

**The Revelations of  
St. Birgitta of Sweden,  
Volume I**

*DENIS SEARBY*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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St. Birgitta of Sweden  
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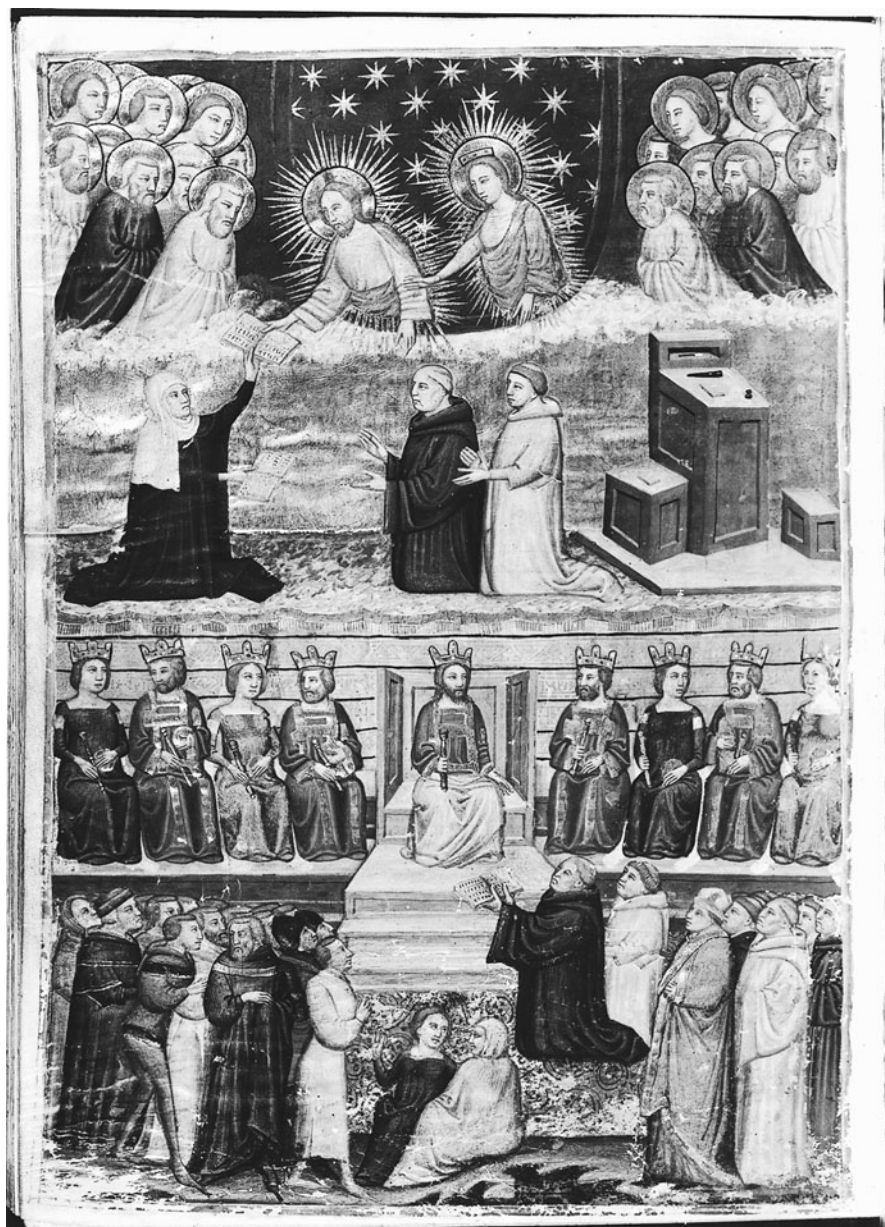


FIGURE 1. Frontispiece to Book VIII in the Neapolitan MS from c. 1380, MS 498, fol. 343v, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

# The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden Volume I

*Liber Caelestis, Books I–III*

TRANSLATED BY DENIS SEARBY  
WITH INTRODUCTIONS AND NOTES BY  
BRIDGET MORRIS

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# Preface

This is the first part of a four-volume translation of the *Revelationes* of St. Birgitta of Sweden into modern English, indeed, the first translation of the complete corpus into English since the Middle Ages. It follows the critical edition of the Latin text, which was commissioned in the 1950s by Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien (The Royal Academy of Letters, History, and Antiquities), Stockholm, and copublished with Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet (The Medieval Swedish Texts Society), Uppsala; the final volume in this series was published in 2002.

