

The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden

VOLUME 4,
THE HEAVENLY EMPEROR'S
BOOK TO KINGS, THE RULE,
AND MINOR WORKS



Translated by

Denis Searby

Introductions and Notes by

Bridget Morris

The Revelations of St. Birgitta
of Sweden
Volume 4



FIGURE 1. View of Vadstena from Lake Vättern. (Photo Lars Berggren)

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This, the concluding volume of the translation of St. Birgitta's works, contains the supplementary materials and minor works that were incorporated into the central corpus in time for her canonization in 1391, and remained a defined part of the manuscript tradition up to the first printed edition by Bartholomeus Ghotan in 1492. The ordering of the books in the translation follows Ghotan's arrangement. In order to make this translation a complete corpus of all extant texts by St. Birgitta, it also contains a small number of short texts that were never part of the central corpus and are not included in Ghotan's edition.

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Abbreviations

Add.	<i>additio</i> , addition, addendum
Birgittine-Norwegian	an early text of the Swedish vernacular tradition that displays elements of a pre-Latin version of the revelations
Decl.	<i>declaratio</i> , “explanation”
DS	Diplomatarium Suecanum, Svenskt diplomatarium, 1829–
Ex.	<i>Revelationes extravagantes</i>
Gh	first printed edition of the collected corpus of <i>Revelationes</i> , produced in Lübeck by Bartholomeus Ghotan
KL	<i>Kulturhistoriskt Lexikon för Nordisk Medeltid</i> (Encyclopedia of the Cultural History of the Scandinavian Middle Ages)
KVHAA	Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien (The Royal Academy of Letters, History, and Antiquities)
int.	<i>interrogatio</i> (Book V)
Lat.	<i>Latin</i>
OM	<i>Olaus Magnus. A Description of the Northern Peoples</i> , ed. P. G. Foote, 1996–98
PL	<i>Patrologia latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, Paris, 1841–64
QO	<i>Quattuor orationes</i>
rev.	revelation, <i>revelatio</i>
RS	<i>Regula Salvatoris</i>
SA	<i>Sermo angelicus</i>

SFSS	Samlingar utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet (Swedish Medieval Texts' Society Series)
Sw.	Swedish (medieval or modern)
Söderwall	<i>Ordbok öfver svenska medeltids-språket</i> , ed. K. F. Söderwall et al. (Dictionary of Medieval Swedish), 1884–1973

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Book I (sixty chapters)

Mixture of early revelations

Date: Sweden years, 1344–49

Ed. Carl-Gustaf Undhagen, 1977 (printed 1978)

Book II (thirty chapters)

Revelations on the knighthood

Date: Sweden years, 1344–49

Ed. Carl-Gustaf Undhagen† and Birger Bergh, 2001

Book III (thirty-four chapters)

Revelations on clerics

Date: Sweden and Rome years, mainly 1349–51

Ed. Ann-Mari Jönsson, 1998

Contained in Volume 2 of the present translation:

Book IV (144 chapters; includes the *Tractatus ad sacerdotes* chs. 131–35
and the *Tractatus ad pontifices* chs. 136–44)

Mixture of revelations on various subjects

Date: Sweden and (mainly) Rome years, 1344–71

Ed. Hans Aili, 1992

Book V (also known as the *Liber quaestionum*; a brief preface, sixteen questions and answers, and thirteen interspersed revelations)

Dialogue between Christ and a cleric

Date: Sweden years, 1344–49

Ed. Birger Bergh, 1971

Contained in Volume 3 of the present translation:

Book VI (122 chapters)

Mixture of revelations on various subjects

Date: Sweden and Rome years, 1344–71

Ed. Birger Bergh, 1991

Book VII (a brief preface, thirty-one chapters)

Revelations mainly on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Date: 1371–73

Ed. Birger Bergh, 1967

Contained in the present volume:

Epistola Solitarii ad reges (Prologue to Book VIII)

Date c. 1377

Ed. Arne Jönsson, in Aili, *Book VIII* (below)

Ed. Hans Aili, 2002

Book VIII (also known as the “*Liber caelestis Imperatoris ad reges*”; sixty-one chapters)

Revelations concerning worldly leaders

Date: Sweden and Rome years, 1344–71

Ed. Hans Aili, 2002

Regula Salvatoris

The Birgittine Rule, the “Rule of St. Savior” (prologue and preface, thirty-one chapters)

Date: Sweden years, probably between 1346 and 1348

Ed. Sten Eklund, 1975

Sermo angelicus de Virginis excellentia

Matins readings for the nuns of the order (prologue, twenty-one chapters)

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Ed. Sten Eklund, 1972

Quattuor orationes

Four major prayers (preceded by preface)

Undated

Ed. Sten Eklund, 1991

Revelationes extravagantes (prologue, 116 chapters)

Additional materials on a wide variety of subjects, including supplements to
the Rule

Date: Sweden and Rome years, 1344-71

Ed. Lennart Hollman, 1956

The Revelations of St. Birgitta
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Volume 4

Book VIII

The Heavenly Emperor's Book to Kings

Introduction

The *Liber caelestis* (the term for the complete collection of Birgitta's books of revelations) finishes at the end of Book VII, but after Birgitta's death in 1373, a further book, known as the *Liber caelestis Imperatoris ad reges* [*The Heavenly Emperor's Book to Kings*], soon came to be added as an eighth book.¹ It was compiled by Alfonso of Jaén, probably in 1376–77, and is likely to have been included alongside books I–VII in the submissions to Pope Urban VI in 1379.² It is preceded by a lengthy treatise written by Alfonso, known as the *Epistola solitarii ad reges* [*The Hermit's Letter to Kings*]. This work probes the means of testing the nature of revelation and miracle and the ability to demonstrate how false and diabolical illusions could be distinguished from visions that were genuinely conferred by the Holy Spirit.³ This question—that had already been raised by Master Mathias in his Prologue to Book I—is also indicative of the theological obstacles that had to be overcome to attain Birgitta's public recognition by the church, and a possible explanation for the length and rigor of the treatise.

