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St. Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373) as Author

In 1344 (or perhaps 1346), Ulf Gudmarsson and his wife Birgitta returned to Sweden from a long pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Ulf had become ill on the journey back and would soon die at the abbey of Alvastra in Östergötland. While praying in a small chapel there a few days after his death, Birgitta felt God inflame her. Rapt in spirit, she heard a voice say, "I am your God and I wish to speak to you." (Sahlin 45) Thus began her life as one of the most influential mystics of the late middle ages, an outspoken critic of kings and popes, and-- before the century was over-- a saint.

We know a surprising amount about this medieval woman and her visions. Birgitta had many of her revelations recorded over the next thirty years-- more than 700 in fact. At the end of her life, she assembled them into a book. The canonization process, which involved many hearings and documents about Birgitta, started shortly after her death in 1373. It is clear from these records that she had experienced visions long before becoming a widow in her forties. Birgitta witnessed the Virgin Mary placing a crown on her head at the age of seven. (Sahlin 59) Further visions and auditions apparently came to her during her married life. She even wrote down some early prayers and holy messages. Still, the call from God at this dark moment terrified her because she feared it was a trick of the devil. God told her to go to her confessor and tell him what she has seen because Master Mathias could discern evil spirits. (Searby I, 8) Even so, Peter, the prior of the monastery, did not believe in her visions. However, when he became sick he took it as a sign from God and agreed to translate what she related into Latin. Through her God said, "You should know with the greatest certainty that I wish to do a great work through my words, which you will write from the mouth of that woman, by which the powerful

will be humbled and the wise silenced. Do not believe that these very words, which this woman speaks to you, proceed from an evil spirit.” (*Extrav* 48. 12-13, from Sahlin 138)

As Birgitta developed into an influential holy woman, she would continue this collaboration with her spiritual advisors and translators for the rest of her life, making certain that they worked together to record many of her visions. The question, though, is whether she maintained control over this complicated process over those decades, and did her canonization continue her wishes? Did the book of the saint, which would be written and printed in thousands of copies for the next three hundred years, reflect the wishes of the visionary? To provide answers, it is necessary to examine Birgitta, her visions, and her writing.

Birgitta was born into an influential family from just north of Stockholm. Her father was governor and lawspeaker for the district and her mother had connections to the royal family. At the age of thirteen, Birgitta married the lawspeaker of another district. Apparently educated from a young age, Birgitta is known to have read frequently from a Swedish translation of the lives of the saints, and she had a portion of the bible translated for her. The Speculum Virginis was read to her, and she studied Latin a bit with her sons’ tutor. We also know that she herself could write from a young age and that she encouraged her husband to read and study. In her thirties, Birgitta served as a handmaiden for the young Blanche of Namur, and evidence in the revelations shows that Birgitta was responsible for the new queen’s education. (Morris 56-58) There is a good chance that she was the most educated woman in Sweden of her generation. She certainly was well placed to have access to books and learning throughout her married life.

Despite her wealth and position, the religious zeal that Birgitta exhibited from a young age encouraged her to resist luxury and to practice a harsh regime of fasting, confession, and prayer. Judging from her knowledge of domestic life, she took her responsibilities as the

wife of a nobleman very seriously. The couple had eight children, six of whom survived to adulthood. Still, she spent a great deal of time in contemplation and composing personal meditations. Those that survive from these years focus on the earthly life of Christ and how a sinner could avoid excessive eating, drinking, and sleeping. (Morris 55) Birgitta would read a scripture passage or recite the liturgy to enter a state of prayer; this would sometimes lead to religious visions.

After the difficult birth of her daughter Cecilia, Birgitta and her husband went on a pilgrimage by foot to Nidaros, and the trip to Spain followed shortly afterwards. The religious guidance she received certainly intensified with the retinue of advisors and confessors that accompanied them. It was on the return trip that the couple both took vows of celibacy. Despite her claims in the revelations of being a poor helpless woman from a poor isolated country, Birgitta had been trained her entire life to study the scriptures and the lives of the saints to condition her mind for prayer and meditation. And she was surrounded by clerics at the time of Ulf's death-- those in her party and those at the monastery. When she heard the call from God as a widow, she was prepared to trust in divine communication, despite some lingering fears of demonic manipulation. Shortly afterwards, Birgitta felt a movement in her heart, confirmed by her confessor, which she interpreted as a mystical pregnancy in imitation of the Virgin Mary. Birgitta carried the spirit of Christ and this marked her as a holy prophet to communicate his message for the rest of her life.