The Birgittine corpus comprises twelve “books”: seven books of *Revelationes*, Books I–VII (the *Liber caelestis*), followed by Book VIII (the *Liber caelestis Imperatoris ad reges*) and four supplementary books known as the *Regula Salvatoris*, *Sermo angelicus*, *Quattuor orationes*, and *Revelationes extravagantes*. In the ordering of the books, we have followed the layout of the *editio princeps*, issued by Bartholomaeus Ghotan in Lübeck in 1492. Books I–III are contained in the present volume, and are preceded by a general introduction, which outlines the various stages in the textual history of the *Revelationes*. The subsequent volumes in the series will contain Books IV and V (volume 2), Books VI, VII, and VIII (volume 3), and the *Regula Salvatoris*, *Sermo angelicus*, *Quattuor orationes*, and *Revelationes extravagantes* (volume 4). Volume 4 will also contain translations of a few related but noncanonical Birgittine texts, as well as indexes covering subjects, names, places, and biblical quotations for the entire corpus.

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# Acknowledgments

Very many of our Birgittine friends and colleagues have shown an enthusiastic interest in this enterprise, and encouraged us along our way. Above all, we would like to extend our very warm thanks to Stephan Borgehammar, whose idea it originally was to produce an English translation in advance of the Jubilee celebrations of the seven hundredth anniversary of Birgitta's birth in 2003, and who set about seeking funding and launching the project in 1999. His editing and translating skills, as well as his knowledge of medieval Swedish hagiography and Birgittine sermons, have been an enormous asset to our project. Although he moved to work at the Center for Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Lund in 2003, he has maintained a keen interest in our work, and has made invaluable comments on issues relating to the translation as well as theological matters. It is a pleasure also to thank Tore Nyberg, who has always been on hand to offer a word of support or help resolve a thorny problem. Birgitta Fritz has been an astute reader who has kindly read through drafts of historical materials and corrected us on details where our knowledge was lacking; we extend our most grateful thanks to her. Many others have offered support in a variety of ways, giving advice on specific problems we have encountered as we proceeded, and helping to resolve practical difficulties. In particular we would like to acknowledge Jon Adams, Hans Aili, Mia Åkestam, Birger Bergh, Lars Bergquist, Sten Eklund, Roger Ellis, Olle Ferm, William Flynn, Alf Hårdelin, Monica Hedlund, Arne Jönsson, Veronica O'Mara, Claire Sahlin, Ulla Sander Olsen, and Thomas Shepherd. We would also like to thank the editors of the Latin critical edition for the interest they have shown in this project, and indeed, for paving the way to make an English translation at all possible.



Thanks are also due to the staff at Oxford University Press for their expert help and guidance.

This project would not have been launched without the sponsorship of Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation), which has generously provided financial support since 1999 and enabled us to bring the present volume to completion. In particular we would like to acknowledge the help and support we have received from the Foundation's representative, Kjell Blücker, and from the Department of Theology at the University of Uppsala, and Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, for their accommodating administrative support.

We gratefully acknowledge the following who have granted permission for the reproduction of illustrations. Professor Jan Svanberg, Department of the History of Art, University of Stockholm; The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York; Kungl. Biblioteket (The Royal Library), Stockholm; Biblioteca centrale della Regione siciliana, Palermo; Riksantikvarieämbetet (The National Heritage Board) with the Antiquarian-Topographical Archives (ATA), Stockholm. We are also grateful to Claes Gejrot, Riksarkivet (Swedish National Archives, Stockholm) for allowing us to make available the Latin text on Riksarkivet's Web site (see [www.ra.se](http://www.ra.se)), and to Sara Risberg for preparing the electronic version of the Latin text.