Book VIII contains fifty-eight revelations almost exclusively on the subject of the government of kings, and more specifically, on the rule of Swedish king Magnus Eriksson. It opens with an overarching statement from Christ as ruler, advising on various aspects of the king's life, from his personal behavior and marriage to his political affiliations and foreign policy. There follows a loosely organized body of revelations, and toward the end there is an appeal to both the emperor, requesting him to ratify the Birgittine Rule, and the pope, requesting him to absolve King Magnus from his excommunication following a financial loan from the papacy. Finally, in a tone of moral opprobrium, God expresses his anger over the sins of the people of Sweden. The Book serves as a guide to Christian rulers, who are to receive it as a "precious

and new royal crown" (*Epistola* paragraphs 9–10). It also contains propagandist elements in the sanctioning of the Birgittine Order and the declaring of Birgitta's sanctity.

A Thematic Anthology

About half of the contents of Book VIII repeat revelations that occur earlier in the *Liber caelestis*. The relevant chapters and their equivalents in the main corpus are: chapter 1 paragraphs 24–34 (equivalent to II 7 paragraphs 1–11); chapter 2 paragraphs 1–4 (II 12 paragraphs 1–5); chapter 7 (IV 48); chapter 8 (V rev. 4); chapter 13 (IV 4); chapter 15 (IV 17); chapter 22 (VII 18); chapter 23 (VII 19); chapter 24 (III 31); chapter 25 (IV 1); chapter 26 (IV 103); chapter 27 (IV 104); chapter 28 (IV 105); chapter 29 (VI 95); chapter 30 (VI 26); chapter 32 (II 7 paragraphs 17–37, 41–45); chapter 33 (II 9 paragraphs 1–2 [beginning], 17–33); chapter 34 (IV 74); chapter 35 (II 13 paragraphs 1, 11–39); chapter 36 (II 12 1[beginning], 31–59); chapter 37 (II 11); chapter 38 (VI 82); chapter 41 (IV 3); chapter 42 (II 6); chapter 44 (VI 41); chapter 50 (IV 45); chapter 58 (VII 30).

The placing of these duplicated materials is not fixed in the manuscript tradition of the central corpus.⁴ Rather than giving a revelation twice, many manuscripts of Book VIII simply provide a cross-reference to the location in the main corpus. There is sometimes contamination or overlap between the two text locations and an explanatory phrase is taken from Book VIII into the main corpus of books. For example, "I sent to the kings of France and England" in VIII 28.1 is given as "I sent to them" in IV 105.1, but one manuscript (Lund University Library, Codex 21, "Falkenberg") adopts the same reading as Book VIII.⁵

As can be seen in the above example, Alfonso makes a number of minor alterations in the duplicated revelations that he includes in Book VIII. A further example is VIII 50, giving "the German emperor" but "Your Majesty" in Book IV 45. And by elevating the high rank of the recipient (such as "nobilis" of Birgitta's brother in VI 95, but "princeps" in VIII 29), he brings the political character of the collection to the fore.

Alfonso also makes many minor qualifying and stylistic additions in his version of Book VIII, such as "*my* womb" (VIII 27.1), "*Noah's* ark" (VIII 41.3), "Tell *him*" (VIII 7.4), and "*my* enemies" (VIII 58.15), and adding adverbs such as "in truth" (VIII 35.20). He sometimes changes sentence division, inverts a word order, or inserts a synonym, such as "conscience and intellect" (VIII 44.9) and "emperor and king" (VIII 50.9). Or he gives a fuller gloss, such as the expansion of IV 3.16 "to its legitimate owner" into "to the legitimate lord, that is, to that king, agreed by the preceding king as the hereditary king" (VIII 41.16). Many of these changes—such as the substitution of a synonym, or the active for the passive voice, or the accusative for the ablative case—are made for no apparent reason, but they shed light on Alfonso's editorial method as he sought to standardize the corpus as a whole.⁶

A few of the duplicated revelations are made up of extracts from several revelations, suggesting a tendency that recurs in the fifteenth century whereby

parts of individual revelations are adapted into other contexts.⁷ The most complex of these is ch. 1, which is a compilation from VII 30, III 26, II 13, II 18, II 17, and ch. 32, which is equivalent to Book II 7 17–37 and 41–45. Ch. 41, which is equivalent to IV 3, also consists of different parts dating from different periods of Birgitta's life.

