

Saint Catherine and Hypatia: A problematic identification

Elias Krippas

<http://doi.org/10.33209/2519-4348-2707-9627-2020-8-84>

The historically obscure elements in St. Catherine's martyrologies, as well as her characteristic of an exceptionally wise woman, were the triggers for a theory of being a Christianized version of the atrociously murdered philosopher Hypatia. Even her peculiar name was a subject of several hypotheses concerning the etymology and the meaning of it. In any case, the compelling conception that St. Catherine was definitively Hypatia was exposed in a book by Vasileios Myrsilides which has been published in 1926. In that book the author claims that in 1897, being a headmaster of a Greek school in the Turkish town Denizli, he discovered that in 25th of November the Greek minority there instead of celebrating the memory of St. Catherine, just as the rest of the Greeks Christians Orthodox, the community was rendering honor to the holy martyr Hypatia. The writer attests the existence of a manuscript containing a Mass about Hypatia, as well as a letter confessing her desire to die as a Christian. Additionally, Myrsilides shares his witness about an ancient temple dedicated to Hypatia with a respective inscription that discovered to the ruined city of Laodicea. About thirty years later the theologian Chrestos Enisleides propagates all these findings and indeed many were the scholars in the Greek scientific milieu who, bona fide, attached much credence to this theory. Finally the theory of an absolute identification of St. Catherine and Hypatia enjoyed a revival through the work of Annemarie Maeger who in 2002 published a full translation of Myrsilides' book in German. This paper surveys the endurance that this theory developed in a time frame of 76 years and examines its problematic core.

Keywords: St. Catherine, Hypatia, Synesius, Laodicea, Alexandria, Denizli, Myrsilides, Enisleides, Annemarie Maeger, 25th November, John Capgrave, Mount Sinai.

The heinous death of Hypatia that took place in Alexandria in the year 415, evoked feelings of sympathy or even remorse, at least among the erudites, in Byzantium almost throughout its long history. Indeed, her contemporary Christian historian Socrates the Scholasticus states in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* about Hypatia's

death, that: “[...] surely nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity than the allowances of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort”¹. Furthermore, prominent Byzantine writers such as the Patriarch of Constantinople Photios or Michael Psellos are referring to her with great respect².

All these led some researchers, historians or novel-writers to the conclusion that the official Christian Church in her remorse for Hypatia’s death “invented” a non-existent female Saint -Saint Catherine- in order to conceal Hypatia’s memory³. On the other hand, some other researchers tend to identify Hypatia with St. Catherine. As a matter of fact, the figure and the story of St. Catherine are covered with remarkable obscurity. Even her name is characterized by fathomless mystery; therefore many have been the efforts to interpret the meaning and the etymology of it.

The most prevalent explanation about St. Catherine’s name claims that the name is Greek, and that name, which in Greek is “Αικατερίνα” (Aikaterina), derives from the Greek phrase “ἀεὶ καθαρὴ” (aei kathare) with the Latin ending “-ina”. This is a defensible theory since the name was often written in Latin with “th”; a diphthong that in Greek is pronounced with the letter “theta”. “Αεὶ καθαρὴ” means consistently clean, pure or, more accurately in this relevancy, virgin.

A second, more imaginative, version is that Aikat(h)erina is the feminine form of the ancient Greek name “Ἑκάτερος” (Hecateros); a minor god in Greek mythology⁴. Related to that is the version that refers Athanasios Kykkotes, Metropolitan of Cyrene, in his book written in 2015 and titled Memory of Hypatia the Philosopher. This interpretation is even more fanciful and claims that Aikat(h)erina derives from the chthonic goddess “Hecate” (Ἑκάτη) of the ancient Greek

¹ *Socrates Scholasticus*, Ecclesiastical History, trans. A. C. Zenos in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. II, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1957, Chapter XV, p. 294.