In providing an English translation of the *Revelationes* that is based on and can be linked closely with the Latin archetype, we are creating a bridge that extends from Sweden and Scandinavia towards an international readership. It is our hope that with this translation we will help widen access to one of the major female saints of the later Middle Ages and make her works more readily available outside the Swedish-speaking or Latin-reading world.

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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	<i>Diplomatarium Suecanum</i> , 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.	Latin
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    *Ordbok öfver svenska medeltids-språket*, ed. K. F. Söderwall et al. (Dictionary of Medieval Swedish), 1884–1973

# Chronological Table

## *St. Birgitta's Life and Order*

In the following table, the significant historical events of the period that have a bearing on or form a backdrop to the visions are placed alongside the main events of Birgitta's life.

New Year, 1302/1303	Birgitta Birgersdotter, born in Finsta, near Norrtälje, in the eastern part of Uppland, not far from Uppsala (the seat of the Swedish archbishop), to Birger Persson (Finsta family), <i>lagman</i> —interpreter and codifier of the law and judge—of the province of Uppland, and Ingeborg Bengtsdotter, from the <i>lagman</i> 's branch of the Folkung family, and connected with the royal Folkung dynasty. Second oldest of seven children; only she, a sister, and a brother grew to maturity.
1305–14	Pope Clement V.
1309–76	Residency of Papacy in Avignon.
c. 1312	Death of Birgitta's mother. Birgitta moves to the home of her maternal aunt, Katherina Bengtsdotter, and uncle, Knut Jonsson (Aspenäs family), who was <i>lagman</i> in Östergötland. Records of some childhood visions.
c. 1316	Birgitta marries Ulf Gudmarsson (Ulvåsa family) from Östergötland, later a knight and <i>lagman</i> in the neighboring province of Närke.
1316–34	Pope John XXII.
1319	Election of Magnus Eriksson (age three) as king of Sweden.

1322	Crisis in minority government; Knut Jonsson becomes a Councillor of the Realm ( <i>drots</i> ).
c. 1319–c. 1340	Birth of eight children: Märta [m., against Birgitta's wishes, Sigvid Ribbing [d.c. 1350], Karl [d. 1372], Birger [d. 1391], Katherina [later St. Katherina of Sweden; m. Eggard van Kyren, widowed soon afterward; first abbess of Vadstena; d. 1381; beatified in 1482], Bengt [died in infancy], Gudmar [died in infancy], Ingeborg [d. c. 1350], and Cecilia [d. 1399].
1332	Magnus Eriksson becomes king of Sweden.
1334–42	Pope Benedict XII.
1335	Marriage of Magnus Eriksson to Blanche (Blanka) of Namur.
c. 1335–1340s	Birgitta stays at court of King Magnus Eriksson, as mentor ( <i>magistra</i> ) to Queen Blanche. Acts of piety recorded, e.g., care for the poor, reading to the servants in her household, asceticism in private life.
1337	Outbreak of Hundred Years' War between France and England.
1339	Pilgrimage of Ulf and Birgitta to Nidaros (Trondheim).
c. 1341–42	Pilgrimage of Ulf and Birgitta to Santiago de Compostela. Return through Arras, where Ulf became ill; vow of chastity undertaken by the couple. Back in Sweden, they take up residence in the vicinity of the Cistercian monastery of Alvastra, Östergötland.
1342–52	Pope Clement VI.
1344? 1346?	Death of Ulf Gudmarsson at Alvastra monastery.
1344? 1346?	At Alvastra, a few days after Ulf's death, Birgitta receives her "calling vision," commissioning her to become the <i>sponsa et canale</i> [bride and channel] of Christ. Supported by clerics Master Mathias Ovidi (Mathias Övidsson), canon of Linköping, Prior Petrus Olavi (Peter Olofsson) of the Cistercian abbey of Alvastra, and Master Petrus Olavi (Peter Olofsson) of Skänninge.
1344/46–49	Birgitta resides near Alvastra abbey, where she receives many revelations, including those collected in Books I, II, and V.
1346	English Victory at the Battle of Crécy, 1346; Battle of Poitiers, 1356.
c. 1346	Revelation of the Rule (the earliest version, in which Christ speaks in the first person).
1 May 1346	King Magnus Eriksson and Queen Blanche donate Vadstena palace to become a monastery, the church of which was to be a burial place for the Folkung