Epistola Solitarii

Alfonso sets out to defend the divine inspiration and authenticity of the *Revelationes* against potential voices of opposition: "Because many not unjustly were questioning how and in what way lady Birgitta was able to have and had most frequently in her prayers such an abundance of revelations and divine visions, . . . the prologue was composed and produced."⁸

The *Epistola solitarii* was written either in 1378, in response to the outbreak of the Great Schism in the church and as a defense of pope Urban VI, or else between the summer of 1375 and October 1376, as evidence in support of the canonization.⁹ Petitions for the canonization came first from Vadstena and were taken up in the late 1370s among others by King Albrecht in Sweden, Queen Johanna of Naples, and Emperor Charles IV. These powerful voices in turn may have prompted the many critiques of the *Revelationes* after Birgitta's death. In 1415, Jean Gerson (one of her main critics) wrote *De probatione spirituum*, which is in part a commentary on the deliberations of the Council of Constance over Birgitta's canonization and the credence given to other female mystics. Gerson is concerned with the difficulties raised by identifying and proving the origin of the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he outlines three ways to test spirits: by learning from the scriptures, by spiritual experiences, and by virtue of hierarchical office.¹⁰

The opening question raised in the *Epistola solitarii* addresses the question of why God chose a woman to be the mediator of his divine message; the response is to present Birgitta as a weak and simple woman chosen in order to confound the strong and foolish of the world.¹¹ Alfonso lists many types of unlearned people, including women who had been given the gift of prophecy, and he urges those who are qualified to distinguish between demonic delusions to examine such cases very carefully. He compares Birgitta with a number of female prophets and biblical women, and he dwells in particular on a comparison with Moses, a "simple person" (*homo simplex*). He enumerates seven different ways in which authentic revelations may be distinguished from diabolical influences. They include the humility and obedience of the visionary, the sweetness of divine ecstasy, and the enlightenment of the intellect so that the soul understands what it sees and hears. Further, there must be an accord between what the visionary says and the Church's official teaching, as well as a propensity for the divine message to be widely broadcast. Lastly, the visionary must experience a pious death, and there must be evidence of posthumous miracles. Alfonso states that all these criteria are met in Birgitta's case, for which reason the heavenly origin of the revelations may be guaranteed.

The *Epistola solitarii* became a landmark in describing the criteria required for judging visionaries and their visions, and the *Revelationes* are consciously presented within the framework of discourse on the *discretio spirituum*.¹² Yet it was often omitted by later compilers of the *Revelationes*.¹³ As we have frequently noted in connection with earlier books, the result is that Birgitta herself becomes a disembodied mouthpiece of the divine message. By discussing the different presentations of Birgitta as a female mouthpiece of a divinely revealed message, Alfonso establishes her impeccable credentials as a visionary and measures her achievement against each of the criteria he defines. The *Epistola solitarii* was addressed to the European royalty and it emphasizes Birgitta's descent from the royal house of Sweden, calling her (erroneously) at one point the "princess of Närke" (*principissa Nericie*) to emphasize her high rank and royal connection.

It is not until the final chapter of the treatise that Alfonso outlines the function of the compilation of Book VIII, and this section alone serves as the Preface to the book itself.

A Propagandist "Mirror of Kings"

Birgitta's political revelations provide a valuable commentary on the struggles between the crown, nobility, and church in her time, and in gathering such texts into a single collection, Alfonso creates a unique historical and political document. By highlighting and reinforcing the distance that had arisen between Birgitta and the Swedish king—who had disappeared from the political scene by the 1370s when the book was compiled—Alfonso may be consciously aligning the Birgittine cause more closely with that of Magnus's successors for his own purposes in promoting Birgitta's case in Rome.

Although Birgitta was about fifteen years older than Magnus, the fate of both individuals was closely intertwined throughout the fourteenth century. Magnus's reign is difficult to evaluate because the existing written sources from the period are few and emanate mostly from within the Birgittine circle and present an ambivalent picture of him.¹⁴ Framing her language in moral imperatives, Birgitta voices the interests of Sweden's small and homogenous political class, which consisted of no more than a hundred members, about twenty or thirty of whom belonged to the exclusive circle around the king, and many of whom appear as shadowy figures in the *Revelationes*. She moves from a position of unequivocal support for him in the 1340s to one of contempt and condemnation—even, as can be seen in her autograph vision (Book VIII 56 and *Extravagantes* ch. 80), to the extent of calling for an uprising against him.

Magnus was elected as king of Sweden in 1319 at the age of three, and in the same year he also inherited Norway and its dependencies. His minority (1319–32) was presided over by a council drawn from the aristocracy and church, and led initially by the regent Mats Ketilmundsson and later by *drots* Knut Jönsson of Aspenäs, who was Birgitta's uncle by marriage; later, in 1348, Birgitta's brother Israel Birgersson took over as *officialis generalis* during the king's absence. Magnus's mother, Ingeborg, took an active part in the political

intrigues during the minority rule, with her Danish favorite, Knut Porse. Magnus was crowned king over Sweden, Norway and Skåne in Stockholm on 22 July 1336. He inherited serious financial difficulties caused essentially by an imbalance between the nation's income and its expenditure. Denmark—which was in even greater financial disarray until king Valdemar Atterdag began to restore its fortunes in the 1340s—was forced to mortgage some of its territories, and the people of Skåne and Blekinge in the southernmost part of present-day Sweden asked Magnus to take over the rule of the unpopular mortgage holder from Holstein, who had been governing them. Magnus paid 34,000 marks in silver and gained a wealthy region with approximately 350,000 inhabitants. To help raise the money to pay for the provinces, he taxed the nobility and church savagely. The fragile economic system was further unable to support the developing state and military institutions and the king continued to increase taxes, and to bring more of the nobility under the tax-paying umbrella. He taxed exports, mortgaged other parts of the kingdom, raised loans from the papacy, the Hanseats, and German magnates, and he centralized trade and imposed greater state controls on fiscal life. His relations with the Hanseats further exacerbated his problems as he struck repeated truces with them.

