

# **A Visual Window into the World of St Birgitta of Sweden (FINAL)**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how St Birgitta of Sweden's life experiences and views on gender, birth, sexuality, marriage, and politics are represented through the lens of visual culture. Imagery associated with the publication of her *Revelations*, devotional images produced in relation to her Birgittine Order, and paintings of the *Nativity* and *Crucifixion* inspired by her visions, provide a visual representation of aspects of Birgitta's intriguing life as a visionary and widow. Drawing upon interpretations of St Birgitta's significance in historical, theological, cultural and art historical dimensions, the discussion illustrates how Birgitta's personal, spiritual, and public persona are conveyed and interpreted in art works.

**Keywords:** St Birgitta, widow, gender, iconography, sanctity, Revelations of St Birgitta, Nativity, Crucifixion

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## **Introduction**

As a woman, widow, and female mystic, Birgitta of Sweden transcended traditional confines of gender and social culture to become a saint whose influence extended

beyond ecclesiastical and political bounds to the realms of visual culture. Art works inspired directly or indirectly through word of her personal piety and visions, serve as fragmentary but intriguing reflections of Birgitta's views and life experiences. Glimpses of her attitudes towards sanctity, gender, social hierarchies, and theological arguments are visually expressed both in images depicting St Birgitta in relation to her Order and in depictions of Christian narratives influenced by the record of her visions. Analysing the imagery produced in connection with St Birgitta complements understandings gained through written records and historical accounts of her life. We see a dynamic relationship between the inspirational individual St Birgitta and the inferences drawn by artists when selecting and interpreting her life and visions.

### **Connecting Life and Art**

In suggesting links between the personal and public worlds St Birgitta inhabited and art works that were produced in the decades following her death, this article draws upon historical scholarship on St Birgitta's role as a reformer and visionary within fourteenth century ecclesiastical and secular contexts. Birgitta's life achievements and recorded visions have been extensively investigated by scholars such as Bridget Morris and Claire Sahlin. Morris has shown how the phases of Birgitta's life, such as her Swedish childhood, marriage, and connections with the royal court, shaped her attitudes towards Swedish politics, while her connections with ecclesiastical authority figures in Sweden and experiences in Rome led to her determination to establish a new monastic order and restore the Pope to Rome.<sup>1</sup> Morris concludes, 'Brought up by, and among, the leading

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<sup>1</sup> In early revelations, while living in Sweden, Birgitta called upon the pope to return to Rome. These revelations were examined and endorsed by a commission, probably held

political, legal and Church magnates of her day she was uniquely prepared for her life as a reformer and prophet'.<sup>2</sup> Sahlin has examined how Birgitta negotiated her religious authority engaging confessors and clerics who accepted her right to mediate the divine words and lent legitimacy to her claim to be the mouthpiece of God. Birgitta also occasionally addressed audiences herself.

The visual imagery associated with St Birgitta illustrates both her influence as a mystic who could inspire others to devotion and piety, and her legacy to European art through the impact of her documented visions on iconographical shifts in the representations of religious subjects, most notably depictions of the *Nativity* and *Crucifixion*. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Birgitta's life experiences and personal beliefs, as interpreted in historical records and the *Revelations*, have been captured either intentionally or more obliquely in visual imagery. Through exploring the correlations between her *Revelations*, real-life events, and artists' interpretations of St

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in Uppsala in 1346 and led by the Archbishop Hemming Nilsson. A delegation visited the pope in Avignon, presented Birgitta's *Revelations*, and requested that the pope go to Italy for the Holy Year of Jubilee in 1350. Birgitta's calls for the pope to return to Rome persisted and Pope Urban V eventually returned in October 1367. Birgitta met with him in 1370 and later that year political and social unrest led Pope Urban V to depart from Rome. Birgitta warned against his return to Avignon. She prophesied that 'he will receive a blow or puff of wind so that his teeth will gnash[...]his sight will become dim and dark and his limbs will tremble', Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 117. He died a few weeks later, apparently fulfilling Birgitta's prophecy, and his successor re-established himself at Avignon.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 34.

Birgitta, the interests and scholarship of those who have examined her life and society and those who have investigated art works related to Birgitta are brought together in closer proximity. The article therefore serves to triangulate the evidence derived from the extensive writings about St Birgitta as a woman and mystic, evidence put forward by art historians in their discussions of works representing Birgitta or influenced by her, and the visual representations in selected art works.

Through the lens of visual culture, art historians have traced the production history of images, analysed their artistic contexts and iconographical elements in relation to Birgitta's *Revelations*, and also looked beyond to study the imagery within its political and social contexts. Iconographical schemes for depicting Christian narratives, including those influenced by St Birgitta's *Revelations* have, for example, been extensively written about by art historians Erwin Panofsky (1953) and Gertrud Schiller (1968), while Brendan Cassidy (1993) has suggested that reliance on texts (such as St Birgitta's *Revelations*) can be problematic because of a tendency to consider art as a direct illustration of text: an 'inclination to account for medieval and Renaissance images as if they were verbal statements made by non-verbal means'.<sup>3</sup> Maria Oen (2018) has similarly commented upon the complexity of 'the relationship between text and picture'.<sup>4</sup> Considerations such as the social function of images, their audiences, and verbal, rather than textual, transfer of ideas are critical factors to take into account. This is relevant in the case of St Birgitta as her visions and beliefs were both spoken to her confessors and other audiences and recorded in writing through the

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<sup>3</sup> Cassidy, *Iconography at the Crossroads*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Oen, 'Iconography and Visions', p. 229.

aid of her confessors. Therefore, it is not only the textual records of her visions but her personal attitudes and life experiences that are evident in art works. There is, of course, a symbiotic relationship between the two since Birgitta's *Revelations* are a complex amalgam of her imaginings, inspired through her faith, and her personal views.

The publication *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae* by Hans Aili and Jan Svanberg also contributes substantially to our understanding of the commissioning and influence of the early illuminated manuscripts of the *Revelations* as well as early panel paintings. Aili and Svanberg describe the historical contexts, content, and structure of the manuscripts and provide interpretations of the iconographical features of the works, for example the manner in which Birgitta received her *Revelations*.

### **Birgitta's Life**

St Birgitta's eventful life distinguished her as a woman who could inspire her contemporaries. Her familial connections, education, audiences with influential men, advocacy for political and ecclesiastical reforms, and pilgrimages established her credibility and importance. Born into a pious aristocratic Swedish family, Birgitta (c.1304-73) was the daughter of Birger Persson, a governor and *lagman* (lawspeaker) of Uppland, and his wife Ingeborg Bengtsdotter whose family were closely connected with the ruling family. At the age of thirteen, she married Ulf Gudmarsson and thereafter bore eight children.

Birgitta's social position and connections with men in high ecclesiastical office, such as her great-uncle who was the archbishop of Uppsala, helps to explain why Birgitta's early visions were not dismissed out of hand and why she had the courage and confidence to follow her own convictions. During her early devotional life, while married, she recorded her visions in the vernacular without the aid of confessors. She

also commissioned part of the Bible to be translated into Swedish, including an exposition which derives from Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologica*. Increasingly Birgitta's knowledge of the scriptures and liturgy was obtained through her own reading. She had access to a variety of books and also became familiar with Latin through reading and joining her sons' Latin studies.

By the mid 1330s, Birgitta was appointed *magistra* to the new queen, Blanche of Namur, a position of influence within the Swedish royal court. Women in the aristocracy in Sweden had more involvement in public affairs than their counterparts in other areas of Europe. Carol Clover has suggested that 'being born female was not so damaging that it could not be offset by other factors',<sup>5</sup> such as wealth or ambition. She comments further that 'the fault line runs not between males and females *per se*, but between able-bodied men (and the exceptional women) and[...]everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise dis-enfranchised men)'.<sup>6</sup>

Birgitta's pilgrimages began in 1341 when, accompanied by her husband, she went to Santiago de Compostela. Following their return to Sweden in 1343, both Ulf and Birgitta took vows of chastity and resolved to join a monastery.<sup>7</sup> However, when Ulf died (1344/6),<sup>8</sup> it was as a widow that Birgitta devoted her life to religious pursuits. She retreated to the Cistercian monastery at Alvastra but chose not to join a nunnery and

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<sup>5</sup> Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', p. 379.