	family; Birgitta and her plans not specifically mentioned.
1347	Birth of Catherine of Siena (d. 1380).
1348–49	Bishop Hemming of Åbo (Turku) and Prior Petrus Olavi of Alvastra travel to see the pope in Avignon to obtain his recognition of Birgitta's earlier revelations (in Master Mathias's version); they also visit the kings of France and England, with the purpose of making peace.
1348/1350	Magnus Eriksson's crusades to the Eastern Baltic.
1349	Birgitta leaves Sweden to go to Rome, with Master Petrus and others. Travels via Milan. Lives at a cardinal's palace at San Lorenzo in Damaso. Her confessor Petrus of Alvastra arrives later. She never returns to Sweden.
1349–50	Black Death comes to Norway 1349; to Sweden 1350.
1350	Jubilee year in Rome.
1350–70	Birgitta makes pilgrimages to the important churches of Rome, and also may have visited shrines such as those in Pavia, Ortona, Bari, Naples, and Assisi. She continues her charity and asceticism, and makes contacts with Roman nobility, e.g., Orsini and Colonna families.
1352–62	Pope Innocent VI.
c. 1354	Birgitta moves with her household to a house in present-day Piazza Farnese, then owned by her friend, the widowed noblewoman Francisca Papazura. Remains there for the rest of her life. The house was donated to Vadstena abbey in 1383.
1360s	Makes acquaintance of Queen Johanna of Naples (1326–82).
1362–70	Pope Urban V.
1364	Magnus Eriksson deposed.
1368	Birgitta (with her sons) meets the pope.
1364–89	Magnus's half-nephew, Albrecht of Mecklenburg, becomes king of Sweden.
1367	Birgitta meets Alfonso of Jaén, who becomes her confessor.
1368	Pope Urban V meets Emperor Karl IV in Rome.
1369	Rebuilding work begun on Vadstena palace, to transform it into a monastery.
1370	Birgitta meets Pope Urban V in Montefiascone, and petitions him for authorization of her order.
5 August 1370	Approval granted by Urban V for a revised version of the Rule, to be added as constitutions to the Augustinian Rule.

1370	Urban V returns to Avignon and dies soon after.
1370–78	Pope Gregory XI.
November 1371	Birgitta sets out for the Holy Land, via Naples and Cyprus.
March 1372	Death of Birgitta's favorite son, Karl, in Naples.
May–September 1372	In Jerusalem Birgitta witnesses a cycle of visions relating mainly to the birth and passion of Christ. Also visits the courts of Cyprus and Naples on the homeward journey.
23 July 1373	Birgitta dies in Rome. Buried initially in the convent of the Clarissan sisters of San Lorenzo in Panisperna.
1374	Birgitta's remains taken home through eastern Europe, where miracles were recorded en route, to Vadstena. Birger and Katherina accompanied the cortege.
4 July 1374	Enshrinement of relics at Vadstena; a first collection of miracles presented to Archbishop Birgerus Gregorii.
1375	First novices enter Vadstena monastery.
1376	A second collection of miracles ratified in Stockholm, at the behest of Bishop Nicolaus Hermanni.
1377	The first and second application for the canonization. Papal investigators travel to Vadstena for examination.
1377	Outbreak of Great Schism.
1377	Gregory XI returns to Rome.
1378–89	Pope Urban VI (in the Roman Obedience).
1378–94	Clement VII (in the Avignon Obedience).
1378	Third application for Birgitta's canonization, under Pope Urban VI.
3 December 1378	A further version of the Rule (now in the third person).
1379	Canonization process opened; four cardinals lead the investigation.
1380s	Papal bulls relating to the Order, especially its incomes; privileges that regulate the position of Vadstena monastery in relation to ecclesiastical and secular bodies.
1381	Death of Katherina Ulfsdotter, Birgitta's daughter, first de facto abbess.
23 October 1384	Inauguration of Vadstena monastery, and first vows taken. Provision in Rule for sixty nuns, thirteen priests, four deacons and eight lay brethren. Order known as <i>Ordo Sancti Salvatoris seu Sanctae Birgittae de Svecia</i> (later "Sancti" was changed to "Sanctis-