Magnus had undertaken his rule when conditions seemed favorable for the setting up of a united kingdom (VIII 1–5 describe the qualities of a good king), and the early decades of his reign were marked by a number of legal reforms and a cultural awakening. He was responsible for the codification of all the provincial laws into a single, national law, *Magnus Erikssons landslag*, in c. 1350, which became the embodiment of the constitutional basis of society (VIII 41 refers to this law code). He also developed closer contacts with Europe. In marrying Blanche of Namur in 1335, the daughter of a Flemish duke, he was forging a bond with one of the most politically developed and advanced states in Europe, and the new queen probably brought with her continental ideas about kingship and government. Birgitta was employed in the court as a “magistra” to the queen after her marriage (see *Extravagantes* ch. 59). VIII 10–16 deal with the qualities of a good queen, and advice on how a queen should behave.

However, without a strong power base, a fixed court, a healthy economy, a loyal aristocracy, and a supportive church, it was difficult for Magnus unconditionally to establish his authority. The old aristocratic families such as Birgitta's, whose members included lawmakers and leading ecclesiastics, had powerful positions in society, and the king was beholden to them; if he was not in a strong enough position, politically or economically, the aristocracy could legitimately overthrow him. (VIII 54 concerns the manners and clothing of the aristocracy, and there are chapters on the king's counselors, drawn from the aristocracy, such as ch. 2, ch. 4 on justice, and ch. 6 on the protection of commoners, paragraphs 18–20, 49.)

Magnus's political difficulties were exacerbated in the late 1340s, first with his abortive crusades to the regions east of the Baltic Sea and then by the ravages of the Great Plague, which hit Sweden much as it did continental Europe. Birgitta reminds the king of the need for a just cause and proper execution of the crusade (VIII 39–47).¹⁵ In the 1350s, by which time Birgitta was in Rome at a safe distance

and therefore more able to vent her criticism, the king's fortunes changed more markedly. He designated his two sons, Håkan and Erik, to inherit the thrones of Norway and Sweden respectively in 1343 and 1344; when the younger son, Håkan, reached his majority in 1355 he was declared king of Norway, leaving his elder brother without power or influence, and he was thus lured into conspiracy with the leading magnates against his father (VIII 41). In particular there was opposition among the magnates against the king's favored adviser, duke Bengt Algotsson (VIII 31), which led to open conflict in 1356, in which Erik, aided by his uncle Albrecht of Mecklenburg (the Elder), in an effort to broker peace, forced his father to relinquish parts of his Swedish kingdom, leaving the kingdom divided in 1357. Bengt Algotsson was banished from Norway and Sweden, and a council of state, consisting of members of the aristocracy, was established.¹⁶ Other parts of the kingdom were further weakened in this power struggle: Albrecht of Mecklenburg gained control of parts of the south, and thereby a political foothold in Sweden, and the Danish king, Valdemar Atterdag, who was anxious to regain the southern territories that formerly had been under the Danish crown, entered an alliance with Magnus and his son Håkan against Erik and Albrecht. Erik died shortly afterward, in 1359, and Magnus was again sole ruler of Sweden. During the following negotiations, Magnus found himself isolated when Albrecht and Valdemar agreed terms. Sweden lost the southern provinces in the ensuing conflict, and Valdemar then turned his attention to the rich Baltic island of Gotland (VIII 16–17 use the images of a fox and wolf, which may refer to these disputing rulers). VIII 52 contains outspoken criticism of the king's misdemeanors during his excommunication, including his debts, the heavy taxation of his people, disobedience, patronage of clerics to high positions, and his violation of state and ecclesial laws. Birgitta advises him to seek the pope's forgiveness and absolution from excommunication in person in Rome.

As Danish influence in Sweden grew, King Magnus's position looked increasingly vulnerable. His relations with the aristocracy grew ever more bitter, especially since the nobles had cherished the possession of the southern provinces. By an ill-fated alliance with Valdemar in 1359, Magnus had lost the southern region, and the aristocracy started to criticize him openly. When Magnus in 1361 refused to ratify a treaty with the Hanseatic towns against Valdemar, the aristocracy sided with his son Håkan, deposed Magnus in 1362, and made Håkan king. But shortly afterward father and son were reconciled and together they sought support from Valdemar, which was cemented by the marriage of Håkan with Valdemar's daughter Margarethe in 1363 (a marriage of which Birgitta disapproves in VIII 9). Håkan's cousin Albrecht "the Younger" was summoned to Sweden and elected king in Uppsala in 1364, at the same time as Magnus and Håkan were banished to Norway, although they retained the regions of western Sweden. Magnus died in a shipwreck in 1374. The unhappy events at the end of his reign heralded a new period of upheaval that led to Margarethe taking over the crown of a unified Scandinavia in 1397, the so-called Union of Kalmar, which was to last for over a hundred years.¹⁷

As her visionary authority grew, Birgitta became better equipped to speak out on behalf of the political class she represented. Her thinly veiled messages

initially offered positive advice, but later became more forthright. She is contemptuous of Magnus's government in the wake of his disastrous crusade to the Baltic, and she dislikes his financial squeeze on the church and aristocracy, his elevation of favorites, and his disregard of a ban of excommunication imposed by the church.