<sup>6</sup> Clover, 'Regardless of Sex', p. 380.

<sup>7</sup> Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> The date of Ulf Gudmarsson's death is commonly held to be 1344 but 1346 has also been suggested as a possibility, see Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 60.

stayed slightly outside of the control of male-regulated monasteries. At Alvastra, she appears to have caused consternation among some of the male community by being present in and around the male houses of the monastery. The precise relationship is unclear, but one Gerekinus, who had lived at the monastery for about forty years wrote ‘Why does that lady reside here in a monastery of monks, introducing a new custom against our rule?’ Whereupon he heard a voice explaining about her special mystical gifts and that she was being directly commanded by God.<sup>9</sup>

She left Alvastra for Rome, circa 1350, accompanied by her daughter Katarina and lived in both Rome and Naples, with occasional departures to go on pilgrimages. While in Rome she had various living arrangements and normally maintained her own household living under quasi-monastic rule; for example, for the first four years in Rome she lived in a house adjoining the church of San Lorenzo in Damaso. Through avoiding close monastic control, she was free to pursue friendships with influential noblemen to advance both her political and spiritual agendas.

Birgitta met with Pope Urban V in 1370 and in August of that year she gained papal approval to establish a new Order, the *Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris*. The Order rapidly gained followers, particularly at Vadstena, Sweden and in England and Italy following her death in July 1373 and canonisation in 1391.

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<sup>9</sup> Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 73-74. Also see Salmesvuori, *Power and Sainthood*, chapter 5 for a discussion of possible rivalry between this Gerekinus, who was well respected in the monastery and also said to have received visions, and Birgitta.

## The Development of Birgitta's Legacy

Birgitta's popularity also grew as manuscripts of her *Revelations* were published and widely distributed. Birgitta had entrusted the care of her literary records to Alfonso Pecha da Vadaterra, and he is believed to have started compiling the *Liber celestis*, which was necessary for canonisation, about 1375.<sup>10</sup> In January 1378, Alfonso wrote to the Swedish archbishop Birger Gregersson in Uppsala that the *Revelations* had already spread to Spain and were proving a success and that copies were steadily being produced in Italy and in the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily.<sup>11</sup> Magnus Petri, Confessor General of Vadstena Abbey, recorded that copies of the *Revelations* 'were much sought after, even at this early date: there came to Rome both messages and messengers requesting books to be produced "with exquisite care, at their own expense" for both lay and spiritual princes'.<sup>12</sup> Distinguished purchasers included the queens of Cyprus and Sicilia, both of whom had met St Birgitta, and the bishop of Worms who bought a copy for the German Emperor.<sup>13</sup> Three illuminated manuscripts from this early period which fit the description of having been produced with 'exquisite care', appear to have survived: Warsaw, Biblioteka Narodowa of Warsaw, MS 3310; New York, Morgan Library and Museum (formerly Pierpont Morgan Library), M.498; and Palermo,

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<sup>10</sup> By 1377 Alfonso had prepared an edition of the text, with a further edition in 1380.

It was translated into Polish and Bohemian by 1392, into German, in various versions, in the late fifteenth century, and a Latin edition was not available until 1492.

<sup>11</sup> Nordenfalk, 'Saint Bridget of Sweden', p. 379.

<sup>12</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 16.

Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Siciliana, MS IV.G.2. These manuscripts are believed to have been produced between 1375 and 1390 in Naples.<sup>14</sup>

The visual imagery which developed in the decades after her death provides references to her aristocratic and clerical connections, her education, her religious convictions, her views on marriage, virginity, and gender, and her life as a widow. Three main bodies of art works developed in relation to St Birgitta's life and visions. First, illuminations produced for inclusion in copies of Birgitta's *Revelations* which serve to champion her spirituality and devotion and verify Birgitta as the author, secondly images produced in association with her Birgittine Order and works depicting Birgitta as a saint, and thirdly art works, inspired by the visions and ideas presented in her *Revelations*. The art works selected for this article aim to illustrate these categories and are deliberately chosen on the basis of their capacity to serve as visual reference points for features of Birgitta's life: her status, roles, beliefs and experiences. It is not intended that the analyses or explanation of each work be comprehensive, but rather that significant features of her life story and attitudes be shown through the imagery. It is also not possible to address the extent and breadth of the art works which either depict Birgitta or are inspired by her. In 1991, Mereth Lindgren identified about 350 images (wood carvings, frescoes, embroidery, engravings, book illustrations, paintings, etc.) either in existence or documented in the region that had once been the boundaries of medieval Sweden.<sup>15</sup> Birgitta's influence both during and after her lifetime is represented in art works across Europe and beyond.

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<sup>14</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 16, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Lindgren, *Bilden av Birgitta*.

## St Birgitta in *Liber Celestis Revelationum*

[Figure 1 goes here, approximately ¼ page portrait orientation]

Figure 1. ‘St Birgitta at Alvastra Monastery Inspired by Heaven’, *Liber Celestis Revelationum*, New York, Morgan Library and Museum (formerly Pierpont Morgan Library), MS M.498, fol. 4<sup>v</sup>. c. 1380. Courtesy of The Morgan Library & Museum. MS M.498. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) in 1912.

Illuminations in manuscripts of her *Revelations* establish St Birgitta as the author and a person of significance in religious matters. The full-page illumination *St Birgitta at Alvastra Monastery Inspired by Heaven* from the Pierpont Morgan Library collection, New York (Figure 1) is a particularly fine example of a painting which interprets Birgitta’s worthiness as a recipient of God’s messages and positions her in a state of importance and authority. The origins of St Birgitta’s divine inspiration are literally depicted through strong beams of light transmitted from the hands of Christ and the Virgin Mary who sit side by side in the heavens. Svanberg has suggested that Alfonso is likely to have had a hand in arranging the illumination of the manuscripts ahead of the canonisation commissions and in their distribution to influential members.<sup>16</sup> If that is so then Alfonso’s personal knowledge of Birgitta’s views alongside his awareness of ecclesiastical acceptability and protocol may have played a part in the development of

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Alfonso had copies made of both the first and second editions to provide a number of magnificent, costly and lavishly decorated manuscripts for prominent subscribers. They went to those who could not only afford to acquire such sumptuous copies but also possessed influence that could be used to benefit Birgitta’s canonisation’, Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 61.

the imagery for St Birgitta. Alfonso had determinedly promoted Birgitta's prophetic gifts in the *Epistola solitaria* when he stated that 'she had from God the most extraordinary grace of spirit of prophecy through the internal locution of God and through spiritual and intellectual vision, divinely and freely given to her'.<sup>17</sup> Rosalynn Voaden has shown how Alfonso positions Birgitta in the discourse of *discretio spirituum* (the discerning of spirits) to present her as an 'exemplary visionary'.<sup>18</sup> While it is unlikely that Alfonso directed the detail of the imagery, the value of including a full-page illustration of the manner of her receiving her visions and the prominence given to Birgitta within the image may derive from ideas communicated by Alfonso.

