CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LEGENDA MAIOR OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

Silvia Nocentini

The *Legenda maior* is the earliest biography of Catherine of Siena and represents the most important narrative source about her life. No one who is interested in studying her can ignore this work. Until now the authoritative text of the *Legenda maior* has been the *Acta Sanctorum* edition.¹ The well-known Bollandist Daniel Papebroch had available for his edition only two sources, the *editio princeps* (Cologne, 1533) and one manuscript from the Charterhouse of Liège.² In 2004, Jörg Jungmayr produced a modern edition³ in which he transcribed and translated into German the reading offered by codex Nürnberg, Stadtbibliothek, Cent. IV. 75, which had a central role in the diffusion of Catherine’s life in Germany. A critical edition of the Latin text, based upon the *collatio* of all extant manuscripts, is being prepared by the present author, within the framework of a project of the Centro Internazionale di Studi Cateriniani in Rome.⁴

Here I will offer some remarks upon the written tradition of the *Legenda maior*, how it was handed down, by whom and why, and I will try to verify the historical evidence through close philological examination; in other words, I shall study the history of this text and of its meaning, keeping in mind who read it and who copied it in the past. But before we go further, some preliminary remarks need to be made. First of all, I will briefly treat of the composition and the narrative structure of the *Legenda maior* in order to take stock of the

---

¹ Raymond of Capua, *Vita S. Catharinae Senensis*, Acta Sanctorum, III Aprilis, Dies 30 (Antwerp, 1675), cols 853A–959B (hereafter *Legenda maior*; see Introduction to the present volume, n. 4, for an explanation of the reference system for the *Legenda maior*).
² Probably the same manuscript preserved in Liège, Bibliothèque de l’Université 361 (a.1468).
critical studies about this text and clear up the successive passages of this study, which concern the complex handling of Catherine’s sanctity within the circle of her disciples and companions.

The number of historical-critical studies specifically about the *Legenda maior* is not as large as the abundant general bibliography on Catherine. Apart from simple stereotyped biographies and similar devotional essays, there are essentially three cornerstones for Catherinian research. First is the work of Robert Fawtier, who laid the foundations of modern Catherinian criticism in two books. Fawtier’s principal aim was to cut through the rhetorical ornament of the primary sources, in order to determine as precisely as possible the historical truth about Catherine. From this perspective, he does not look upon the hagiographical corpus positively because he considers it to some degree untrustworthy, and at times completely unreliable. Fawtier’s study is invaluable for the vast quantity of sources he personally examined and discussed in his volumes. The second is Marie-Hyacinthe Laurent, a Dominican historian who, from among all the scholars of Catherine of Siena, has been the one most devoted to the subject; it is thanks to his series *Fontes vitae s. Catharinae Senensis historici* that we can read critical editions of some of the most important documents regarding Tommaso Caffarini’s activities in relation to Catherine and her cult, such as the *Processo Castellano* and the *Tractatus de Ordine fratrum et sororum de poenitentia sancti Dominici* (1402–07). He also compiled an extensive, if incomplete, draft list of manuscripts containing the *Legenda maior*. The third cornerstone is the work of Ezio Franceschini on the legendae minores and minimae devoted to Catherine, in particular Caffarini’s *Legenda minor*, which

---


9 Published in *Analecta Bollandiana* 69 (1951), 189–90.