What followed was an intense period of mystical visions for the next several years in which she experienced over half of the revelations she would have in her entire life as a mystic. Called to be the bride and channel for Christ, Birgitta felt herself compelled to warn people that God was bringing about a new age which demanded repentance and devotion. She

submitted her writings to an assembly of prominent Swedish bishops to review the orthodoxy of her visions and make certain that she was neither delusional nor misled by the devil. (Sahlin 119) With the authority that this review imparted, she criticized the practices of the church and the politics of contemporary Sweden, while also providing religious instruction through interpretation of her many images and parables. Whatever the direction of her visions, “wisdom of the spirit” often came to her directly from the voice of Christ (or more often, from the Virgin Mary.)

These sessions of divine communication often started with the same practices of prayer that Birgitta had used for years: reading and contemplation. But now she would be overcome with an ecstatic stupor as her mind flooded with impressions. (Searby I, 6) As she said in book iv from this period:

3... Whenever you please, you put my body to sleep - yet not with a bodily sleep but with a spiritual rest. 4 Then you rouse my soul to life as though from sleep so that I hear and feel in a spiritual way. O Lord, how sweet are the words of your mouth! It truly seems to me, as often as I hear the words of your Spirit, that my soul within me swallows them with an indescribably sweet sensation like that from the sweetest food that seems to drop into my heart with great joy and indescribable consolation.

Searby I. IV. 77. p. 147.

The revelations stress repeatedly that Birgitta was not asleep, not dreaming, reflecting a medieval fear that dreams could not be trusted for divine messages. Instead, she experienced a sort of rapture of divine contact, but Birgitta only very rarely describes unity with the divine. Nor does she, as a widow, use any erotic language to express her relationship with God. Her experiences as a channel for Christ gave her direct knowledge of God and a responsibility to share that with others-- despite frequent protestations that she did not feel qualified. In some cases, the message of the images had to be puzzled out and might have required discussion with

her confessor; in others, she felt an immediate understanding. All of book v came to her fully formed during an hour-long trance that struck her while horseback riding.

Many of the visions could easily be seen as instruction for Birgitta herself as much as anyone else.

1 The Mother speaks, “ When you make dough, you have to knead and work it a lot. Fine wheaten bread is set before lords, but courser bread is set before commoners, and an even worse kind of bread is given to dogs.

2 The kneading stands for hardship. A spiritual person suffers great hardship when God does not receive honor from his creatures and when there is little charity in them. 3 Those who suffer in this way are the kind of fine wheat in which God and all the heavenly host rejoice. 4 All those troubled by worldly adversity are like the courser kind of bread. For many people, however, this coarser kind is good enough for them to reach heaven. 5 Those who suffer because they are not able to do all the evil they wish are like the bread of the dogs in hell.

Searby II. 28. 1350s, Italy. p. 75.

Her educational imagery includes souls suffering in hell, but also a shepherd taming sheep, bumblebees, butterflies, vats of beer, nesting chickens, and a washerwoman cleaning clothes. These all come from God. They are not so obscure as the Apocalypse, she writes, nor hidden like the mysteries of Paul, but so patent that everyone, both small and great, can understand them, (Searby I. Book I. 56. p. 154) though in some cases Birgitta has to provide detailed explanations. There are instances when she predicts the deaths of individuals or troubles for countries, but in essence her role as a prophet came from her deep, mystical understanding of God, which had been a common understanding of a type of prophecy since Gregory the Great (Sahlin 36)