St Birgitta's role is enhanced in particular through the unconventional approach to scale. Normally the larger figures are reserved for Mary and Christ in the upper tier, but here the figures of the priest and Birgitta in the bottom tier are significantly larger. The differential is partially obscured by Birgitta's seated position, but if Birgitta was to stand she would be twice the height of Mary.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps such dominance served the functionality of the image well but Alfonso and others who promoted Birgitta may also have been keen and willing to allow her to be shown as transcending normal hierarchies, endowing unusual consideration on this 'giant' among women. Even the priest remains shorter overall than Birgitta despite his equivalent placement in the lower tier. He assumes the role of a conduit for depicting an early vision of Birgitta's that the boy-child emerged from an elevated host, which Svanberg suggests Alfonso probably

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<sup>17</sup> Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, p. 70.

<sup>18</sup> Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>19</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 64.

directed for inclusion ‘because it illustrated the central Christian dogma of transubstantiation’.<sup>20</sup>

Also unusual is the motif of the quill in hand which would normally be expected to be associated with monks or male saints.<sup>21</sup> As a woman of learning and education who had shown determination in learning Latin and reading religious scriptures, this serves the purpose of asserting Birgitta’s independence as author of her *Revelations* and indicates a willingness to subordinate the role of confessors in recording her visions. The higher goal of promoting Birgitta, in association with the goal of achieving her canonisation, may play a part in this mode of presentation. The depiction of St Birgitta at a desk, gaining inspiration from the celestial sphere above (indicated by the angels, Mary, and Christ) becomes the iconographic scheme associated with St Birgitta (Figure 2). It reappears repeatedly in historiated initials and in other illuminations and art works, for example *Initial E, Book I*, Palermo, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS IV.G.2, fol. 3<sup>r</sup>.

**[Figure 2 goes here, approximately ¼ page landscape orientation]**

Figure 2. ‘Initial E, Book I’, New York, Morgan Library and Museum (formerly Pierpont Morgan Library), MS M.498, fol. 8<sup>r</sup>. Courtesy of The Morgan Library & Museum. MS M.498, fol. 8<sup>r</sup>. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) in 1912.

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<sup>20</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 65.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The image of Birgitta preparing to write down her revelation, the quill in one raised hand and the open book in the other is, as far as we know, the first of its kind’, Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 64.

**[Figure 3 goes here, approximately ¼ page portrait orientation]**

Figure 3. 'The "Liber Celestis" Transferred from the Emperor of Heaven to the Kings of the Earth', *Liber Celestis Revelationum*, New York, Morgan Library and Museum (formerly Pierpont Morgan Library). MS M.498, fol. 343v.

Courtesy of The Morgan Library & Museum. MS M.498, fol. 343v. Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) in 1912.

Birgitta's privileged status sometimes appears to have placed her beyond gender norms. However, in her lifetime she always recognised the importance of maintaining relationships with influential men and frequently sought authentication of her visions. Illustrators, most likely male, of her *Revelations* also recognised the critical role played by her male associates. In *The 'Liber Celestis' Transferred from the Emperor of Heaven to the Kings of the Earth* (Figure 3), Alfonso Pecha and Prior Peter of Alvastra appear in two places. Birgitta receives her *Revelations* from Christ and the Virgin while Alfonso in dark habit and Peter in a light habit, wait to receive them. In the lower register, Alfonso and Prior Peter appear again handing the *Revelations* to a king positioned in the centre of the second register. A group of clerics oversee the handing over and thereby reinforce the Church's acceptance of the *Revelations*. The imagery supports both Alfonso's position as an expert in *discretio spirituum* and his claim that Birgitta is legitimately an 'exemplary visionary'. In accordance with Voaden's argument that 'The most important indicator of a visionary's virtue was her submission to the guidance of her spiritual superiors',<sup>22</sup> Birgitta, the widow, wearing her black habit and pinkish-white widow's hood, is supported here by her male spiritual advisors.

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<sup>22</sup> Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices*, p. 90.

## St Birgitta and the Birgittine Order

[Figure 4 goes here, approximately ¼ page landscape orientation]

Figure 4. Lippo d'Andrea di Lippo. *St Birgitta and a Choir of Birgittine Nuns*, New York, Bernard H. Beslauer. After 1401. Tempera on parchment. Courtesy of the Bernard H. Beslauer Foundation.

In manuscripts and paintings connected with her Order, Birgitta is normally shown as a pious and humble widow and 'mother of the monastery'.<sup>23</sup> This representation of Birgitta aligns with the characteristics of the Order she founded. It was to be a strictly contemplative Order devoted to the Virgin Mary, for whom she felt a particular affinity, and was to be founded upon the principles of humility, chastity, and poverty. Birgitta is thus shown in her role as the founder of the Order in Lippo d'Andrea's *St Birgitta and a Choir of Birgittine Nuns* (Figure 4). Set in the nave of a church, Birgitta holds a banderole in her left hand, which is likely to reference her Rule, and in her right hand is the red processional cross, associated with the Birgittine convent of Santa Maria del Paradiso. She is both taller, indicating her status, than the Birgittine nuns and distinct from them both in dress and in her downward gaze towards her right, which contrasts with the nuns who collectively focus on the book on the lectern to their left.

This visual identification of her in a role of authority in the Order is also evidence of changing views on how females were both perceived and conveyed in

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<sup>23</sup> Lindgren, *Bilden av Birgitta*, p. 180.

devotional art. While not as highly ranked in the saintly hierarchy as the virgin martyr saint, holy female mystics were progressively able to enlarge their sphere of influence, and, as a result, also increasingly enter the realms of art. In pictorial representations, Birgitta, as a pious widow, therefore contrasts with the female saints venerated in early Christian theology, such as St Lucy and St Katherine of Alexandria who are traditionally beautiful, of aristocratic birth, and gave their lives tragically as martyrs in the service of the Church. From this stems the elegant imagery of fashionably-dressed virgins with their symbols of martyrdom. Karen Winstead writes that ‘medieval hagiographers frequently present Katherine of Alexandria as an exalted creature, second only to the Virgin Mary among saints’.<sup>24</sup> These female saints remain popular as sources of religious imagery through the medieval and Renaissance periods but alongside this arise depictions of female saints, such as St Birgitta, St Elisabeth of Hungary, St Clare, and St Catherine of Siena, who may be widows or virginal women who have lived pious lives, done good deeds and performed miracles. Rather than being displayed in elegant attire they are often depicted in plain dark clothes appropriate to their religious vocation.

In the late medieval period, there was also a gradual but distinct shift in attitudes towards a more positive viewing of widows’ contributions to the Church. While the virtues of female virginity, chastity, and humility still remained the ideal, the widow saint began to be appropriated by the Church in order to encourage female piety. Bernadino of Siena (1380-1444), for example, praised Anna the Prophetess for her pious behaviour and her longevity as a widow since she was married only seven years:

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<sup>24</sup> Winstead, ‘St Katherine’s Hair’, p. 171.

‘You have that Anna, a widow for sixty years, who did not leave the temple, day and night and stood in prayer and fasting[...]And these are those widows who, doing this, are of God’.<sup>25</sup>

Laop Mazzei, a Florentine notary, took particular note that Birgitta was a mother and wife. In commenting on the wide circulation of St Birgitta’s *Revelations* soon after her death, he wrote that:

It is not twenty years ago (since) she died, in Rome,[...]There are found writings by her followers and by her confessor, of her, in the first year, hundreds of miracles of which I have read them all[...]And this marvellous woman had a husband and children...<sup>26</sup>

Such an affirmation indicates that contemporaries may have been more open to patterns of piety that lay outside the patriarchal structure of the Church, although detractors can also be found. One cleric found it ‘nearly impossible that God would speak with an ignorant little woman’.<sup>27</sup>

Along with an increase in lay piety, the shift of emphasis can also be attributed, according to Catherine Lawless, to a change of focus ‘from the female body as a locus

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Lawless, ‘Widowhood was the Time of her Greatest Perfection’, p. 21.

Anna the Prophetess lived in the first century BCE. She was charged with the care of the Virgin Mary for her Presentation in the Temple aged three and therefore normally appears in images on this subject, such as in Taddeo Gaddi’s *The Presentation in the Temple*, c.1350.