The so-called autograph revelation (of which ch. 56 is the opening part, and then the main political message is consigned to the *Extravagantes* ch. 80; see p. 325) is without doubt the most vehement and explicit criticism that Birgitta makes of the Swedish king. Although earlier Christ had said in a revelation (ch. 18) that "my friends should strive carefully to observe and maintain justice, to love the common people, to glorify God, and punish the rebellious and impious," only a few years afterward, in Rome, she issued an irrevocable program for a rebellion against the king. Showing a strong sense of *Realpolitik* combined with careful tactics, she presented her call to have Magnus Eriksson deposed in such a way that it came as a divine mandate, carefully couched within the legal prescriptions of the national law. Magnus was expressly accused of having broken the laws he himself had helped to create only a few years earlier in the national code, *Magnus Erikssons Landslag*. Birgitta addresses her message to four noblemen, calling on them to solicit help from the highest social ranks (where she herself had friends and relatives). But she also appeals to the wider group of the low nobility and the political group of commoners consisting of the farming class that made up the greater part of the population.¹⁸

Moral Reform in the Christian Community on Earth

Although Book VIII is informed by the real deeds of individuals, providing guidance on governance, yet Alfonso, in the genre of the "Mirror of Kings" [*Speculum regale*], seeks to draw out a general moral and spiritual meaning from the specific examples given. These have an application to the whole of Christendom. The revelations begin with a powerful metaphor or visual image, a sharp mnemonic detail that marks the beginning of a schematizing process that develops into moral, political, and religious exegesis. Doctrine, allegory, and scriptural exegesis are incorporated into the layers of interpretation, leaving a medley of unstructured phrases and snatches of familiar biblical and liturgical and commonplace devotional materials. Despite their rough edges and lack of elegance, Birgitta's own voice may clearly be heard in these revelations.

Birgitta is not writing as a theorizer or political commentator, but in a prophetic tradition; her concern is with the salvation of humankind. She began with the reform of those around her, in real persons and events, but it is the idea of the Christian community, as reflected in relation to political power and the heavenly community of saints, that is at the heart of Birgitta's worldview.¹⁹ In keeping with traditional Christian exegesis she always has in mind the traditional fourfold method of explaining the stark images and voices within her mind, and these divisions are to a greater or lesser extent present throughout the revelations.

Other contemporary treatises on kingship can be set alongside Book VIII, and they too present a larger worldview of the Christian kingdom on earth and its parallels with the heavenly kingdom. A tract entitled *Um styrilse konunga ok höfðlinga* [*On the Government of Kings and Leaders*], dating from the 1340s, marks a departure from entrenched conservative views in Sweden, and looks forward to more European models of government.²⁰ Possibly written for Magnus Eriksson's two sons, Erik and Håkan, it is based on a work written c. 1280 by Giles of Rome for Philip the Fair of France. It highlights the ideological split between the king and aristocracy that was opening up in the mid-fourteenth century. It argues for absolutism rather than group government by an aristocracy, and shows how kingship by inheritance is preferable to kingship by election. It also describes how the prospective king should be educated, and what demands should be made on the court and the king's subjects. The overriding principle is that royal government should be not only to the credit of the king, but also to the benefit of the people.

Birgittine propaganda against Magnus was further fuelled by a pamphlet issued in c. 1370, known as the *Libellus de Magno Erico Rege*.²¹ It is a defense of aristocratic interests, and ascribes to Magnus the vices of *cupiditas*, *voluptas*, and *superbia*. It suggests a corrupt political influence on the king by his wife, Blanche, a view that is again hinted at, but never made explicit, in the *Revelationes* (for instance, the queen is described as a rotten apple, VIII 10).²²

One of Alfonso's primary ambitions in promoting the canonization was to persuade European leaders of Birgitta's commanding visionary voice and perhaps even to remind them of their shared political interests within the universal church at a time when powerful national interests were emerging. By applying particular details to individuals, he seeks out a universal message by referring collectively and implicitly to the ruling elites across the continent.²³

In chapter 50, an unequivocal appeal is made to the Emperor Charles IV.²⁴ He was one of the signatories to the application for Birgitta's canonization on 9 September 1377, and—according to the Prologue by Johannes Turrecremata in Ghotan's printed edition—the owner of one of the earliest copies of the *Revelationes*, as was the university he founded in Prague. Indeed, the *Revelationes* was allegedly the favorite reading of Charles IV.²⁵ Birgitta probably opposed the current view of the emperor as a partial secular European leader and instead espoused the traditional unity of pope and emperor, seeing the emperor's role as protector of the church.