Warning and criticizing people became part of her message more and more. Birgitta attempted to advise the kings of France and England how to forge peace, and she made clear references to Swedish bishops who were disappointing God. She also began to work to establish her own religious order after receiving the rule for it complete in one of her visions. In 1349, she

departed for Rome in preparation for the jubilee of 1350 after coming into conflict with her own king and losing the support of her confessor. The popes remained in Avignon at this time, and Birgitta found a dire situation in Rome with a decaying city and uncommitted priesthood. She stayed for more than twenty years, focusing her efforts on establishing the Brigittine Order, revitalizing the church, and bringing the papacy back to Rome. She lived in humility and poverty with a group that included the two Peters and her daughter, Katherine, who would also be named a saint one day. Birgitta took great pains to stress the orthodoxy of her message at this time. While the Virgin played a prominent role in her visions, they also stress the importance of the triune nature of God, the mediation of the saints, the spiritual power of the papacy, the importance of good works, and the pains of purgatory. With the support of prominent churchmen and some of the powerful families of the city, Birgitta managed to become a famous visionary and moral voice for all of Catholic Europe. She met with archbishops and popes, as well as queens, to share the message of God while she continued to record the lessons of her visions.

Through the decades that she worked as a holy woman, Birgitta understood the importance of these records in communicating to others what God had told her. The national library of Sweden preserves several pages of parchment in Birgitta's handwriting describing in Swedish what she had seen in some of her revelations. Though her writing is cramped and difficult, perhaps showing more familiarity with wax tablets, the fragments show that she did make an effort to describe her experience fully and lay out the possible meanings as they were revealed. Testimony from her canonization process describes her taking notes immediately after coming out of her raptures, though other records suggest that sometimes she dictated these notes to a secretary and her confessor translated the words into Latin in her presence. Some of the early messages were formatted as letters to specific people in Sweden, but apparently all the

revelations were translated immediately into Latin, perhaps at the suggestion of Master Mathias (Searby I, 14)

Master Mathias of Linköping, the confessor of the prophetess, had studied theology in Paris and become one of the most influential theological writers of Sweden during the Middle Ages. He shared many of the same religious interests as Birgitta: making the Bible understandable, interpreting the story of the Apocalypse, and reforming the church. The two of them developed their voices as writers during the time they worked together and it is easy to imagine them discussing religious issues. (Morris 71) Certainly as her confessor, Mathias shaped Birgitta's understanding of sin and penance. He also was a major force in gaining acceptance for her visions as divine and orthodox among the upper levels of Swedish society. They broke apart in 1349, apparently as a result of the rift that developed between Birgitta and King Magnus. Master Mathias seems to have traveled east with the king on crusade and died shortly afterward from plague.

Transcription and translation appear to have been the main work of Prior Peter and Master Peter in her household. As one of visions relates in the 1340s, "When any of my words are being transcribed, the transcriber should bring two trusty witnesses or one man of proven conscience to certified that he has examined the document. Only then may it be transmitted to whomever he wants, in order not to come uncertified into the hands of enemies who would add something false." (Searby I, 2.14. p. 213) Both worked at the Cistercian monastery at Alvastra when she arrived there, and both had already spent several years as her principal collaborators in shaping the text when they traveled with her to Rome. She trusted them to be honest about recording the meaning of her language. As it was described later, the process involved Birgitta, with her understanding of Latin, discussing the translation with the scribes, making sure that it

not only brought across her original notes, but also that the text fully recorded what she had seen. In some cases, this could be a difficult process as when Christ tells her she is like the apostles in that they had to, “examine and ponder my words in their heart and after much reflection set them forth more clearly and bring forth better... you turn them over and over again in your mind, sometimes you write and rewrite those things, until you come up with the proper sense of my words.” (Sahlin 73 from *Extrav.* 49) One can imagine that the process included many opportunities to improve the description and many chances for the clerics to influence her language.

In her drive to be a properly religious woman of the time, and perhaps to emphasize the respectability of her visions, Birgitta offered her obedience to her confessors and collaborators. In Rome, Prior Peter had complete control of her life. Not only did he impose penance, but he also dictated her movements outside of the house. Her confessors oversaw her ascetical practices, reminding her not to be too extreme just as Christ repeatedly reminded her. The clerics acted as partners in working towards their shared goal of reforming the church and Christian society, but they did it in such a way so as to fit expectations of the time. (Sahlin 115) Birgitta built these relationships very consciously, knowing that it would take preachers and theologians to spread her message as a holy woman and also to construct a written text that would reflect her message. (Morris 175)

