

# A Medallion of St Catherine of Alexandria

## by Peter E. Lewis



*The Harbour at Alexandria. The white building on the far left is the Library of Alexandria. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by TheEgyptian)*

**O**LDER Australians will remember Cracker Night, which was held every year on the 5<sup>th</sup> November, Guy Fawkes Day. It was on the 5<sup>th</sup> November because that was the day in 1605 when Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the English parliament with the king in it. In Australia children would save up their pocket-money to buy fireworks from the local shop and the excitement would build as the day grew closer. Their purchases would include crackers, rockets and catherine wheels. Catherine wheels were spectacular because they would spin around shooting out an explosion of light. Most of the parents of the children would have known the story of Guy Fawkes and that they were celebrating his thwarted attempt to cause an explosion by making explosions themselves. Although it was a lot of fun, some of the fireworks were

quite dangerous especially in the hands of silly children, and for safety reasons Cracker Night was banned. But how many people knew that the catherine wheel was named after a young woman called Catherine who (according to the legend) was horribly tortured by being stretched on a wheel with spikes on it?

To commemorate Saint Catherine a silver medal (**Figure 1**) was issued in the series 'Art Treasures of the Vatican'. It shows a scene that was part of a large fresco by the Italian artist Pinturicchio (**Figure 2**). His real name was Bernadino di Betto di Biago, but he was called Pinturicchio, which means 'little painter', because he was a small man. He was born in 1454 in Perugia in Italy. He assisted the great Renaissance painter, Perugino, when he painted frescos on the walls of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in 1481

and 1482. In 1492, the year that Christopher Columbus discovered America, Rodrigo Borgia became Pope Alexander



*Figure 2 – Pinturicchio appears on this 2008 Italian stamp.*



*Figure 1 – Medallion showing St Catherine disputing with scholars. Diameter 45 mms. (Collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History)*



Figure 3 – Silver medal of Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503). His emblem on the reverse includes two keys which refer to Jesus Christ giving the keys of the kingdom of heaven to St Peter as recorded in Matthew 16:19. (Classical Numismatic Group, Electronic Auction 210, Lot 354)

VI. (Figure 3) Although an able administrator he led a scandalous life and his many children included the notorious Cesare Borgia and his sister Lucretia. Alexander must have been impressed by the work of Perugino and his assistant in the Sistine Chapel because a section of the fresco entitled ‘Delivery of the Keys to St Peter’ (Figure 4) appears on his coins. (Figure 5)

Alexander VI was a patron of the arts and he asked Michelangelo to plan a new St Peter’s Basilica to replace the old building. Also he commissioned Pinturicchio

to decorate the walls of the six rooms in the Vatican known as the Borgia Apartments, and one of the frescos that he painted was called ‘The Disputation of St Catherine’. (Figure 6) It is a detail of this fresco that appears on the medal in Figure 1.

In Pinturicchio’s fresco Catherine is disputing with scholars in about 310 AD. There are various versions of the legend of St Catherine, and the emperor is either Maxentius who ruled Rome from 306 to 312 (Figure 7) or Maximinus II who ruled Egypt from 309 to 313 (Figure 8). The

versions agree that she was a beautiful young noblewoman who was a Christian, but the emperor was not a Christian. He was a cruel tyrant and when she protested about the worship of idols and refused to sacrifice to the gods, she had to defend her Christian faith against fifty pagan philosophers. Catherine was a learned woman and when she demolished their arguments the emperor was enraged and had all the philosophers burnt alive. She was imprisoned and tortured but she refused to deny her faith. Then an attempt was made to break her



Figure 4 – Fresco: ‘Delivery of the Keys to St Peter’ by Perugino, 1481. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 5 – Silver coin (double grosso) of Pope Alexander VI. On the reverse Jesus gives keys to St Peter who is kneeling. The Latin words mean “Receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Berman 531. (Numismatica Varesi, Auction 69, Pt 2, Lot 743)

on the wheel but it broke into pieces and some of the spectators were killed by the flying splinters of wood. Finally she was beheaded.