<sup>26</sup> Lawless, ‘Widowhood was the Time of her Greatest Perfection’, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> The cleric may possibly be a Dominican theologian, Brother Simon, Sahlin, ‘Gender and Prophetic Authority’, p. 69.

of sanctity or sin to female activity in performing penance and charitable works'.<sup>28</sup> Women such as St Birgitta and the virgin St Clare (c.1194-1253) exemplified the Franciscan ideal of poverty in denouncing their noble parentage. In *St Birgitta and a Choir of Birgittine Nuns*, Birgitta's renunciation of her Swedish royal connections may be suggested through the crown being placed at St Birgitta's feet, while her averted gaze simultaneously reminds us of her goals of humility and poverty. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the crown is ambiguous. Although St Birgitta was never a princess, the crown may have been included to elevate St Birgitta's popularity since, according to Alfonso, she was a princess in the view of the Italians.<sup>29</sup> In devotional images, St Clare is shown wearing the grey habit of her Order of the Poor Clares with a knotted girdle like the Franciscan friars. Similarly, Elizabeth of Hungary (1207-31) was a princess of the Arpad dynasty in Hungary, who entered the Franciscan Order and is depicted doing charitable work tending the sick. Like Birgitta, Elizabeth was a widow whose loss of virginity through marriage proved no impediment to her canonisation in 1235. The veneration of these women and their representation in art works, attests to this shift.

Similarly, Birgitta's former marriage did not prevent her being associated with the concept of being a 'Bride of Christ'. Her status as a widow and perhaps the decision with Ulf to 'maintain a mutual continence'<sup>30</sup> following their return from their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela gave her the credibility to enter the spiritual

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<sup>28</sup> Lawless, 'Widowhood was the Time of her Greatest Perfection', p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i,107.

<sup>30</sup> This is mentioned in St Birgitta's *vita* which was written soon after her death by her Swedish confessors Peter-Olafsson of Alvastra (Prior Peter) and Peter Olafsson of Skänninge. See Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 60.

dimension appropriate for being accepted as a 'Bride of Christ'. Five red dots, symbolic of the wounds of Christ, appear on the headgear of her Order, worn by the nine Birgittine nuns. This symbolism represents St Birgitta's compassion and affinity for the suffering of Christ and alludes to her mystical marriage with Christ. Birgitta had, through her visions, received a special calling from God: 'I have chosen you and taken you as my bride'.<sup>31</sup>

**[Figure 5 goes here, approximately ¼ page portrait orientation]**

Figure 5. '*St Birgitta Giving Her Rule to Members of Her Order*'. Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, MS A75, fol. iv. 1400-25. Reproduction: National Library of Sweden.

Birgitta's personal and political ambitions to establish an Order with double monasteries is set down in her *Rule*, including her stipulation that they would be governed by an abbess. In a full-page frontispiece for a manuscript of her *Rule*, the artist conveyed the concept of the dual establishment for men and women in *St Birgitta Giving Her Rule to Members of Her Order* (Figure 5). As usual, St Birgitta is shown in her dark habit with a widow's white veil, but here she sits on a throne giving copies of her *Rule* to a group of kneeling Birgittine nuns on her right and to a group of monks on her left. The image therefore captures not only the text of the *Rule* but the essence of Birgitta's determination to afford women greater influence in religious matters. Her influence is, by virtue of her position as the patroness, given prominence through such images. Having double monasteries was however, a challenging notion which proved

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<sup>31</sup> Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, p. 47

difficult to put into practice. Pope Urban V sanctioned her *Rule* in 1370, but Birgitta was denied double monasteries. Instead there were to be two distinct monasteries within the Order. It was not until 1435 that Pope Eugene IV issued a bull that confirmed the double monasteries.

### **Birgitta as a Saint**

**[Figure 6 goes here, approximately ¼ page portrait orientation]**

Figure 6. Boucicaut Master. *St Birgitta*. Les Heures du Maréchal de Boucicaut, Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André, fol. 42v. c. 1410. 275 x 190 mm. Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André - 'Institut de France © Studio Sébert Photographes.

In addition to Birgitta's influence in art arising from her role as a visionary and the institution of her Order, St Birgitta's importance to artists and patrons was recognised in depictions of her as a saint. In a book of hours by the Boucicaut Master (c.1410) which contains twenty-seven full-page illustrations of saints, Birgitta is positioned as the last of the virgins. The Boucicaut Master remained faithful to the convention of including the white veil of widowhood, but her Swedish heritage, and aristocratic bearing is unusually acknowledged in the depiction of St Birgitta wearing a blue tunic and golden mantle, the Swedish national colours, rather than a black habit (Figure 6). The inclusion of St Birgitta in a French book of hours is highly unusual since the cult of St Birgitta was never popular in France and no Birgittine house was established in France.<sup>32</sup> It seems that St Birgitta's criticism of Avignon as the seat of the Papacy was not forgiven,

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<sup>32</sup> Nordenfalk, 'Saint Bridget of Sweden', p. 389

even after the Schism had come to an end. Yet here, St Birgitta is depicted in prayer and her political interference appears to be deliberately ignored by the Boucicaut Master. Her praying hands are detached and received, with the intercession of an angel, into heaven. This acceptance of Birgitta's prayers affirms Birgitta's exceptional status as a woman who could make direct contact with God.

### **The Visions of St Birgitta**

Many artists clearly recognised St Birgitta's visionary inventions as a rich source of imagery with the potential to spiritually engage viewers. The *Revelations* are a source that provide insight into her views on matters such as gender, birth, and virginity. It is likely that some artists or patrons knew of the precise descriptions contained in the *Revelations* through word-of-mouth accounts, since most artists would neither have access to, or sufficient literacy for reading, the texts. More probable for the spread of new iconographical features is that artists' communities became aware of new possibilities following early initial examples of imagery based upon the descriptions. According to a witness account presented at Birgitta's canonisation proceedings, a *Nativity* scene, now lost, which is said to have represented Birgitta's description of the event, was painted circa 1380 for the Church of San Antonio in Naples.<sup>33</sup> While it is difficult to trace a clear path of influence from one artist or artists' workshop to another because of the loss and destruction of many images<sup>34</sup> and their uncertain dating, the

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<sup>33</sup> Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 138.

<sup>34</sup> Van Buren comments that 'The problem is compounded by a paucity of material that discourages all but the most obsessed investigators. The normal destruction of six

remaining art works provide a partial glimpse of iconographic reorientation and show distinct differences in interpretation of St Birgitta's *Revelations* from one region to another. Furthermore, artists were selective in their reference to the *Revelations* of Birgitta. While some elements of Birgitta's visions appear to have inspired significant iconographical invention, visions such as those of purgatory appear to have had little appeal.