	simi"). Bishop of Linköping diocese becomes the monastery's <i>pater et visitator</i> .
1387-1412	Kalmar Union, uniting the three Scandinavian kingdoms.
1389-1404	Pope Boniface IX (in the Roman Obedience).
7-8 October 1391	Birgitta's canonization declared.
1392-94	First two houses abroad: Maria Paradiso (Florence) (1394-1776) founded with help of Vadstena brethren; and Marienbrunn/Fons Mariae (Danzig/Gdańsk) (1396-1835).
1399	Vadstena monastery had to prove its right to the Vadstena estates and show that it had been a private royal property and not ancient crown property.
1400	Royal town privilege for the dwellings and lands around Vadstena; the town came under the control of the monastery.
1400-1500	Founding of houses throughout Europe, each one with an independent status, under the supervision of the local bishop. Many were dynastic foundations, and many had links with Hanseatic merchant circles.
1410-15	Pope John XXIII.
1 May 1413	John XXIII's bull, <i>Mare Magnum</i> [The Great Ocean]; confirmation of previous papal privileges that established definitively the development of the order and helped outline the relation of the daughter-houses to the mother abbey.
1414-18	Council of Constance. Elects Martin V as pope of all Christendom.
1415-1539	Syon Abbey, England, founded by King Henry V at Isleworth; nuns of the Abbey in post-Reformation exile in Netherlands and France, and from 1594 in Lisbon; returned to England in 1861.
1417-31	Pope Martin V.
1 July 1419	Pope Martin V confirms Birgitta's canonization.
1422	Pope Martin V objects to the idea of male and female monastic life in one abbey under an abbess, forbids any more abbeys of this type, and orders existing brethren to move away from houses with nuns. Dispensations granted for many of the existing abbeys on the basis of applications by individual founders and their families.
1423-35	Houses for men only in Genoa, Rome, Venice, Vicenza, Pisa, and Bologna. All new foundations halted.
1431-45	Council of Basel. Opposition to orthodoxy of some