Because Catherine triumphed over the philosophers she became the patron saint of philosophers, and because of the wheel she became the patron of crafts-

men who work with wheels such as wheelwrights. Also she became the patron of young women and students, including the clergy. Her body was carried by angels into the Sinai desert to the foot of Mount Sinai where Moses had received the Ten Commandments. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century a monastery was built there and it

was called St Catherine’s Monastery. (Figure 9) One of the icons in the monastery shows St Catherine seated with a wheel and objects used by scientists and mathematicians. (Figure 10) She is surrounded by small pictures illustrating her life and in the picture on the right at the bottom we see the angels carrying

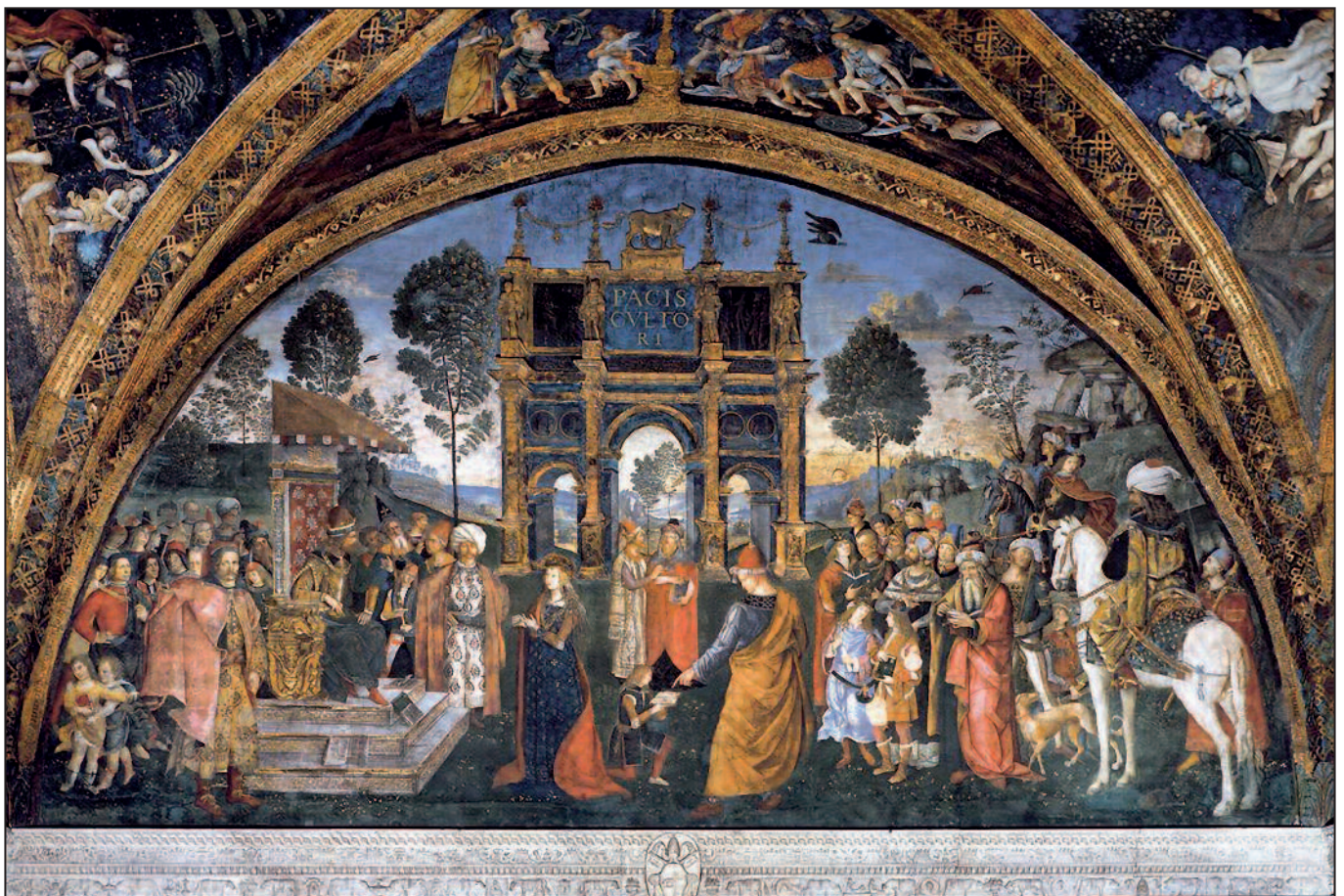


Figure 6 – Fresco: ‘The Disputation of St Catherine’ by Pinturicchio. In the background there is an arch that looks like the arch of Constantine in Rome. On the top is the bull that appears on Alexander’s emblem in Figure 3, and the Latin words PACIS CVLTORI refer to Alexander bringing peace and justice. (Wikimedia Commons)

her body to the Sinai. In the icon collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History, <https://cccrh.org>, there is one that shows St Catherine standing (**Figure 11**) and in a small picture on the right at the bottom she is about to be beheaded. (**Figure 12**)

Catherine was a popular saint during the Middle Ages and even into modern times, but there was a major problem with the legend about her. Almost certainly she never existed. She is not mentioned in the early lists of Christian martyrs and there is no record of the events described in the legend. According to *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* the legend of St Catherine is one of the “most preposterous of its kind.” The author goes on to say, “There is no trace of her name in early martyr records, nor any other positive evidence that she ever existed outside the mind of some Greek writer who first composed what he intended to be simply an edifying romance.” The name Catherine or Katherine comes from the Greek word *καθαρα* which means clean, pure or spotless.