James Marrow writes of the 'extreme conservatism' among artists in pursuit of their desire to 'convey information from the teachings of the church'.<sup>35</sup> It can therefore be seen as an exceptional circumstance that some of St Birgitta's visions were forceful enough to influence shifts in practice for the depiction of Nativity and Crucifixion scenes. Based on his study of fourteenth to sixteenth century writings about art from northern Europe, Marrow concluded that 'the principal forces which shaped and directed artistic invention' were 'the issues of response to the work of art and of its role in stimulating new states of consciousness'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore rather than a focus upon the iconographical shifts represented through particular selections and combinations of symbols in a Panofskian model of inquiry, we need to consider the ways artists sought to evoke audience response and bring their viewers to a deeper level of spiritual awareness and devotion. The preoccupations of artists in this respect can, in part, be explained by the growing popularity of private meditative practices. The shift away from monastic centres of power as represented by the Benedictines to more lay

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centuries – fires, vandalism, and changing taste – is far greater than historians like to admit.' Van Buren, 'Thoughts, old and new', p. 93

<sup>35</sup> Marrow, 'Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art', p. 151

<sup>36</sup> Marrow, 'Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art', p. 152

involvement in spiritualism as encouraged by the Franciscans and Dominicans enabled individuals such as Birgitta to attest to their sanctity. The eleventh-century illustrated *Life of Radegund* produced at the monastery of Sainte-Croix in Poitiers is one such example that celebrates the life of a Merovingian queen and depicts her in various roles from miraculous healing to being ordained as a deaconess. ‘To put it another way’, writes Cynthia Hahn, ‘in the absence of tortures, which elicit an automatic emotional response, miracles must suffice’.<sup>37</sup>

While contemporaries may have taken for granted that images could serve as transparent windows into their spiritual worlds, today our lens on medieval and Renaissance worlds is likely to be more clouded. In proceeding to interpret art works in relation to St Birgitta’s *Revelations*, consideration can therefore be given to the following:

First, on what terms should the visions of mystics be interpreted? When viewed in present-day terms they may be regarded as fictitious, yet to medieval contemporaries they may have been seen as partially or entirely real. Therefore, Birgitta’s *Revelations* may have been regarded as a true representation of Christ’s and Mary’s spoken dictums, leading artists to depict in more accurate terms the reality of biblical events. ‘Reality’ however is determined by the beholder and there is the capacity for ‘the fictive world of [...] images (to be received) in quite different ways’.<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, it is clear that the artists who chose to depict St Birgitta’s *Revelations* made choices about the aspects they would select and the modifications to Birgitta’s descriptions that they would make. A complex relationship emerges where artists’ own

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<sup>37</sup> Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart*, p. 281.

<sup>38</sup> Marrow, ‘Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art’, p. 158

interpretations of the narratives of St Birgitta, including their desires to provoke emotional and religious experiences among viewers, are interspersed with the codified conventions for depicting religious subjects. Therefore, the art works cannot be read as direct translations from text to image. Panofsky claims that St Birgitta's text was 'never strong enough to suppress entirely the iconographic traditions prevailing in various countries'.<sup>39</sup>

Thirdly, upon this are the layers of gender, class, and culture which contribute to an understanding of St Birgitta's *Revelations*. Consideration of the contextual circumstances in which Birgitta lived widens our perceptions of St Birgitta's influence upon art.

### **The Nativity**

The most influential of Birgitta's visions, in terms of their representation in art, is her vision of the Nativity. While iconographical conventions varied according to region and time, the uniqueness of St Birgitta's vision of the Nativity created a distinct re-think that is both readily apparent and dominant in depictions of the subject. To illustrate these shifts in thinking, Nativity scenes by Italian artists' Niccolò di Tommaso and Lorenzo Monaco, and Northern artist Master Francke, are examined. These span a period of approximately 80 years and illustrate the continuing influence of Birgitta well after her death.

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<sup>39</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 125

### *Virginity and the Virgin Mary*

Pictorial representations of the Nativity during the fourteenth century commonly showed the Virgin Mary lying in bed or on a mattress with the infant Jesus in swaddling clothes in a manger beside her, as for example in Duccio's *Nativity* in the *Maestà*, 1308-11. This followed the manner in which babies were swaddled for their protection during the Middle Ages.<sup>40</sup> A handmaiden or maidens were often in attendance and Joseph was present anxiously looking on. However, the true manner in which the birth of Jesus took place was, according to Birgitta, revealed to her while in Bethlehem on her last pilgrimage in 1372. Fifteen years earlier, when Birgitta was in Rome, she had been promised that she would receive such a vision. Birgitta comments on the veracity of her own vision when she records that

the Virgin Mary appeared to me [...] and said: "My daughter, it is a long time since I promised you in Rome to show you here in Bethlehem how I gave birth. [...] you can be sure that the way in which I gave birth was on my knees, praying alone in the stable, as you saw just now".<sup>41</sup>

This suggests that Birgitta was very aware that her vision differed substantially from existing accounts of the circumstances of Jesus' birth.

Her account begins with a vision of the physical appearance of the Virgin:

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<sup>40</sup>Some examples include: a stone relief depicting the Nativity c.1240-50 from the former rood screen of Chartres Cathedral, Giotto's Nativity scene in the Scrovegni Chapel frescoes 1304-06, and an altar predella, *Nativity and Annunciation to the Shepherds* 1332-34 by Bernardo Daddi.

<sup>41</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.22, pp. 1-2.

When I was at the manger of the Lord in Bethlehem, I saw a most beautiful virgin who was pregnant and clothed in a white mantle and a light gown through which I could clearly see her virginal body. Her womb was very heavy and swollen, for she was now ready to give birth.<sup>42</sup>

This passage is explicit about the white colour of her mantle, her ‘virginal flesh’, and that Mary was a virgin whilst pregnant. Birgitta’s emphasis on the purity and virginity of Mary suggest that Marys’ virginal status was of critical importance to Birgitta despite Birgitta herself having been married and having children. Virginity, whether it be in relation to the Virgin Mary or to women in general, was a subject that was pervasive in medieval literature, and Birgitta was clearly well aware of the virtues and benefits of virginity. Ruth Evans writes, ‘In the traditional division of medieval women’s ‘estates’ virginity offers the greatest heavenly returns’,<sup>43</sup> and there can be no doubt that Birgitta was seeking such returns and would have understood the notion that ‘marriage has its reward thirtyfold in heaven; widowhood, sixtyfold; virginity, with a hundredfold, surpasses both’.<sup>44</sup>

Birgitta’s views on virginity and conjugal sex are recorded at various points in the literature but there are contradictory messages, no doubt as a result of her own complicated and transforming status from married woman to chaste widow. Birgitta accepted that women may have been compromised by marriage, but she upheld the virtues of virginity and suggested that women in this position could retain chastity of

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<sup>42</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.21, pp. 1-2.

<sup>43</sup> Evans, ‘Virginites’, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> Evans, ‘Virginites’, p. 25.

mind. She comments on God's mercy and forgiveness when she follows his command to 'eternally [...] hate all physical sexual contact [...] [and] henceforth become a mother to spiritual children, just as you have been a mother to fleshy children'.<sup>45</sup> After Ulf's death, she looked back on her sexual relations with distaste.

She saw as it were a body covered in sperm and totally deformed. When she showed surprise and fear, the Spirit said to her: 'I created you from your parent's seed. I gave you limbs and a beautiful body [...] My angels protected you, for otherwise none could have saved you from demons [...] and I permitted you to enter marriage and have all that you desired. Afterwards I led you to my Spirit, in order that you should come to know me and love nothing as much as me.'<sup>46</sup>

Birgitta's daughter Katarina also provides an interesting model of chastity since she married but did not consummate her marriage. She and her husband slept separately, on the hard floor of their bedroom.<sup>47</sup> While visiting her mother in Rome, Katarina's husband Eggard van Kyren died, conveniently leaving her as a virgin who would be later become a saint like her mother.

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<sup>45</sup> See Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 46, for a discussion of the manuscripts in which this is found.

<sup>46</sup> Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 110.

### *Meditation and Visualisation*

Maria Oen's discussion of how Birgitta's vision came into being examines the role of the fourteenth-century *Meditaciones vite Christi*, which is often attributed to Franciscan Pseudo-Bonaventura (Giovanni de Caulibus). She argues that the development of Birgitta's *Revelations* and the vision of the Nativity involved meditation 'as an active process of image making'.<sup>48</sup> Such meditation may therefore suggest a complex yet indeterminate array of influences where Birgitta's memories, life knowledge and learning of scripture were brought together in an interplay which developed images in her mind. For example, the exactitude in the visualisation of the birth could mean that Birgitta's own experiences of birth for her eight children were recalled. She compares the Virgin's divine delivery with mortal/human births stating that 'In giving birth, the Virgin experienced no change in colour nor any sickness. She suffered no loss of bodily strength as is normal for other women at childbirth'.<sup>49</sup>

The description of the preparations Mary undertook for the birth, the precise details in relation to afterbirth, which was neatly rolled up, and the ease with which the umbilical cord was detached are indicative of a woman whose own experiences are incorporated into the 'crafted cognitive image'.<sup>50</sup> Mary Dzon has examined the attention given to the pieces of cloth that Mary carefully laid out and has suggested that

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<sup>48</sup> Oen, 'Iconography and Visions', p. 214.