² *Asmus J. R.*, “Hypatia in Tradition und Dichtung”; in: Studien zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte, v. 7, Berlin 1907, p. 18-19: „Der allgemeine Typus, nicht die religiöse Stellungnahme, ist es auch, der unserer Philosophin bei den Byzantinern eine bleibende Bedeutung gesichert hat. Für sie ist Hypatia das sprichwörtliche Prototyp der gelehrten Frau. Als solch eine Zierde ihres Geschlechtes tritt sie im vierzehnten Jahrhundert bei Nicephorus Gregoras Hist. rom. VIII, 5 auf, wo es von den gelehrten Kaiserin Eudoxia Makrembolitissa heißt, man habe sie „eine zweite Theano und Hypatia“ genannt. Angesichts dieser Stelle hat man wohl auch schon bei Psellos (elftes Jahrhundert) bei der Zusammenstellung „der weisen Ägypterin“ mit Theano an die Alexandrinerin zu denken.“ See also Σπετσιέρης Κ., Εἰκόνες Ἑλλήνων Φιλοσόφων εἰς Ἑκκλησίας, Ἀθῆναι 1964, p. 59-61 and Σπετσιέρης Κ., «Εἰκόνες Ἑλλήνων Φιλοσόφων εἰς Ἑκκλησίας. Συμπληρωματικά Στοιχεῖα»: Ἐπιστημονικὴ Ἐπετηρὶς τῆς Φιλοσοφικῆς Σχολῆς τοῦ Πανεπιστημίου Ἀθηνῶν, v. 24, Athens 1973-1974, p. 418-421.

³ See for instance the recent book by *Nicola Bizzi*, Ipazia di Alessandria e l'enigma di Santa Caterina, Edizioni Aurora Boreale 2018.

⁴ Κεραμόπουλος Ἀντ., «Αἰκατερίνη - Ἑκατερίνη», Ἀθηνά: Σύγγραμμα περιοδικὸν τῆς ἐν Ἀθῆναις Ἐπιστημονικῆς Ἑταιρείας 51 (1941), p. 128.

mythology. Hecate is usually associated with the moon and the writer links this fact with the Mount Sinai where the incorrupt body of St. Catherine was found somewhere in the 8th century⁵. According to an unsound theory, the name of Mount Sinai may stem from “Sin”, a Sumerian deity of moon. So the fact that the relics of Aikat(h)erina or Hekaterina were found to the Mount Sinai is an evidence that reveals where her name comes from⁶.

A third hypothesis comes from Konstantinos Papamichalopoulos who has been a Minister of Education in 1892. In his book *The Monastery of Mount Sinai* declares that Aikat(h)erina is not a name but it is actually a cognomen⁷. Namely the Saint was originally called Dorothea or Damiane and Aikaterina was a paronym that had been attached to the Saint’s name, and which means “the wise”. According to this theory, “Aikat(h)erina” is an adjective that in fact comes from the Arabic language, in which “*el kadem*” means the wise man, while “*el kater*” means the wise woman. So the articulated word “*el kater*” gradually had been corrupted to “Aikat(h)er” and, moreover, sometime it got the Latin ending “-ina”. However this theory has been disproved by the Professor of Theology and a former rector of the University of Athens Gregorios Papamichail, who noted that in Arabic language “*el kater*” doesn’t mean “the wise” but “the powerful”, while “*haki-mat*” is the feminine form of the adjective “wise” in Arabic⁸.

In any case, the Eastern Orthodox Church, at least, labeled St. Catherine as “*Pansofos*”; that is “*Omniscient*” or “*Hyperwise*”; a characterization that is usually given to God. The connection, here, with Hypatia is evident since her extraordinary wisdom is muchly praised by many Byzantine writers and historians. But was it really St. Catherine the eminent philosopher Hypatia?