Many of her communications with God did not get sent out as specific warnings to individuals nor circulated in any way. Over the course of her final decades, Birgitta built her reputation as a mystic on a small portion of what she had written about these experiences. But toward the end of her life, which prophesy told her would be soon, she went on a long pilgrimage to the Holy Land. At Montefiascone, the Virgin revealed to Birgitta that she was to take the

divine revelations that had been given to her-- and kept secret for so long-- and give them over to her friend Alfonso the priest. Alfonso Pecha had been a bishop in Jaen in Andalusia but had given that up to pursue the life of a holy hermit. They had met in Rome and become friendly enough that she asked him to be her confessor. The divine instruction of 1370 was repeated two years later while Birgitta was in Cyprus. Christ spoke of himself as a carpenter who creates a lovely carving from a tree he has found in the forest. He has painted the carving to make it beautiful, but his friends could make it even lovelier with further adornment. And so, Alfonso had authorization to alter and improve the text, not only to make it more learned but also to make sure that it suited orthodox dogma. (Searby I, 15)

He turned the previous writing into a comprehensible book, organized more by theme than chronologically. Each vision received a heading, and in general the language was cleaned up. We know that he also suppressed a few visions that did not reflect well on Birgitta or that put her at odds with Catholic belief. In some cases, Alfonso simply did not have everything that had been recorded for his first redaction completed in 1377 after Birgitta's death. This book became an important document for the commission that began investigating the canonization of the prophetess just a year later, as did a vita report prepared by Prior Peter and Master Peter. That hearing failed after the pope died. When Peter came back from Sweden in 1380, he brought further revelations for Alfonso to put into the book, which was now recognizable as the *Revelaciones*, although it was still not complete. New hearings on the canonization were opened in 1389 under Pope Boniface IX. For this, Alfonso made further additions and improvements, along with writing his own defense of Birgitta's life and sainthood that became part of the prologue. (Morris 149)

The final edition of Alfonso's book proved to be a great success. With the help of luxurious copies given to numerous kings and archbishops, the commission quickly named Birgitta a saint. It was one of the fastest canonization processes for a female saint and certainly one of the earliest to be completed after the saint's death. Additional editions were copied to send her message across Europe. Today almost two hundred manuscript examples survive from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries; this is a remarkable number. The success of the *Revelations* also helped to establish the Brigittine Order in Sweden, Italy, England, and later, Portugal. Her sainthood had even been one of the conflicts bandied about in the highest levels of the Great Schism of the time; debate at the councils of Constance and Basel raged over whether the work was heretical. When the conflict was over, however, the popes trumpeted Birgitta's holiness and her mysticism proved to be a good fit with the spirit of the day for many people who were ready to criticize the church and look within for religious guidance.

But we have to return to the question of whether the book that resulted from decades of intense collaboration and editing, a book in a language that she did not fully command, really interpreted the experience of rapturous communication with God in a way that the mystic intended-- especially when one considers that it took almost twenty-five years for Birgitta to get the message that the writings should be turned into a book and two more years of dragging her feet before she got started on it with Alfonso. Did Birgitta write the *Revelationes*? Did she really think that God wrote the book through her visions, even though it ended up containing complaints about her son-in-law and so many of the messages came, "By means of analogies, since you cannot grasp them otherwise?" (Searby I, 2.18. p. 221) Did she set out to write a book that male clerics co-opted for the interests of the church?

Recently, historians of religion and the lives of women during the Middle Ages have certainly expressed hesitation at being able to find Birgitta's isolated voice in the book that has come down to us after so much debate and reworking. (Mooney 7) Birgitta didn't choose to collaborate with the church hierarchy because it was the only option open to her as a female mystic, but because it served her desire to be a Catholic holy woman (and possibly a saint). So, we must consider that in her opinion, Birgitta's collaborators were sympathetic to her religious views, in so far as it served their shared goals in reforming the church. She chose to work with them for years-- several decades with Prior Peter and Master Peter. Birgitta does not seem to have intended that she would write a final book herself when she crafted the language describing her holy visions. Having churchmen perfect the expression of her experience into a polished manuscript probably fell in line with her larger goals as a visionary, knowing as we do her respect for the power of books. Birgitta not only owned books, but books appear repeatedly as symbols in her visions – symbols of eternal law, learned knowledge and holy wisdom. So it was a book that she chose, a book crafted by churchmen, to carry her message to all believers that Christ had spoken to her as his bride, and his Catholic saint.

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