Letters of supplication were sent to the pope from other leaders: Johanna of Naples was instrumental in the campaign in Rome, and although she is not mentioned in Book VIII, she is well represented in Book VII. The archbishop of Sweden, Birger Gregorsson, made a supplication in 1376, as did several members of the Swedish aristocracy; the Swedish king, Albrecht of Mecklenburg, who had not shown great enthusiasm toward the cause, probably saw the political and financial advantages that would accrue from the canonization, and added his name in support.²⁶

The ultimate purpose of the collection that made up Book VIII was therefore probably a mixed one: to write a tract on the subject of kingship that also

demonstrated that Birgitta's prophecies about Magnus Eriksson had been vindicated; to enlist the support of the current king of Sweden, Albrecht, now that there was a new emerging political order within a unified Scandinavia; to produce a thematic collection to reach a defined aristocratic European readership; to persuade the rulers of Europe to support the canonization and ratify the Rule; and, most importantly, to highlight Birgitta's view of the Christian community and the church's mission of reform in salvation history.

Imagery

Perhaps because of the political sensitivities of the subject matter and the need to convey many strong messages metaphorically, there are exceptionally many striking images in Book VIII, especially animal images to represent human beings and apocalyptic themes (e.g., a fox, a viper; ch. 17, 18). Christ's passion is like a thunderstorm (ch. 47); a mother thrusts away a stillborn fetus which she refuses to touch or breast-feed (ch. 56); a king sits in a glass orb (ch. 48); a dragon appears in the sky (ch. 31); marriage is like children playing with dolls (ch. 9); a queen is like a chewed-on apple core (ch. 10). Ch. 48 contains a particularly interesting range of images, with descriptions of God as a distiller producing brandy through several pipes through a complicated process until it has reached perfection. There are also images of instruments of torture, a blind puppy, marrow squeezed out of the brain, and a king who appears to be holding a whirligig. In ch. 56 there is an image of a human face in the eucharistic host and a flame burning around it.

Note on the Translation

In the translation, the duplicated revelations that have already been translated in the earlier books are not repeated, with the exception of those revelations where only a few paragraphs are duplicated (e.g., ch. 1 and 2). In the case of the duplicated chapters that are not included in full, a cross-reference and short summary heading is given, together with Alfonso's heading as given in Book VIII (where it sometimes has a slightly different wording from the heading of the parallel text). Any substantive points of difference between the two versions are indicated in the footnotes.

NOTES

1. Concerning the title, it is uncertain whether "caelestis" is intended to refer to the "emperor" of the title, or to "books." The former makes sense, and was probably Alfonso's intention, but the canonization materials suggest it was also interpreted as the latter; see further Jönsson, *Alfonso of Jaén*, p. 62. In the Prague redaction that was compiled by Mattheus of Kraków, Book VIII is placed between Books III and IV; the New York and Palermo manuscripts that are among the earliest group of *de luxe* manuscripts that originated in Naples most likely included it as an integral part of the corpus instead of an additional text.

2. See further Undhagen, *Book I*, p. 22–23, 29–30, and for arguments regarding the dating, Aili, *Book VIII*, p. 21.

3. Alfonso mentions Book VIII in his canonization testimony with regard to the defenses of the divine inspiration of Birgitta's visions in the Prologue to Book I as well as the *Epistola solitarii*: "factus et compositus fuit

prologus hoc plene declarans per diuinam scripturam super primo libro celesti et clarius super viii eidem domine Brigide diuinitus reuelato, qui intitulator liber celestis jmperatoris ad reges"; Collijn, *Acta et processus*, p. 375.

4. The exact number of the *Extravagantes* cannot easily be determined. For example, there is a further duplicated chapter, *Extravagantes* 42, which is equivalent to Book VIII 51: but in this case it is most likely that the medieval editor had placed this chapter from the *Extravagantes* into Book VIII by mistake. In all the printed editions there are a further three chapters included in Book VIII that correspond to *Extravagantes* 27, 78, and 80. On the manuscript transmission of these revelations, see Aili, *Book VIII*, pp. 21–22, 46. We have made some minor amendments to Aili's table on p. 46 in accordance with the review by Stephan Borgehammar, in *Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift*, 104, pp. 163–65.

5. As Aili, *Book VIII*, pp. 21–22 indicates, the early Italian manuscripts include the duplications in both locations, as does the beta₂ group of manuscripts; the defective MS "r" omits—with a cross-reference—the equivalent chapters only from Book VII (but not from the earlier books). The "Vadstena branch" of manuscripts is inconsistent, with some revelations included *in loco* and others omitted (IV 74 = VIII 34 is missing in both locations); MS K adopts Book VIII consistently, but a secondary hand has inserted the duplicated chapters at the end of the codex; the Prague group has an erratic pattern of retention or omission; and Ghotan adopts the principle of placing all of the duplications in Book VIII and giving cross-references in books of the main corpus.

6. On this editorial process see further Aili, *Book IV*, pp. 44–47; Aili, "St Birgitta and the Text" and Aili, "Alfonso's Editorial Work."

7. See for example the German or Italian vernacular compilations discussed in Morris and O'Mara, *The Translation of the Works*.

8. The *Epistola solitarii* was first edited by Jönsson in *Alfonso of Jaén*, pp. 115–68, and is reprinted by Aili in his edition of Book VIII.

9. In favor of the later dating, see Colledge, "'Epistola solitarii,'" pp. 44–45; of the earlier dating, see Jönsson, *Alfonso of Jaén*, pp. 62, 106.