The Saint’s martyrologies, namely the narrations of her life and her eventual martyrdom, assign her existence somewhere between the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century. Hypatia, on the other hand, lived almost a hundred years later. According to the Roman Catholic Abbot, Joseph Eugène Viteau, who was the first to publish, in 1897, St. Catherine’s oldest martyrologies, the oldest one should be dated somewhere between the second half of the 6th century and the first half of the 7th century⁹; so quite a long time since Saint’s death.

However we have the witness of historian Eusebius from Caesarea who wrote his *Historia Ecclesiastica* in 4th century and informs us about an anonymous

⁵ Τσάμης Δ., Τὸ Μαρτυρολόγιον τοῦ Σινᾶ, Θεσσαλονίκη (Β’ ἔκδοση) 2003, p. 74.

⁶ Κυκκώτης Αθ. Μνήμη Ὑπατίας τῆς Φιλοσόφου, Ἰ. Μ. Κυρήνης 2015, p. 35.

⁷ Παπαμιχαλόπουλος Κ. Ν., Ἡ Μονὴ τοῦ Ὁρους Σινᾶ, Ἀθήνα 1932, p. 171-172.

⁸ Επιστολὴς Χρ. Ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς τὸ περιοδικὸν Κιβωτός: Μηνιαῖον Φυλλάδιον Ὁρθοδόξου Διδαχῆς, Φεβρουάριος 1954, issue nr. 26, p. 46-47.

⁹ Τσάμης Δ., Τὸ Μαρτυρολόγιον τοῦ Σινᾶ, Θεσσαλονίκη (Β’ ἔκδοση) 2003, p. 77.

distinguished and wealthy Christian woman who stood out against the pagan Emperor Maximinus. In particular: (I cite)

“The tyrant having fully gratified his lust on others at Alexandria, his unbridled passion was defeated by the heroic firmness of one female only, who was one of the most distinguished and illustrious at Alexandria, and she was Christian. She was in other respects distinguished both for her wealth, and family, and condition, but esteemed all inferior to modesty. Having frequently made attempts to bring her over to his purposes, though she was prepared to die, he could not destroy her, as his passion was stronger than his anger; but, punishing her with exile, he took away all her wealth¹⁰.” (End of the citation).

That woman is believed to be St. Catherine; at least for the cardinal and ecclesiastical historian of the 16th century, Caesar Baronius¹¹.

Eusebius wrote, of course, about exile and not about martyrdom. However, according to a version of St. Catherine’s life¹², the Saint, though she lived in Alexandria, she was born in Cyprus as the daughter of a sovereign, and sometime during her life, she was imprisoned there. Until today her jail is a place of interest in Famagusta in Cyprus. Furthermore, at least for the medieval English historian and hagiographer John Capgrave who wrote a biography of St. Catherine, the name of Famagusta itself is intimately related to the Saint, since her father’s name was Costus and Famagusta means, according to Capgrave, *“the fame of Costus”* with an alteration of the letter “C” to letter “G”¹³.

Undeniably St. Catherine is known for her chaste and prudent life; an attribute which is sharing with the philosopher Hypatia. Indeed, according to Suda, the Byzantine encyclopedia of 10th century, Hypatia *“[...] was both just and chaste and remained always a virgin”*¹⁴. Moreover the Suda encyclopedia refers that:

¹⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History VIII, 15; The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus, Bishop of Cesarea, in Palestine, trans. C. F. Crusé, New York 1856 (10th ed.), p. 341.

¹¹ Annales ecclesiastici auctore C. Baronio cum critice Pagii, vol. 3, Luccae 1738 and ann. 307, note 31.

¹² See Τσάμης Δ., Τὸ Μαρτυρολόγιον τοῦ Σινᾶ, Θεσσαλονίκη (Β' έκδοση) 2003, p. 75.

¹³ Capgrave J., The Life of Saint Katherine, book 1, ch. 8, verses 494-507; editor: Karen A. Winstead. (From the site of University of Rochester “TEAMS - Middle English Text Series”: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/winstead-capgrave-life-of-saint-katherine-book-1> - last accessed 5.2.2020).

