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# The Cult of Saint Katherine of Alexandria in Late-Medieval Nuremberg

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Nuremberg in the later Middle Ages was one of the most prominent cities in central Europe: a free Imperial city, the location of the imperial regalia and the place where Imperial Diets were held, it was also a wealthy centre of economic life, one of the largest cities in German-speaking Europe, and an important manufacturer of many industrial products, in particular weapons. Unlike most German cities, by the 15th century Nuremberg had virtually no guilds with any power, and was ruled by an oligarchic patriciate of merchants, from the families of which also came many of the leading humanists of late 15th and 16th centuries, during which period the city was also known not just for its industry and wealth, but equally for its literary and artistic personalities. Prominent figures born or resident in the city during this period include the humanists Lorenz Beheim, Willibald Pirckheimer, and Hartmann Schedel; the poets Hans Rosenplüt and Hans Sachs; and the artists ? who in particular are of a great significance in European, not just German, cultural history ? Sebald Beham, Veit Stoß, and of course Albrecht Dürer. As a place of political power, worldly wealth, learning, and art, it was natural that the religious lives of Nuremberg?s elites should also be extremely rich and complex, not least because its cloisters were populated with and endowed by members of its patriciate, who were physically present in its churches both in the flesh, and in their arms or portraits depicted in the

stained-glass windows and altars; they were also among the consumers of the religious books copied by Nuremberg?s monks and nuns and later produced by its printers. St Katherine of Alexandria has been called the unofficial patron saint of the city, and the Dominican cloister dedicated to her ? the Katharinenkloster, first endowed in 1293, and destroyed by bombs in 1945 ? was by 1470 one of the largest women?s convents in southern Germany, and also a very wealthy one, filled as it was largely by the daughters of the towns patrician families. In this book, Anne Simon provides a stimulating account of the cult of this saint in Nuremberg (mainly in the 15th century), and its connections with various other aspects of urban life. The basis of the analysis and the main focus of the two longest chapters of this work is a print of *Der Heiligen Leben* from 1475, which contains a German redaction of the *Legenda Aurea* (the manuscript of the oldest extant German translation was produced in Nuremberg?s Katharinenkloster), including an account of the life and miracles of Katherine drawn largely from a manuscript (again a Katharinenkloster manuscript) of 1421; Simon also draws on documentary sources, travel accounts (most importantly Hans Tucher?s *Reise zum Heiligen Grab* of 1482), various literary works, and especially the visual evidence of the cult ? stained-glass windows; altars ? extant from Nuremberg from this period.

The life of Saint Katherine resonated with the lives of the Katharinenkloster nuns in a number of ways: she was a princess, just as they were daughters of families that ruled an Imperial city; she was learned, and said to have studied the seven liberal arts, just as the convent was itself a place of learning; and she was a saint of Alexandria, a city with which the denizens of Nuremberg, itself a prominent mercantile city, had many trading links. Altars and windows in the churches of the city, including the convent?s own church, portrayed members of the families of various donors, who were also the relatives of the nuns; many of these artefacts were dedicated to Katherine, portraying aspects of her life and miracles, and thus directly linking in image the inhabitants of the cloister both with their families in the world outside, and with the saint to whom their foundation was dedicated, leading Simon to the conclusion that the patrician families ?used Saint Katherine as a billboard for advertising their place within the spiritual economy, financial hierarchy and familial network of the city? (p. 16). The commissioning of an altar by Dürer to be placed in the Katharinenkirche, for example, was, as Simon convincingly argues, an effort to display a family?s social status. The altar of the Paumgartner family is a particularly telling instance: it was commissioned after the family?s disgrace and bankruptcy, and thus ?publicly announces both their remorse, and, more forcefully, their return as major players on the civic stage, a return ?sanctioned? by Saint Katherine as the altar stands in the space dedicated to her? (p. 274). Because of the intimate links thus created between the religious spaces endowed by the patrician families, and the worlds of politics, finance, industry, and trade, the very spaces of ritual ? and thus, Simon suggests, ritual itself ? became means of displaying both personal and familial piety as well as social prestige ? a phenomenon common in other German (and European) cities as well (this broader perspective might perhaps have benefited from a somewhat more detailed treatment in this book).

Similarly, in the narrative sources Simon examines the saint is implicitly connected to the secular life of trade and finance, for example in Tucher?s account of pilgrims seeking to visit the dungeon in with Katherine was imprisoned, for which they have to pay a madin, which Tucher helpfully explains is one 25th of a ducat. The second and third chapters of this book in particular illustrate in some detail the place of this saint (and her life and miracles) in the devotional practices of the nuns of Nuremberg?s Katharinenkloster, which included the reading at mealtimes of Katherine?s life and miracles, as well as ? Simon convincingly argues ? private devotions based on meditative readings of the same texts. The last two chapters of the book site the earlier ones within a broader context, demonstrating the close ties between the convent and the wider urban world outside its walls, in particular by the author?s detailed exposition of the many family ties linking nuns to patricians, paintings to patronage, and thus the saint to the city. The web of connections that are revealed justifies Simon?s suggestion that Katherine might have been particularly venerated in Nuremberg both because of her and its links to learning, and in order ?to gain her favour as a representative of the city in Alexandria, a sort of divine insurance policy for a business that was highly lucrative but equally hazardous? (p. 234), namely the spice trade, in which prominent Nuremberg families such as the Volckamer and Mendel ? patrons of a prominent window in the Lorenzkirche featuring Saint Katherine ? were involved. In an analogous manner, the saint could be used by patricians to make not just spiritual, but also political statements

Simon manages well the difficult task of connecting her readings of texts and images and insights primarily from literary and art-historical scholarship, with the social and economic history of the city, as well as with a good deal of the recent theoretical work on gender, space, and the performative aspects of religious practice in the later middle ages. On occasion the author?s background in literary scholarship is betrayed by her numerous unglossed references to texts of the Middle High German canon that will prove mystifying to those who do not belong to the dwindling club of Anglophone scholars of this literature; these are, however, rarely of central importance to the exposition of her ideas, and will not be an obstacle for those unable to place the references. (A further minor quibble: it is not clear to me why Heinrich Seuse?s *Horologium Sapientiae* ? itself the author?s own Latin version of a Middle High German work originally written for Dominican nuns ? is cited not in Latin, but only in a modern German translation, with an English translation of the modern German provided by the author; Simon herself points out that the vernacular text was possessed by at least one of the nuns of the Dominican Katharinenkloster.(1))

This is a very interesting book that will be of use to scholars in various disciplines. It has been handsomely produced with the inclusion of 13 plates of some of the images discussed by the author ? though one wishes that Ashgate had seen fit to reproduce at least some of these glorious works in colour. It will be accessible to scholars with no German or prior experience of studying German history, as all sources are presented in clear English translations. Anne Simon?s work can be recommended as an excellent means of gaining insights into many aspects of lived religiosity in one of the most prominent cities of late-medieval Germany

# Notes

1. Seuse?s vernacular works are edited by Karl Bihlmeyer, *Heinrich Seuse: Deutsche Schriften* (Stuttgart, 1907), and provided with a modern German translation in Loris Sturlese and Rüdiger Blumrich, *Das Buch der Wahrheit* (Hamburg 1993); the *Horologium sapientiae* is edited by Pius Künzle, *Heinrich Seuses Horologium sapientiae* (Freiburg, 1977). Neither are listed in Simon?s bibliography.Back to (1)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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