10. See further Caiger, "Doctrine and Discipline," and McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation*.

11. See further Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 173–76.

12. See further on the discernment of spirits Voaden, *God's Words, Women's Voices*.

13. Roger Ellis, "Flores," p. 167, argues: "The 'propagandist' elements in the work—revelations, that is, sanctioning the creation of a new Order, or declaring the holiness of the Lady Bridget or certifying their own divine origins—served the turn of the compilers, in the main, only when the creation of the Order and the canonization of its foundress were still in question, or were being brought into question, and when the *Revelations* might be called in evidence on their behalf."

14. Magnus's career within the Birgittine tradition is assessed by Ferm, *Olaus Petri och Heliga Birgitta*, especially pp. 13–33. See also Authén Blom, *Norge i union* and Helle, *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, pp. 713–20.

15. On the crusade see further volume 1 p. 170 and volume 2 p. 14.

16. On Bengt Algotsson, see further Klockars, *Birgittas svenska värld*, pp. 129–33.

17. See "Magnus Eriksson" in *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon*, 24 (1982–84).

18. The process by which Birgitta distanced herself from the king has been debated by several scholars. Andersson, *Källstudier till Sveriges historia*, challenges the Augustinian dualistic view drawn from the literary sources of a simplistic transition from a saint king to a tyrannical *rex iniquus*. Drar, *Konungens herravälde*, looks at the presentation of the princely ideal developed within canon law, and challenges the accuracy of the accusations levelled against the king in the revelation. Ferm, "Birgittas uppror mot Magnus Eriksson," discusses the motives for the uprising itself and the legitimacy of the revolt within the context of the legal framework in Sweden, arguing in favor of a pragmatic rather than theoretical approach on the part of Birgitta.

19. As Zochowska, "The Christian Kingdom," p. 8, has written, Birgitta was "deeply interested in the relationship between the religious and the political performance of Christian rulers, bishops, and nobles: specifically, the pragmatic exterior and spiritual interior of their activities. Therefore, even if we do not regard Birgitta as a political thinker, we must admit that she is a descendant of a certain political tradition. This tradition has specific Scandinavian marks, but it is also a part of general Christian political theology. *Revelationes celestes* is among the priceless sources that can aid an exploration of this tradition."

20. See Moberg, *Konungastyrelsen*.

21. It is also referred to as *Qualiter regnavit rex Magnus* [How King Magnus Reigned]. It was probably written by a cleric with Birgittine connections. See further Kraft, "Textstudier till Birgittas revelationer," pp. 1–27, Andersson, *Källstudier till Sveriges historia*, pp. 151–73, and Ferm, *Olaus Petri och heliga Birgitta*, pp. 17–18, who points out that the single manuscript owned by Vadstena was not allowed to be circulated, perhaps due to its political sensitivity and despite the fact that it represents a Birgittine faction and voice.

22. The antimonarchic view was reiterated in the chronicle texts of the early Reformation. Olaus Petri wrote *En Svensk krönika* in 1540, in which he insinuated that Birgitta had spread unfounded rumors about the king. See also the discussion of Johannes Magnus's *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque regibus* in 1554 by Johannesson, *The Renaissance of the Goths*.

23. Gilkaer, *The Political Ideas of St Birgitta*, has looked at the tract in respect of its Thomist ideas, and he has also examined some of the political ideas that emerged from the court of Castile under King Alfonso XI and Pedro I, from where Alfonso may have drawn some influence.

24. Charles IV was born under the name Wenceslaus in Prague in 1316. He was a great collector of religious relics, and a follower of the *devotio moderna* (whose representatives included Tauler and Christina Ebner), and he supported the reformist preacher Jan Milič. Birgitta may have met him in person in 1368, to appeal for help in the reform of the church and for reconciliation in Europe. She is told to wait in Rome until the pope and emperor are there at the same time (this message was witnessed by Magnus Petri; see Collijn, *Acta et processus*, p. 267). See also Book IV 45; *Extravagantes* 8, 41; and Collijn, *Acta et processus*, p. 94. Birgitta is said to have received a relic of a splinter of the cross from Charles IV, which later came into the possession of the Birgittine house in Altomünster. See further Liebhart, "Birgitta of Sweden and Politics"; Klockars, *Birgitta och hennes värld*, pp. 88–96.

25. Undhagen, *Book I*, p. 32n145, and p. 64n2.

26. See further on the initial moves toward canonization, Höjer, *Studier i Vadstena klostets och birgittinordens historia*, pp. 102–10; Morris, *St. Birgitta of Sweden*, pp. 143–59; Gejrot, "Att sätta ljuset i ljusstaken."

Epistola.

Solitarij.



FIGURE 2. Frontispiece to the *Epistola solitarii* in the first printed edition at the press of Bartholomaeus Ghotan, Lübeck, 1492. (Photo Kungliga Biblioteket, National Library of Sweden, Stockholm)

THE HERMIT'S LETTER TO KINGS

⚡ Chapter 1

*A Treatise Addressed to Kings in Defense of Birgitta that Outlines how to Distinguish Divine from Diabolical Visions*¹

DATE: 1376/1377, ROME

A rebuke to those who rashly and thoughtlessly accept or reject, without a preceding investigation, people claiming to receive divine visions and revelations.

