Fig.15 15th-century altarpiece in the Museo San Matteo in Pisa, by the Master of the Legend of St Lucy - one of the most sumptuous depictions of St Catherine

Fig.16 St Catherine reading, from the Warburg Hours

Fig.17 St Catherine and the philosophers, from the Cleveland Museum of Art

Fig.18 St Catherine of The Madonna of the Rose Garden *by Michelino Molinari da Besozzo*

Fig.19 Jeremias Palladas's icon, made for Mount Sinai

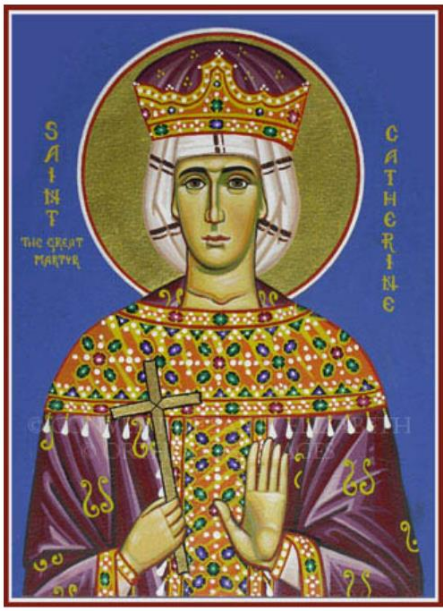


Fig.20 A modern Orthodox icon of St Catherine, looking back to older traditions

Fig.21 Lucretia Borgia as St Catherine, by Bernardino di Betto (Pinturicchio), c.1494

Fig.22 One of Simon Vouet's images of St Catherine using his wife Virginia as a model, 1620