<sup>49</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.21, p. 21.

<sup>50</sup> Oen, 'Iconography and Visions', p. 219.

having been a mother Birgitta's 'own sense of domestic order'<sup>51</sup> and views on childcare may have played a part in the inclusion of such imagery.

**[Figure 7 goes here, approximately ¼ page landscape orientation]**

Figure 7. Niccolò di Tommaso. *Nativity*. Rome, Pinacoteca Apostolica Vaticano, c.1372. Tempera on wood. 43 x 53 cm. Photo © Vatican Museums, All Rights Reserved.

Florentine artist Niccolò di Tommaso (active c. 1346-76) is believed to be the first artist to interpret the Nativity in accordance with elements of Birgitta's vision (Figure 7).<sup>52</sup> He is likely to have known directly about Birgitta's achievements and may have met Birgitta at the Angevine court in Naples while she was living there between 1365 and 1367 and November 1371 to early March 1373.<sup>53</sup> As described in her vision Niccolò sets the scene in a cave and depicts Mary as a kneeling figure, without her veil, finely clad and dressed in a pure white gown. The Virgin's shoes are neatly placed behind her and her mantle, which she removed, is positioned nearby.<sup>54</sup>

Joseph, having returned to the cave after the birth, is included, but the way Birgitta describes Joseph's relationship with the Virgin Mary reflects some of the

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<sup>51</sup> Dzon, 'Birgitta of Sweden and Christ's Clothing', p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 89.

<sup>53</sup> Skaug, 'Niccolò di Tommaso of Florence', p. 289.

<sup>54</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.21, p. 4.

complexity of Birgitta's own life as she sought to claim a pureness of spirit in the absence of being a virgin.

You can, however, be quite sure that Joseph, before he betrothed me, understood through the Holy Spirit that I had vowed my virginity to God and that I was immaculate in thought, word, and deed. He betrothed me with the intention of serving me, regarding me as his lady, not his wife. I, too, knew for certain through the Holy Spirit that my virginity would forever remain unharmed, although, by God's mysterious dispensation, I became betrothed to a man.<sup>55</sup>

However, Birgitta's line of argument concerning the relationship between marriage, virginity and God's dispensation is not easily conveyed in art. In Birgitta's vision for the *Nativity* Joseph is described as a 'venerable old man' who helpfully lit a candle and fixed it to the wall to illuminate the cave.<sup>56</sup> Artists have commonly depicted him as a faithful supporter while God and angels oversees the event from above.

Tommaso also included Birgitta in the painting as a witness to the event. This is not common and may relate to the early dating of this work<sup>57</sup> at a time when Birgitta's name and deeds would have been prominent. Birgitta is shown with a halo of rays, rather than a circular halo, appropriate to the sanctity of a woman who has not yet been

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<sup>55</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.25, pp. 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.21, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> See Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 95 for a discussion of the dating of this work.

elevated to sainthood. Her adventures as a pilgrim are also referenced through the inclusion of her pilgrim's staff and hat.

### ***A Miraculous Birth***

The brevity of the biblical descriptions of Christ's Nativity (Matthew 2. 1-12) and Luke (2. 1-20) had encouraged many medieval writers and mystics to amplify the description and Pseudo-Bonaventura, for example, gave a description in *Meditationes vitae Christi* which also aligns with early pilgrim accounts that:

When her time came at midnight [...] the Virgin arose and leaned against a column standing there. [...] [Joseph] arose and took some hay from the manger and strewed it at the feet of Mary and turned away. But then God's son departed her womb with no pain. As he was within her womb, so was he outside it and lay in the hay at his mother's feet.<sup>58</sup>

Svanberg has suggested that Birgitta is likely to have read *Meditationes vitae Christi*,<sup>59</sup> as well as seeing a Nativity painting based upon Pseudo-Bonaventura's writings when she visited Naples. In particular, Birgitta appears to have experienced a vision which aligns with Pseudo-Bonaventura regarding the positioning of the infant Jesus at his mother's feet although the birth appears to be more miraculous. Birgitta has described in original terms the mystical experience of the sudden appearance of the Christ child.

While she was thus praying, I saw the infant in her womb move, and at that very moment, in the flash of an eye, she gave birth to her son. Such indescribable

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<sup>58</sup> Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 94.

<sup>59</sup> Svanberg discusses Birgit Klockar's findings on this matter, Aili and Svanberg, *Imagines Sanctae Birgittae*, i, 94.

light and splendor went out from him that the sun could not be compared to it. The candle that the old man had placed there was giving no light at all, for that divine luster completely outshone the material luster of the candle. The birth of the child was so instant and sudden that I was unable to see or discern how or even with what part of her body she gave birth. And yet I immediately saw that glorious infant lying on the ground, naked and shining. His body was entirely clean of all filth and impurity.’<sup>60</sup>

The precision of Birgitta’s description of the Nativity lends itself to pictorial representation. Niccolò depicts the naked Christ child lying on the ground radiating a golden mandorla. The nudity, rather than swaddling, of the Christ child is notable and can perhaps be justified doctrinally in its capacity to illustrate a foreshadowing of his near naked body on the Cross.<sup>61</sup>

**[Figure 8 goes here, approximately ¼ page landscape orientation]**

Figure 8. Master Francke. *Nativity*, from the *Englandfahrer Altarpiece*. Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 1424. Panel. 99 x 89 cm. ©bpk-Bildagentur for Hamburger Kunsthalle, photographed by Elke Walford.

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<sup>60</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.21, pp. 8-11.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Dzon stresses this connection between Mary’s joy at seeing her naked son and her knowledge of the wounds which will be inflicted upon Christ’s body in the future, Dzon, ‘Birgitta of Sweden and Christ’s Clothing’, p. 128.

**[Figure 9 goes here, approximately ¼ page landscape orientation]**

Figure 9. Lorenzo Monaco. *Nativity*, from the predella of *Coronation of the Virgin*. Florence, Uffizi Gallery, 1414. Panel.

While Niccolò set Christ within a mandorla, later works by Master Francke (Figure 8) and Lorenzo Monaco (Figure 9) positioned Jesus on resplendent rays of gilded gold. Master Francke further emphasised the miracle of divine delivery through the rays of light emanating from God in the heavens to Jesus. These interpretations clearly place importance on the miracle of the instant birth and demonstrate an awareness of the potential of their art to capture the viewers' eye, drawing attention towards Christ and evoking a spiritual and emotional response which aligns with what St Birgitta herself professed to experience.

Evidence from the *vita* of St Birgitta and other documents suggests that Birgitta placed importance upon miraculous delivery. When Birgitta's mother Ingeborg was pregnant with Birgitta she was saved from a shipwreck because she carried a child imbued with divine grace.

When Saint Birgitta was in her mother's womb, it happened [...] that when her mother took a sea voyage, her ship was wrecked in a sudden tempest with many people in it and she was brought safely to shore. And the next night a person appeared to her in shining garments and said, 'You are saved because of the child which you have in your body [...] it is given to you by God's special goodness'.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *The Life of Saint Birgitta*, ed. by Gregersson and Gascoigne, trans. by Holloway, pp. 13-14.