With many legends there is usually some historical person or event that initiated the whole imaginary story, and in the case of the legend of St Catherine it was probably a woman called Hypatia who lived in Alexandria about 400 AD. She was the daughter of a philosopher and mathematician, and she became the



Figure 7 – Aureus of Maxentius minted at Rome in 307 AD. Hercules is on the reverse with an inscription meaning ‘to Hercules, comrade of our emperor.’ RIC 181. (Classical Numismatic Group, Triton VI, Lot 1081)



Figure 8 – Aureus of Maximinus II minted at Alexandria from 311 to 313. The sun-god Sol holds the head of the god Serapis. RIC 132. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 38, Lot 221)



Figure 9 – St Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Desert. (Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Berthold Werner)



Figure 10 – Icon of St Catherine in St Catherine’s Monastery. (Wikimedia Commons)

head of the Neoplatonist school of philosophy in Alexandria. She was intellectually gifted and is considered to be the first female mathematician. She was an important figure in learning and science, but unfortunately at that time they were identified by the Christians with paganism. When Cyril became archbishop of Alexandria in 412 he was intolerant of paganism and in 415 a mob of his fanatical followers murdered Hypatia. She was pulled from her carriage (hence the association with wheels) and dragged into a nearby church. (Figure 13) There her body was torn to pieces. The mangled



Figure 12 – Detail of the icon in Figure 11.



Figure 11 – Icon of St Catherine. Russian. 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Collection of the Centre for Coins, Culture and Religious History)

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Figure 13 – ‘Death of the Philosopher Hypatia in Alexandria’, a drawing by Louis Figuier (1866) showing what the assault on Hypatia might have looked like. (Wikimedia Commons)

parts were dragged through the city and finally burnt outside the walls.

It is amazing to think that this gifted woman, who was not a Christian and was horribly murdered by Christians, was

changed over the centuries into a Christian saint. She became the patron for Christians of what her murderers despised. It was a reversal of roles, a complete turnaround. Hopefully the medals and

icons of St Catherine of Alexandria will remind all Christians that their faith should be about love, not intolerance of others.

☆☆☆