Fig.23 Artemisia Gentileschi depicts herself as St Catherine, c.1615

Fig.24 Peter Lely's portrait of Countess Barbara Villiers as St Catherine, 1667

Fig.25 By Bernardo Strozzi, 1615

Fig.26 From the church of St Michael, Zeil-am-Main, Bavaria

Fig.27 By Antonio vela Cobo, 1660s

Fig.28 Statue at Carcar Cebu, Philippines

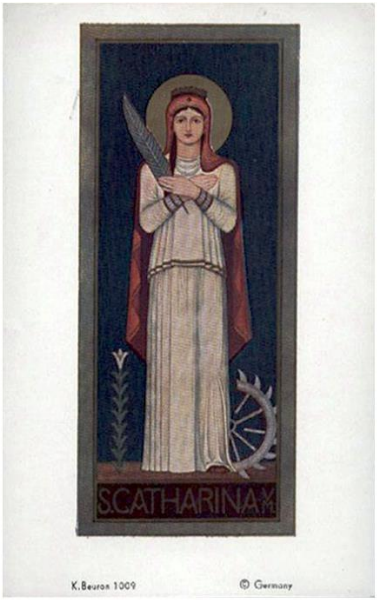


Fig.29 Devotional card, Beuron Abbey, Germany, 1920s

Fig.30 Devotional card, French, 1930s

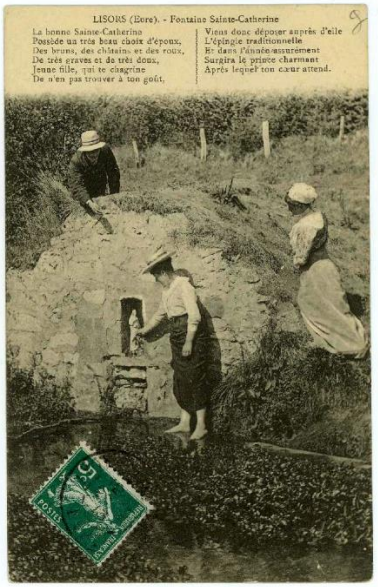


Fig.31 Souvenir postcard of the Fontaine Ste-Catherine, Lisors, France, c.1905

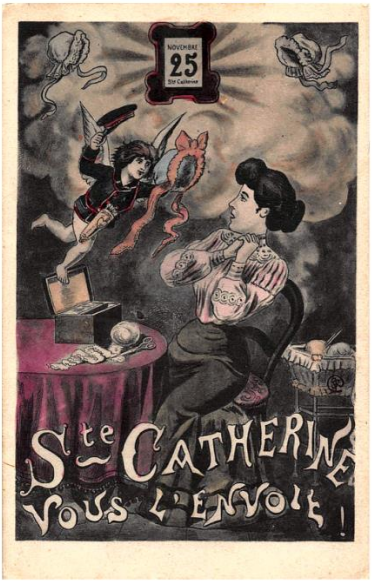
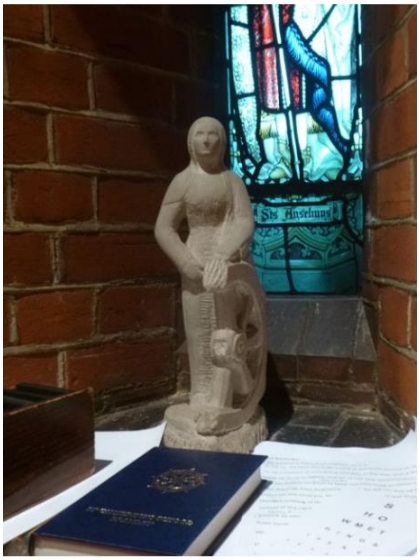


Fig.32 Catherinette postcard, French, c.1905

Fig.33 Catherinettes at the Fete Sainte-Catherine at Vesoul in eastern France, 2017

Figs.34-36 Three stained-glass Catherines in Anglican churches: Farncombe, Surrey (where Catherine appears among a group of virgin-martyrs), c.1885; Salle, Norfolk c.1910; Abbotsbury, Dorset c.1940



Figs.37-40 Representations of St Catherine at St Catherine's School, Bramley, Surrey, in glass (courtesy of the Kempe workshop), wood, stone, and embroidery

Fig.41 By Angelicons, via Etsy

Fig.42 By Ann Campbell, via Etsy

Fig. 43 Aidan Hart's icon

Fig.44 Keyring, via Etsy

Fig.45 By Beatrice Offor, c.1900

Fig.46 By Logan Chitwood, 2016 - St Catherine hands her sword to Joan of Arc

Fig.47 From Matteo Alfonsi's 'Martyrs' series, 2012

Fig.48 The Wheel - part of Michael Landy's 'Saints Alive' exhibition at the National Gallery, 2012-13

Fig.49 The t-shirt design from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum

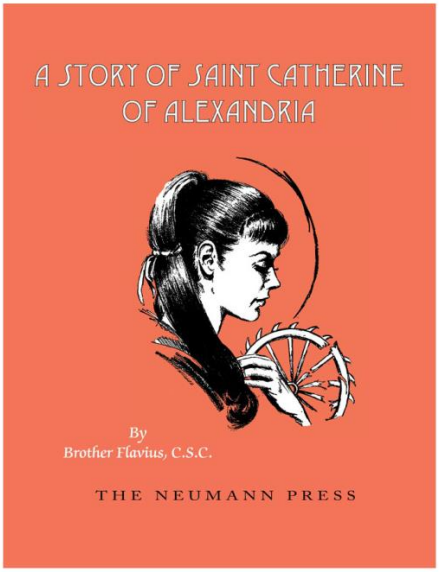


Fig.50 A Story of St Catherine, first published 1965

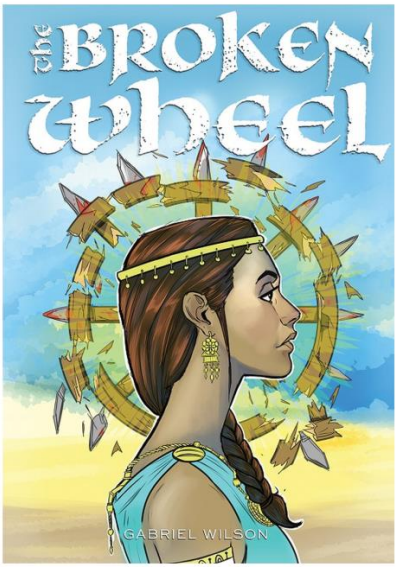


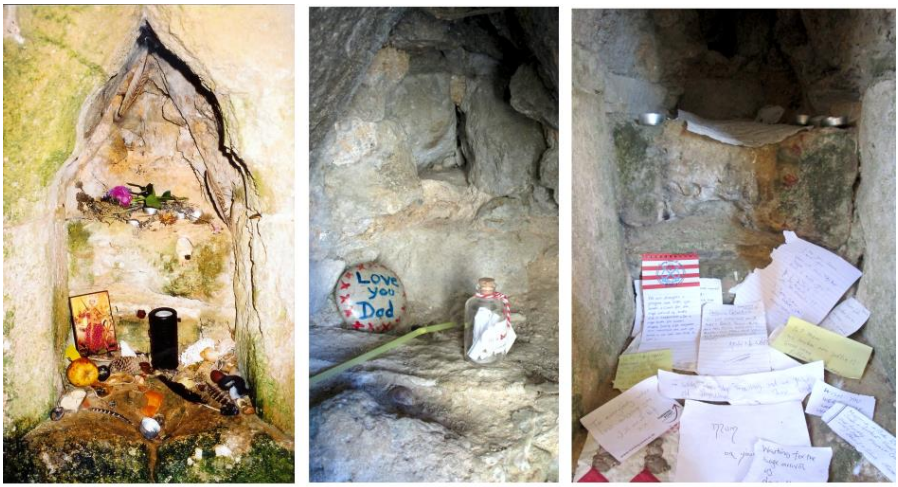
Fig.51 Gabriel Wilson's graphic novel The Broken Wheel *(2020)*

Fig.52 St Catherine before the philosophers, from the movie Decline of an Empire *(or one of its several other names), 2014*

Fig.53 A hot, dry summer view of the chapel at Abbotsbury

Fig.54 One of the Millennium kneelers from Abbotsbury parish church

Fig.55 Silver St Catherine pilgrim badge from Mary Buckle's gallery, Abbotsbury, early 2000s



Figs.56-58 Items from the votive deposit in the chapel at Abbotsbury, in 2002, 2017 & 2018

Fig.59 The 'wheel of light' on Chapel Hill, 2018

Fig.60 St Catherine's Chapel, Milton Abbas

Fig.61 St Catherine's Chapel, Holworth

Fig.62 The folly 'chapel' at St Catherine's Hill, Christchurch

Fig.63 St Catherine's Chapel, Guildford - a 19th-century print

Fig.64 St Catherine's Well, Guildford

Fig.65 The good folk of St Nicolas' parish, Guildford, at St Catherine's Chapel for mid-day prayer, St Catherine's Day 2017