¹⁴ Suida Lexicon Graece & Latine, Cambridge 1705, vol. 3, p. 533-534. (The preferred English translation here, is that of Jeremiah Reedy: https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20281b/Philosophy%20of%20Magic/Arcana/Neoplatonism/hypatia-bio-suda.html - last accessed on 5.2.2020).

"Such was Hypatia, as articulate and eloquent in speaking as she was prudent and civil in her deeds. The whole city rightly loved her and worshipped her in a remarkable way [...]."¹⁵

So maybe that is the key factor for Hypatia's identification with St. Catherine.

In 1926 a book was published by Vasileios Myrsilides, an educator with descent from Asia Minor, under the title, Biography of the Greek philosopher Hypatia and subtitle, Extracted from most ancient, Christian, historical sources and the tradition from the ruins of Asia Minor before the catastrophe and slaughter of 1922. In this book Myrsilides recollects that in 1897, when he was a French teacher and headmaster of the Greek school in the Turkish town of Denizli, he made an extra-ordinary discovery. Namely on the 24th of November he was told by the eldership of the town that the next day should be no lessons in school and additionally he was invited to the neighbouring ancient city of Laodicea in order to participate to the celebrations of Hypatia's memory as a martyr. On Myrsilides' question, of how was it and the town wasn't celebrating on 25th of November the memory of St. Catherine, just like the rest of the Greeks, the elders of Denizli laughed at him and they gave him a manuscript. This manuscript was supposed to be a Mass book for Hypatia containing Church hymns to her, as well as a letter of Hypatia to her disciple Synesius, bishop of Cyrene in Africa. In that letter she was expressing her desire to die as a Christian; namely, to be baptized. Furthermore, this manuscript contained the whole story of her sanctification. According to that, after Hypatia's violent death, her disciple Synesius arrived hurriedly in Alexandria where a great turmoil was going on. Owing to Synesius' actions, a local council was held in Alexandria on 25th November of 415. Additionally he informed the council about Hypatia's desire to die as a Christian, and revealed that he was preparing her baptism on Holy Saturday of that year. So the council decided to canonize Hypatia, but with a new name, in order not to rouse more the passions in the upset city of Alexandria. The new name of Hypatia would be Aikaterina¹⁶.

The next day Myrsilides, along with the whole town of Denizli, went to the ruined, ancient city of Laodicea, which also happens to be a landmark for Christianity as it is one of the Seven Churches referred to the last book of New Testament; the Apocalypse. In Laodicea Myrsilides and the rest of the Christians celebrated the martyr Hypatia in an ancient ruined temple dedicated to her. There also Myrsilides discovered something equally extra-ordinary. That was a stone with the faint inscription: THIS TEMPLE ERECTED FOUNDATIONALLY

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 533-534.

¹⁶ *Ενισλεύδης Χρ., Αικατερίνα ή Αγία και πάνν ώραία 'Υπατία, Αθήναι 1954, p. 12.*

FOR HONOR AND MEMORY OF HYPATIA THE MARTYR UNDER THE REIGN OF MARC... and the rest of it being not so legible.

Some years later, as Myrsilides narrates in his book, he met in Izmir the renowned expert in Christian archeology Georgios Lambakis. He told him about the temple of Hypatia and all the details of her celebration by the Christians of Denizli and Lambakis got very excited. He promised also to write about all that to a book that he was preparing under the title *The Seven Stars of Apocalypse*. But eventually, to Myrsilides' great disappointment, Lambakis didn't¹⁷.