Birgitta also recorded that her youngest daughter Cecilia was a painless birth. ‘The women who attended her saw a woman dressed in white enter the room and touch each of her limbs so that she gave birth quite painlessly’.<sup>63</sup>

If one goes further to seek out a more spiritual interpretation of Birgitta’s notions of birth, an explanation can be found in her accounts of her prophetic gifts. She felt that sudden and unexplained movements of her heart resembled the movements of the infant Christ in Mary’s womb. Through this she believed that the Holy Spirit had arrived in her heart and that divine wisdom was infused in the process. Claire Sahlin writes that ‘In her mystical pregnancy, she seems to have identified the mother of Christ’s gift of prophesy with her own commission of prophecy’.<sup>64</sup>

### **Crucifixion of Christ**

Aside from Madonna and Child subjects, Crucifixion scenes are the most prolific in religious art and a key visual focus of Christian contemplation. It is therefore significant that St Birgitta plays a role in revisions of the depiction of the subject, although the influence appears to have been far less widespread than for the Nativity. The Crucifixion had special significance for Birgitta as she was, while in Sweden, given a relic of what was believed to be part of the true cross. As mentioned earlier, she also used the wounds Christ suffered on the Cross and a crown of thorns as a model for the

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<sup>63</sup> Cited in Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>64</sup> Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy*, p. 98.

head dress of her Order.<sup>65</sup> By the fourteenth century, it was usual practice to depict Christ as a patient sufferer, *Christus Patiens*, with emaciated body and head fallen to one side. This iconographical scheme had replaced earlier representations showing Christ as a triumphant saviour, *Christus Triumphans*. However, St Birgitta envisioned a more intense form of suffering.

St Birgitta had four major visions of Christ's crucifixion during her life, but the vision recorded while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is the most detailed and the most dramatic. It reads as if it were an eye-witness account of the events:

As I was weeping in sorrow at Mount Calvary, I saw my Lord, naked and scourged, led out to be crucified by the Jews under their close watch. I saw, too, a hole cut into the hill and the crucifiers standing around ready to do their cruel work.<sup>66</sup>

At this point St Birgitta goes on to detail the exact manner in which the cross was affixed to the ground, and how they used planks as steps to lead Christ up the cross in order to nail him to it.

He climbed happily up, like a gentle lamb led to slaughter. When he was on top of the planks, without being forced, he stretched his right arm out voluntarily, opened his hand and placed it on the cross. His savage torturers fixed it brutally

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<sup>65</sup> The crown of thorns was introduced into depictions of the Crucifixion from the mid thirteenth century when King Louis IX of France returned from a crusade bringing the holy relic with him.

<sup>66</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.15, p. 1.

to the cross, piercing it with a nail in the part where the bone was more solid. Then, using a rope, they violently dragged his left arm and crucified it in the same way. After his body had been stretched out beyond measure on the cross, they placed one of his shins on top of the other and so fastened his feet together to the cross with two nails. They stretched out his glorious limbs so violently on the cross that almost all his veins and sinews were rupturing. Then they took the crown of thorns, which they had removed from his head while he was being fastened to the cross, and put it back, fitting it to his most holy head. Its barbs entered his venerable head so forcibly that his eyes became filled with flowing blood, his ears were blocked and both his face and beard seemed covered and saturated with his rose-red blood.<sup>67</sup>

Bridget Morris comments that St Birgitta showed her own understanding of the Passion in her daily life ‘by her pouring wax on her body every Friday, and always shedding tears when she contemplated the Passion’.<sup>68</sup> Carolyn Walker Bynum has compared the writings of religious writings of men and women and found that there are no devotional practices that are exclusively female but that mysticism was more central in female piety than in men’s. She also observes that ‘Women’s devotion was more marked by penitential asceticism, particularly self-inflicted suffering’ and that ‘Women’s writing was, in general, more affective.’<sup>69</sup> Birgitta’s deep sensitivity to Christ’s suffering may therefore be interpreted as a gendered response. *Devotio*

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<sup>67</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.15, pp. 7-11.

<sup>68</sup> Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, p. 134.

<sup>69</sup> Bynum, ‘Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages’, p. 131.

*moderna*, which arose in the fourteenth century, encouraged believers to identify personally with Mary and Jesus through intense meditation.

The intensity of Birgitta's description and the clearest parallel between St Birgitta's text and imagery is Matthias Grünewald's *Crucifixion* in the Isenheim Altarpiece, painted between 1510 and 1515 over 130 years after her death (Figures 10a & b). Grünewald has elongated Christ's body, arms and fingers to exaggerate the veins and sinews, as described by St Birgitta and the blood flowing, as a result of the thorns, is clearly visible around his head and in his eyes. Christ's suffering is further illustrated through the contorted position of his limbs and feet and through the numerous sores on his skin. James Synder describes this work as 'one of the most gruesome and disturbing ever painted'.<sup>70</sup>

[**Figure 10a** goes in here, approximately ¼ page landscape orientation]

Figure 10a. Matthias Grünewald. *Crucifixion, Isenheim Altarpiece*. Colmar, Musée d'Unterlinden, c.1510-15. 298 x 328 cm. photo © BPK, Berlin, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Jochen Remmer.

**Figure 10b** goes in here, approximately 1/8 page portrait orientation.

Figure 10b. Grünewald *Crucifixion, detail*. photo © BPK, Berlin, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Jochen Remmer

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<sup>70</sup> Synder, *Northern Renaissance Art*, p. 349.

St Birgitta's mystical affinity with the Virgin Mary is also clearly felt through her description of both her own and Mary's anguish at her Christ's crucifixion.

Full of grief after I had witnessed their cruelty, I then saw his most sorrowful mother lying on the ground, trembling as though half-dead. John and her sisters<sup>7</sup> were comforting her. They were standing then to the right, not far from the cross. A new pain of compassion for his most holy mother transfixed me so that a sharp sword of unbearable grief went through my heart.<sup>71</sup>

In describing Mary as 'trembling', and 'half-dead' St Birgitta reflected the contemporary notion of the 'swoon' that was controversial -- but gathering popularity -- in late medieval devotional practices.<sup>72</sup> The change from the upright, stoically grieving figure of earlier medieval art to the swooning figure that dominated Renaissance art was gradual but is clearly is apparent in works such as Rogier Van der Weyden's Philadelphia *Crucifixion Diptych* c. 1455. Mary swoons in a state of emotional pain and falls backwards into the arms of Saint John. The intensity of such imagery appealed to many mystics, and as Liam Peter Temple has argued, this 'feminised affective spirituality' drew upon women's experiences and was 'unique to their sex, motherhood and childbirth'.<sup>73</sup> Mary Dzon extends the argument slightly further and attributes the

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<sup>71</sup> Birgitta of Sweden, *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, trans. by Searby, VII.15, pp. 13-15.

<sup>72</sup> Schiller identifies a silver relief on the shrine of Albinus, dated c. 1186, as a very early example of the 'swoon' where Mary's personal distress at the death of Christ is extreme. She comments that the motif become frequent from the second half of the thirteenth century, Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, pp. 152-53.

<sup>73</sup> Temple, 'Returning the English "Mystics" to their Medieval Milieu', p. 150.

portrayal of the swoon to the delayed labour pains Mary experienced following her son's death. This is an experience which Birgitta is likely to have empathised with.

The intensity of emotion, grief, and pain expressed through Birgitta's words when describing her visions of Christ's tortured body during the Crucifixion did not, however, become a widely adopted iconographical scheme. Whereas Birgitta's vision for the Nativity seems to have made an immediate and widespread impact, aside from exceptional works such as Grunewald's *Crucifixion*, her visionary conception for the Crucifixion appears to have taken longer and is less marked. For example, Uccello painted a *Crucifixion triptych* (Figure 11) for the convent at *Paridiso* in the mid 1450s which includes St Birgitta in the left panel holding the processional cross and a Birgittine nun kneeling at the cross in the central Crucifixion panel. An inscription identifies the nun as Sister Felicity,<sup>74</sup> and the panel appears to have been intended as a private devotional image intended for her cell. However, despite the placement of this *Crucifixion* in the Birgittine convent, the figure of Christ is conventional and contains none of the extreme indications of torture which are described so hauntingly by St Birgitta.