Fig.66 Cows at Abbotsbury, 2016

Fig.67 Pilgrim and badge

Fig.68 St Catherine vestments

Fig.69 St Catherine by Matthew Alderman

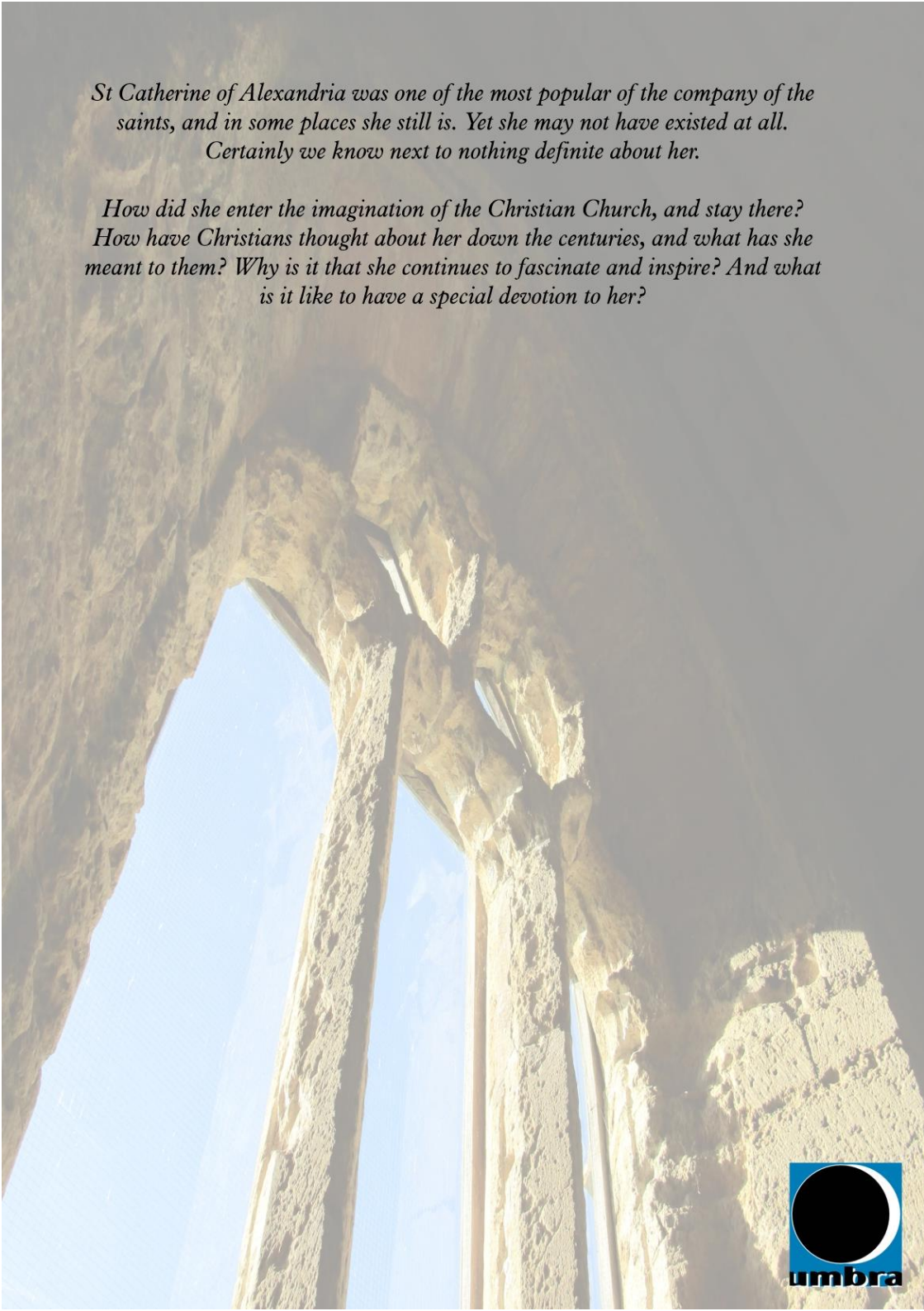
Fig.70 St Catherine by Cylene

Fig.71 In St Peter's Church, Hascombe, Surrey

Fig.72 At Cumberland Lodge

St Catherine of Alexandria was one of the most popular of the company of the saints, and in some places she still is. Yet she may not have existed at all. Certainly we know next to nothing definite about her.

How did she enter the imagination of the Christian Church, and stay there? How have Christians thought about her down the centuries, and what has she meant to them? Why is it that she continues to fascinate and inspire? And what is it like to have a special devotion to her?



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