As Myrsilides states in his book, he felt obliged to write down all that in order to save them from oblivion. But regardless of how beautiful this story sounds it is rather tenuous. First of all because such an epistle of Hypatia stating that she intended to become Christian, has never been discovered and furthermore there has been no discovery of such a manuscript containing what Myrsilides claims. Secondly nowhere is attested that existed ever a council in Alexandria in 415 that canonized any saint. Thirdly, in all likelihood, Synesius was already dead before Hypatia's death¹⁸. Fourthly in the 1960s a Canadian researcher's team under the guidance of Jean des Gagniers catalogued and published all the stone inscriptions that were found in the region of Laodicea, without finding any inscription about Hypatia and her supposed temple¹⁹.

The fifth reason has to do with the Turkish town of Denizli which is situated about 230 km southeast of Izmir. The definitive conquer of this region by the Turks that happened during the 14th century led possibly to a gradual conversion to Islam by many of the inhabitants there, who were mostly of Greek ancestry²⁰. Thus at the end of 19th century Denizli numbered 33.397 Muslims out of a grand total of 35.697 residents, of which 1.758 were Greek Christian Orthodox²¹. So we are speaking of a quite small Christian minority. In fact during the Greco-Turkish War from 1919 until 1922, the Greek government was advised by the British to leave Denizli out of its demands in Asia Minor, exactly because of the

¹⁷ *Μυρσιλίδης Β.*, *Βιογραφία τῆς φιλοσόφου Ἑλληνίδος Ὑπατίας*. Griechischer Originaltext von 1926 mit deutscher Erstübersetzung, Maeger Verlag, Hamurg 2002, p. 16-68.

¹⁸ *Harich-Schwarzbauer H.*, *Hypatia. Die spätantiken Quellen*, Bern 2011, p. 22: "Insbesondere aus den Briefen an Hypatia wird das Ende seiner Korrespondenz auf das Jahr 413 datiert, das in der Folge auch als Todesjahr des Synesios gilt."

¹⁹ See *Des Gagniers J.*, *Laodicée du Lycos. Le Nymphée*. Campagnes 1961-1963, Quebec et Paris 1969; *Μυρσιλίδης Β.*, *Βιογραφία τῆς φιλοσόφου Ἑλληνίδος Ὑπατίας*. Griechischer Originaltext von 1926 mit deutscher Erstübersetzung, Maeger Verlag, Hamurg 2002, p. 88.

²⁰ *Ramsey W. M.*, *The cities and bishoprics of Phrygia*, Oxford 1895, p. 27-28.

²¹ *Kapluhan Er.*, *An evaluation of the geographical features of Denizli in terms of its potential for urban development*; in: *Urban and urbanization*, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, Sofia 2014, p.553.

faint presence of Greeks there²². So if truly existed a worship of the sanctified Hypatia, as Myrsilides claims, this would have only been preformed by the small Greek minority of Denizli amongst other large and flourishing Greek communities living in Asia Minor at the end of 19th century.

This earnest effort for an absolute identification of Hypatia and St. Catherine would have possibly been forgotten and we could fairly refer to a Greek Baron Münchhausen if it wouldn't appear a new round in the case of supporting this theory, almost 30 years after Myrsilides published his book. Indeed in November of 1953 when an issue of the Christian Orthodox magazine "Kivotos" (The Ark) circulates, it contains an article by G. Louros with a reference to Myrsilides' book and his theory. Magazine's next issue of December circulates with an answer to the article of Louros by a theologian named Christos Enisleides. Enisleides' answer is indeed very detailed. He gives many hagiological evidences about a sanctified form of Hypatia that, according to him, is St. Catherine at all events. Naturally he fully accepts the theory of Myrsilides and he is determined to establish it. In parallel, at the end of November of 1953 Enisleides made a lecture to the school where he was working as a theologian, on the subject of Hypatia being St. Catherine and in the next year he published this lecture under the title Catherine the Saint and most beautiful Hypatia. Ultimately in 1962 Enisleides submitted the entire theory of Myrsilides to the significant academic work that was published in Greece during the 1960s, Religious and Ethical Encyclopedia and particularly to the entry about St. Catherine²³.