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**[Figure 11 goes in here, approximately ¼ to ½ page landscape orientation]**

Figure 11. Paolo Uccello. *Crucifixion triptych*. The Metropolitan Museum, New York. mid 1450s. Tempura on panel, 45.7 x 27.9 cm. Bequest of Lore Heinemann, in memory of her husband, Dr. Rudolf J. Heinemann, 1996.

## **Conclusion**

While recognisably selective and fragmentary, art works produced in association with Birgitta's *Revelations*, her sainthood and her Order provide a visual window into her personal, social, and theological worlds. The close connections between Birgitta's extraordinary life journey and her lively and persuasive visions have evoked spiritual responses which have been interpreted and articulated in art. Personal associations such as her ownership of a relic of the Cross or her practices related to the Passion, support and converge with her re-visioning of religious accounts such as the *Crucifixion*. As an influential visionary, Birgitta also demonstrated that the agenda of the female voice could transcend states of widowhood and societal norms to impart a powerful influence upon both society and art. Her views on virginity and childbirth are captured in the imagery of the miraculous delivery of the Christ child in Nativity scenes while her confidence as a woman, educated and visible alongside her male advisors, is evident in imagery depicting her as a saint and figurehead of her Order. The imagery developed in connection with, and inspired by, accounts of St Birgitta's life are testimony to the strength of her visions and her importance as a female model of sanctity. Therefore, through exploring the interface between Birgitta's life, her views and her recorded visions, the visual culture associated with St Birgitta may be better understood.

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FIGURES



Figure 1. 'St Birgitta at Alvastra Monastery Inspired by Heaven', Liber Celestis Revelationum, New York, Morgan Library and Museum (formerly Pierpont Morgan Library), MS M. 498, fol. 4<sup>v</sup>. c. 1380.



Figure 2. 'Initial E, Book I', New York, Morgan Library and Museum (formerly Pierpont Morgan Library), MS M.498, fol. 8<sup>r</sup>



Figure 3. 'The "Liber Celestis" Transferred from the Emperor of Heaven to the Kings of the Earth'. *Liber Celestis Revelationum*, New York, Morgan Library and Museum (formerly Pierpont Morgan Library). MS M. 498, fol. 343v.



Figure 4. Lippo d'Andrea di Lippo. *St Birgitta and a Choir of Birgittine Nuns*, New York, Bernard H. Beslauer. After 1401. Tempera on parchment.



Figure 5. *St. Birgitta Giving Her Rule to Members of Her Order*. Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, MS A75, fol. IV.1400-25.



Figure 6. Boucicaut Master. *St. Birgitta*. Les Heures de Jean le Meingre de Boucicaut, Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris. c. 1410. 275 x 190 mm.



Figure 7. Niccolò di Tommaso. *Nativity*. c.1372. Tempera on wood. 43 x 53 cm.  
Pinacoteca Apostolica Vaticano, Rome.



Figure 8. Master Francke. *Nativity*, from the *Englandfahrer Altarpiece*. 1424. Panel. 99  
x 89 cm. Kunsthalle, Hamburg.



Figure 9. Lorenzo Monaco. *Nativity*, from the predella of *Coronation of the Virgin*.

1414. Panel. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

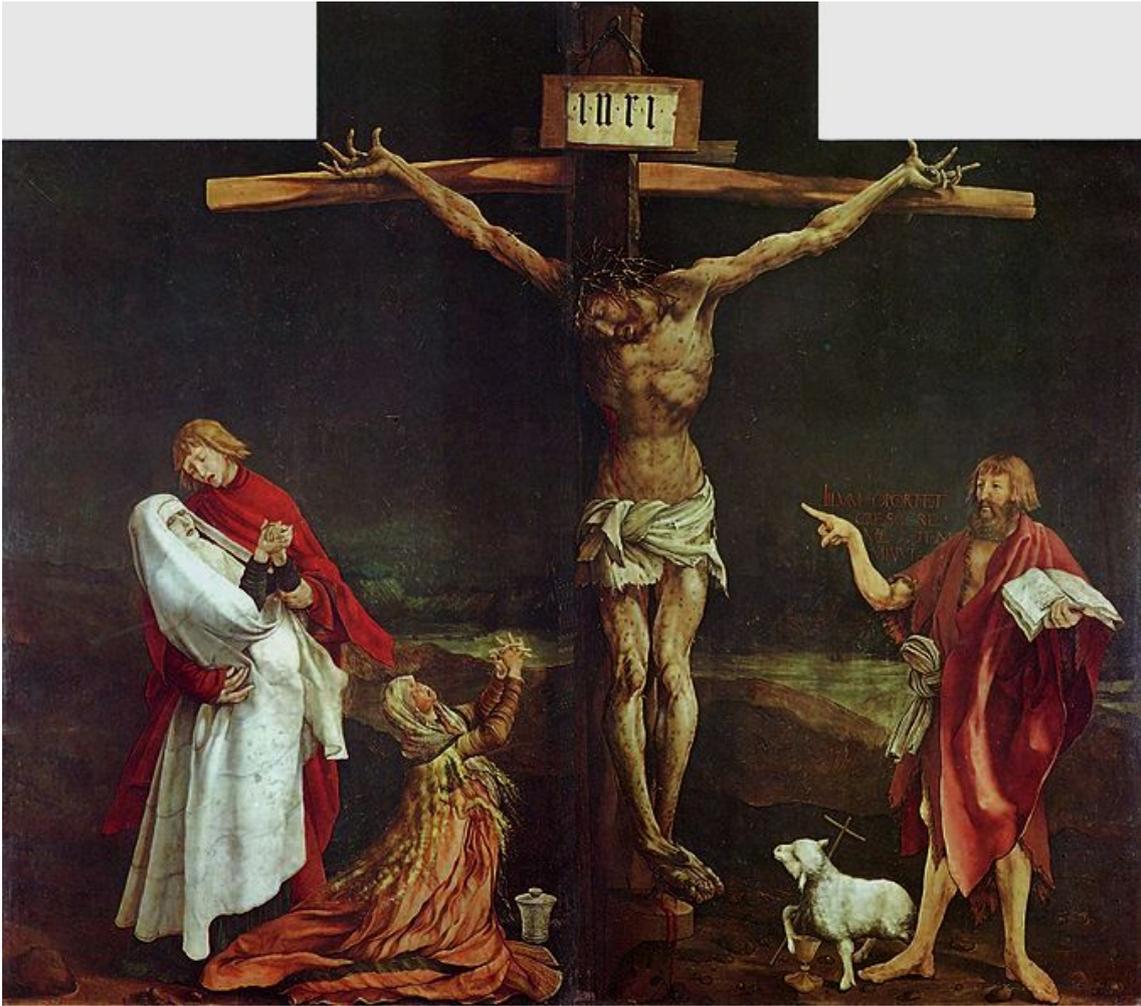


Figure 10a. Matthias Grünewald. *Crucifixion, Isenheim Altarpiece*. c.1510-15.  
298 x 328 cm. Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar.

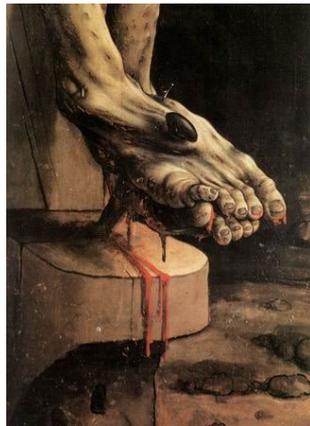


Figure 10b. Grünewald *Crucifixion, detail*



Figure 11. Paolo Uccello. *Crucifixion triptych*. mid 1450s. Tempura on panel, 45.7 x 27.9 cm.

The Metropolitan Museum, New York.