

# St. Catherine of Alexandria

By John Jones (1961) and Anna Sander (Lonsdale Curator, 2004)

Jonathan Meakins and Jacqueline McClaran, who are connoisseurs of such things, have recently made a generous gift to the College of three very early prints of St Catherine of Alexandria (Figures 1-3) which are going to be displayed in a secure place where, in time, all members of the College will get to see and appreciate them.



Figure 1 Lucas van Leyden (1494-1533)  
St. Catherine of Alexandria  
Engraving: 1520  
Provenance: Earl of Aglesford; P. Gellaty.  
Ref. New Hollstein 125, a or b of c; Volbelu 177.  
'L' is Lucas van Leyden's signature. The date is 1520.  
Key icons of St. Catherine are: the crown, the wheel, the book and the sword.

The gift prompts reflection\* about the origin and extent of the connection of the College with this legendary saint, who is the patron of, *inter alia*, young women and scholars.

According to tradition, she was an exceptionally learned virgin who was broken on a spiked wheel and beheaded by the Emperor Maxentius at Alexandria in the fourth century. She had protested against his persecution of Christians. She probably never existed, and it is easy to be facetious about that, and about the fact that the Church of Rome has become ambivalent about her place in its calendar. But she had real meaning in mediaeval Europe, and has been among the most venerated of women saints for nearly a millennium.



Figure 2 Albrecht Durer (1471-1528)  
The Martyrdom of St. Catherine of Alexandria.  
Woodcut 1498  
Provenance: Furst von Liechtenstein  
Ref: Bartsch 120; Meder, Hollstein 236; Schoch, Mende and Scherbaum 128.  
Watermark Imperial orb (M 53)  
Durer's signature is seen at the bottom centre of the woodcut. The wheel of torture is destroyed by divine intervention. It is aflame though the missiles are said to be hailstones.

Dervorguilla of Galloway, Lady of Balliol, was among her special followers, and when the diocesan bishop licensed the College (*domus scolarium de Balliolo*) in 1284, he noted that she had given it a multiple dedication, including the Blessed Virgin and Martyr Catherine (*beate virginis & martiris Katerine*): Figures 4 & 5.

The College's principal corporate seal, which was probably given by Dervorguilla herself, shows Dervorguilla with John Balliol supporting the College, overseen by the Holy Mother and Child. We still have that matrix, and also a smaller matrix of a *sigillum ad causas* which features St Catherine. When the College procured a Royal Charter of Incorporation in 1588, a new matrix was cut for the main seal in which St Catherine - a buxom Britannia-like representation - dominates.

In its earliest days, the College attended the Parish Church of St Mary Magdalen, where a side-chapel became known as St Catherine's Chapel, but as soon as the College was on its feet it set about building its own place of worship: in 1327 the Abbot of Reading gave it £20 towards the building of the Chapel of St Catherine (*ad fabricam capelle sancte Katerine*). The first Chapel, which stood exactly where our Chapel is today, was rebuilt about 1525, but the dedication was transferred and emphasised by the inclusion in the second Chapel of a window telling the story of St Catherine. That window was not incorporated by Butterfield when the Chapel was rebuilt again in 1854, but the fragments were later largely recovered and pieced together in the third and present Chapel. Every day Henry Savage, Master 1651-1672, saw not only that window but also the nearly life-sized wooden figure of St Catherine above the Chapel screen. In his *Balliofergus* (1688), the first history of the College (indeed, of any College), Savage wrote at length about St Catherine. He makes it clear that he doubted the reality of the legend, but also realised the importance of the dedication to earlier generations.

From before 1402 until 1829, the College property which was roughly where the JCR and Development

Office now are, was an inn known as the Catherine Wheel. Although the Catherine Wheel was leased out, its



Figure 3 Giulio (di Antonio) Bonasone (1510-1576)  
The mystic Marriage of St. Catherine  
Engraving: c1543

Ref: Bartsch 47; Massari 8.

The engraving is after a painting in the National Gallery, London by Francesco Parmigianino (1503-1540). Bonasone's signature is on the virgin's chair and Parmigianino is noted below on the right. Her right hand rests on the intact wheel holding a palm leaf.

affairs were not separate from those of the College. College guests were entertained there and there were shared employees. Like the College, it was tainted with Catholicism; in 1589 two priests and a catholic gentleman were captured there together with one Humphrey Pritchard, an inn (and probably College) servant. All four were ritually butchered for their faith (or treason, according to politics). After the

Gunpowder Plot was discovered in 1605, Robert Wyntour confessed under torture that he had conspired with Robert Catesby in the Catherine Wheel. A plot against Parliament was also hatched there in 1648; two of the plotters were condemned to be hanged from the inn sign, but were reprieved at the last moment. In modern times that part of the College has again been the site of occasional folly and drama, but on a tamer scale.

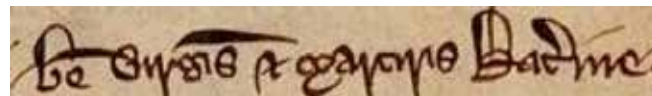


Figure 4. In 1284 the Bishop of Lincoln gives his approval to the foundation of the College.

The Chapel screen was dismantled in 1854, and the St Catherine figure was given pride of place at the far end of the Old Library. She wears the conventional crown (for nobility), holds the hilt of a sword (she was beheaded) and a book (she was learned), but she has lost her most familiar icon, the wheel. However, that icon appears in many other places around the College – in the carpet of the Master’s Dining Room, in the ceiling of the Old Common Room, above the Front Gate Tower arch, and in the apex of the great east window in Hall. More discreetly displayed, we also find Catherine wheels on works of art - on an elegant small silver mustard pot in the SCR and on the ornate binding of Pugin’s 1843 aborted designs for a Gothic Balliol, and on the stunning gilded bowl which Jon

Moynihan has recently given in usum magistris to mark the winding up of the Balliol Campaign Board.

All living members of the College, except the newest whose turn will come, have had the chance of attending at least one St Catherine’s Day Dinner. The 25th of November is her traditional feast day, the most festive day in the Balliol Calendar since time immemorial. Since the mid-sixteenth century for sure we can see its footprint in the accounts year in year out, and in all probability the Fellows and Scholars on the Foundation have indulged themselves on St Catherine’s Day for nearly 750 years. It was until 1897 a select Dinner for Foundationers (i.e. not including the Commoners) but in that year, fortunately for those of us who belonged (originally) to the hoi poloi, it was made all-inclusive at the suggestion of EJ Palmer, the Chaplain. For memorability it can rarely have equalled 1964, when Harold Macmillan spoke so movingly of the Balliol generation slaughtered in 1914-1918, and was given possibly the only standing ovation a Conservative politician has ever had from a student body leaning, as ever, leftwards.



be[ate] virg[in]is & martyris Kat[er]jine

Figure 5. The end of the third line of the above deed: the earliest mention of St Catherine in Balliol affairs.

Captions to Figures 1-3 by Jonathan Meakins

\*The sources used can all be located via John Jones Balliol College. A history (2nd revised edition 2005), or the College Archive website, especially the page on St Catherine by Anna Sander. Further illustrations (e.g. of the stained glass, the statue mentioned, the seals etc.) can also be found in the book and on the website.