It seems though that the charm of Myrsilides and his theory transcends the 20th century and reaches the 21st, since a new effort of promoting the absolute identification of Hypatia and St. Catherine comes this time from Germany. In 2002 appeared a full translation of Myrsilides' book in German by Annemarie Maeger. But before that Maeger had already written a book published in 1992 under the indicative title Hypatia the Three-faceted: Philosopher – Church father – Saint. So for Maeger obviously Hypatia is not only a Saint but a Church "father" as well.

In this book the writer uses as a basic source for St. Catherine's life, the work of the aforementioned medieval English historian John Capgrave who composed in 1463 a very fanciful version of St. Catherine's life in 8.000 rhyme verses written in Middle-English²⁴. Further on, Maeger confuses deliberately the bio-

²² Cilingir S., Lloyd George and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, 2007, p. 181.

²³ *Επιστολή Χρ., «Αικατερίνη»* ΘΗΕ 1 (1962), c. 1037- 1039.

²⁴ Capgrave J., *The Life of Saint Katherine*: Introduction; editor: Karen A. Winstead. (From the site of University of Rochester "TEAMS - Middle English Text Series": <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/winstead-capgrave-the-life-of-saint-katherine> - last accessed 1.2.2020).

graphical elements of Hypatia and St. Catherine creating an unprecedented amalgam. For instance she confuses the episode in St. Catherine's life about her triumph against a group of fifty pagan philosophers through an outarguing Christian speech that she carried out, with a story which recounts the anonymous work from the 4th century *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, about an argument debate among the philosophical school of Athens and the respective of Alexandria. In this debate the winning part was the Alexandrian one and according to Maeger the absolute leading figure of the Alexandrian philosophical team must have been Hypatia²⁵. The writer finally conjoins very eccentrically Hypatia, St. Catherine and the god Dionysus and claims that Hypatia was both devoted to paganism as well as to Christianity and through her philosophy she managed to connect them to a Christian synthetic religion²⁶.

As already mentioned, ten years after this book, Maeger published a translation in German of Myrsilides' book over Hypatia, 76 years after its first appearance in Greece. Needless to say that Maeger gives credence to Myrsilides' theory stating that the so-called evidences that he is providing "are too plausible to be just products of fantasy"²⁷. In the appendix of the book Maeger recounts the journey that she did in summer of 2001 to the archeological site of Laodicea, in order to see for herself the sacred site of the supposed Hypatia's cult. As for the question why Hypatia's cult endured uninterrupted from 5th century until at least 19th century in that particular place of Asia Minor, Maeger in accordance with Myrsilides, ascribes it to Hypatia's paternal ancestry from Izmir; a fact that the writer interprets as a proof for definitive special bonds that the female philosopher should have with that region and its habitants²⁸.

Maybe is difficult for someone to foresee if Myrsilides' theory is destined to experience a new revival in the years coming. The most certain thing is, though, that if someone forgets that it is totally groundless, it happens to be a quite seductive theory and Hypatia can be seen indeed as a Saint but only according to the current Bishop of Cyrene Athanasios, successor of Hypatia's disciple Synesius, who wrote the aforesaid book about the philosopher and comments that, *just like those who befriend Saints assume a certain holiness, thus Hypatia coexisting with Saint Catherine in her Mass book, she must have assumed holiness*²⁹.

²⁵ Maeger A., *Hypatia, die Dreigestaltige: Philosophin – Kirchenvater – Heilige*, Hamburg 1992, p. 64-65.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 69-70.

²⁷ Μυρσιλίδης Β., *Βιογραφία της φιλοσόφου Έλληνίδος Ύπατίας*. Griechischer Originaltext von 1926 mit deutscher Erstübersetzung, Maeger Verlag, Hamurg 2002, p. 69.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 88.

²⁹ Κυκκώτης Άθ. Μνήμη Ύπατίας της Φιλοσόφου, Ί. Μ. Κυρήνης 2015, p. 46.