1 Most illustrious kings—may you be true kings in Christ! My dear lords, accept my humble and suppliant greetings laid at the feet of your royal majesties.²

2 Kings do right to take pains in investigating and by investigating to learn the character of persons who write to them concerning extraordinary and private communications of the divine will. 3 Indeed, in these modern times so darkened by dense clouds,³ a woman of noble birth and shining spirit has appeared, Lady Birgitta of the kingdom of Sweden, the glory of womankind. 4 Like a bright star she sheds shining beams of holiness throughout this wide world. Now, by the command of the supreme Emperor of heaven, she sends you the present book which was supernaturally revealed to her. It is like a bright mirror⁴ to aid your royal adorning and the correcting of your conduct and the holy governance of your subjects. 5 Accordingly, my reverend lords, I wish to guard you against the hasty, rash and unreasonable opinions of unreasonable men that might lead you to the incredulity and hardness of heart of Pharaoh,⁵ uprooting like a storm-wind⁶ the seed of belief and faith from your hearts, without humble acceptance of and belief in this glorious book that was inscribed in the very heart of the aforesaid lady by the finger of the living God.⁷ 6 In order to put you on guard against such a deception, I have decided to give you a brief but complete description of that saintly lady's background and character as well as of the ways in which she received visions⁸ from God. 7 In what I write, I also intend to warn and

1. The Hermit's Letter: the title, "Epistola solitarii," which alludes to Alfonso's former existence as a solitary hermit, conveys the fact that he had been well prepared for his task in the discernment of spirits after he resigned his bishopric in 1368 and spent time as a desert hermit before he met Birgitta. Some manuscripts simply have the title "Epistola solitarii" while others add "ad reges," and others expand still further to explain that Alfonso was the former bishop of Jaén.

2. "Most illustrious kings...your royal majesty": petitions for Birgitta's canonization had been made to certain rulers, notably King Albrecht and the Swedish Council, Queen Johanna of Naples, and Emperor Charles IV. The *Epistola* was another such document of support; see Jönsson, *Alfonso of Jaén*, pp. 107–09.

3. "Darkened by dense clouds"; cf. Job 10:21.

4. "It is like a bright mirror": a reference to the Mirror of Kings that is the theme of Book VIII.

5. "Incredulity and hardness of heart of Pharaoh"; cf. Exodus 5:1–12.36; Mark 16:14.

6. "Storm-wind" renders "ventus turbinis"; cf. Ezekiel 1:4.

7. "By the finger of the living God"; cf. Exodus 31:18.

8. "Background and character": see ch. 3. "Ways in which she received visions": see ch. 4.

briefly teach⁹ both you and others how to distinguish divine visions from the miserable deceptions of Satan.

8 Therefore, my lords, to put it briefly, I say that there are many various kinds of visions. The subject matter is foreign and practically unknown to most people owing to their ignorance and lack of knowledge of Sacred Scripture as well as their inexperience of mental prayer and contemplation and of the spiritual life. 9 Because of the great dangers to which many people today, unfortunately, are exposed owing to their inexperience of this strange and arcane subject, I have often wished to write a brief treatise which would serve as a winnowing shovel¹⁰ in order to recognize and distinguish between the different kinds of visions. 10 At the beginning of the present book, the saintly lady, to whom it was supernaturally revealed in a vision, says that she saw “an incredibly large palace as big as a cloudless sky.”¹¹ 11 With this in mind, I have now decided to compose this treatise, this winnowing shovel, in the form of a letter, to winnow out good and divine visions and to separate them carefully from diabolic and evil visions, as we do grain from chaff.¹² 12 In this way the pure, clean grain can be laid up and venerated in the storehouse of spiritual and Catholic-minded persons, but the diabolical chaff of deceptions will be blown away by the wind of Holy Scripture and cast far off on the dunghheap to be trampled underfoot.

13 I begin then in the name of Christ, ever ready to submit all I say to the correction of holy mother Church and to better-informed opinion. 14 Anyone who wishes to investigate, discuss, distinguish, and judge the different kinds of visions or revelations rightly and reasonably 15 must, I say, possess both theoretical knowledge of Sacred Scripture regarding visions, as explained by the holy fathers and doctors clearly and discerningly, and practical experience of the spiritual life and the mental consolations and visions imparted by God spiritually or intellectually.

16 Because these days, unfortunately, there are few persons commonly found with experience in this theory and practice of making distinctions and forming correct opinions about such visions and spirits, 17 many people stumble about in these matters like blind men in a maze. They rashly turn around and condemn sincere and holy persons who follow God rather than make thorough distinctions and accept or reject on reasonable grounds that which should be accepted or rejected. 18 They offer no logical arguments for their unconsidered opinions and hasty pronouncements or, rather, for their detractions. They only say that Satan often disguises himself as an angel of light,¹³ 19 and then bring up examples of other spiritual persons who have in times past been deceived in their visions by the devil. 20 They do not,

9. “Warn and briefly teach”: see chs. 5–6.

10. “Winnowing shovel” renders “ventilabrum”; cf. Matthew 3:12.

11. “Large palace as big as a cloudless sky”; see Book VIII 1.

12. “Winnowing shovel [...] grain from chaff”; cf. Matthew 3:12, Luke 3:17.

13. “An angel of light”; cf. 2 Corinthians 11:14.