- Revelations voiced. Cardinal Johannes de Turrecremata (Torquemada) writes his *Defensorium*; also a defense by Heymericus de Campo.
- 1431-47 Pope Eugene IV.
- 1435 Prohibition of double monasteries canceled. Pope Eugene IV reinstates the original practice of having monks live in the same monastery as nuns, but requires them to live in a separate enclosure under the authority of the abbess.
- c. 1437 Foundation of Mariënwater, Maria ad Aquas Frigidas, Rosmalen, motherhouse of the Netherlandish branch.
- 1489 Translation of St. Katherina of Sweden; henceforth celebrated annually on 2 August in all Birgittine houses and in Sweden.
- c. 1500 Order has around twenty-five houses in total: The northern Baltic countries: Mariental (Vallis Mariae), Tallinn/Reval, Estonia (1412-1575); Marienwohlde (Silva Mariae) Lübeck (1413-1558); Marienkron (Corona Mariae) Stralsund (1421-1525; consecrated 1445). Scandinavia: Maribo/Habitaculum Mariae, Lolland (1416-c. 1556); Naantali/Nådendal/Vallis Gratiae, in eastern part of Swedish kingdom, present-day Finland (1440-1591); Munkeliv, Bergen, Norway (1425-1531); Mariager/Ager Mariae, Jutland (1446-c. 1590). From the Danish branch were founded Gnadenberg/Mons gratiae (1426/1435-c. 1556); Maria May Maihingen bei Öttingen (1473-c. 1580); Maria Altomünster (1497-).
- Italy, and elsewhere: From Paradiso, Maria Scala Coeli, Genova (1441-1799) was founded. Other Polish houses were founded from Gdańsk: e.g., Maria Triumph/Triumphus Mariae, Lublin (1424-1835).
- 1535 Richard Reynolds, brother at Syon monastery, martyred.
- 1595 House at Vadstena dissolved; last nuns go into exile in Poland.
- 1605 First house in Gallo-Flandria.
- 1613 First house of seven founded by Agnes Jastkowska (d. 1630) in Poland. The last survived until c. 1907.
- 1615 Papal approval obtained for monasteries with men only, the "Novissimi Birgittani." Pope Clement VIII gives permission to found a monastery in the Netherlands. A total of ten houses are founded.
- 1629 Marina de Escobar founds the Spanish branch, the "Spanish Recollection," for women only. Five houses

	founded in Spain in the seventeenth century, one in Mexico in 1743.
1794	Execution during French Revolution of two sisters in Gallo-Flandrian houses, Anne Marie Erraux and Marie Françoise Lacroix (beatified in 1920).
1911	New "reformed" or "Swedish" (because it intended to move to Sweden) branch of the order founded in Rome by the Swede Elisabeth Hesselblad (1870–1957). Since 1931 its generalate/motherhouse (under the <i>abbatissa generalis</i> ) has been Birgitta's house in Piazza Farnese, the Casa di santa Brigida, and it exercises full authority over all houses of this branch.
1935	Birgittine sisters from the reformed branch of the order established in Vadstena.
1963	House at Vadstena reverted to the original Rule and placed under the abbey of Maria Refugie, Uden, Netherlands.
1960s	Official feast day changed from day of canonization (7 October; later changed by Urban VIII to 8 October) to day of death (23 July).
1970	Richard Reynolds canonized.
1976	A male community founded in the United States (since 1986 in Amity, Oregon).
1983	The missionaries of St. Birgitta founded in Mexico City, which now has two houses.
1991	The house at Vadstena, Pax Mariae, becomes an independent abbey with an abbess as elected head.
1999	Declaration by Pope John Paul II of Birgitta as one of Europe's three female patron saints.
9 April 2000	Mother Elisabeth Hesselblad beatified (feast day in the Birgittine Order and in Sweden 4 June).
2005	Five houses remain that follow the "original" rule in modernized form: Pax Mariae, Vadstena (1963–); Maria Refugie Uden (1437–); Maria Hart/Cor Mariae, Weert (1843–); Syon Abbey, South Brent, Devon (1415–); and Altomünster (1497–). Eleven houses exist from the Spanish Recollection (all five of the seventeenth-century foundations, and six in Latin America). About forty-five convents around the world belong to the Rome-based "reformed" branch.



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# The Entire Birgittine Corpus

All volumes are published in two series, by KVHAA and SFSS (ser. 2, latinska skrifter)

*Contained in Volume 1 of the present translation:*

Prologue of Magister Mathias of Linköping

Date: c. 1346

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

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

*Epistola Solitarii ad reges* (Prologue to Book VIII)  
Date c. 1377  
Ed. Arne Jönsson, in Aili, *Book VIII* (below)

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

*Contained in Volume 4 of the present translation:*  
*Regula Salvatoris*  
The Birgittine Rule, the “Rule of St. Saviour” (prologue and preface, thirty-one chapters)  
Date: Sweden years, probably sometime 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)  
Date: Rome years, probably 1354  
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

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The Revelations of  
St. Birgitta  
of Sweden  
Volume I

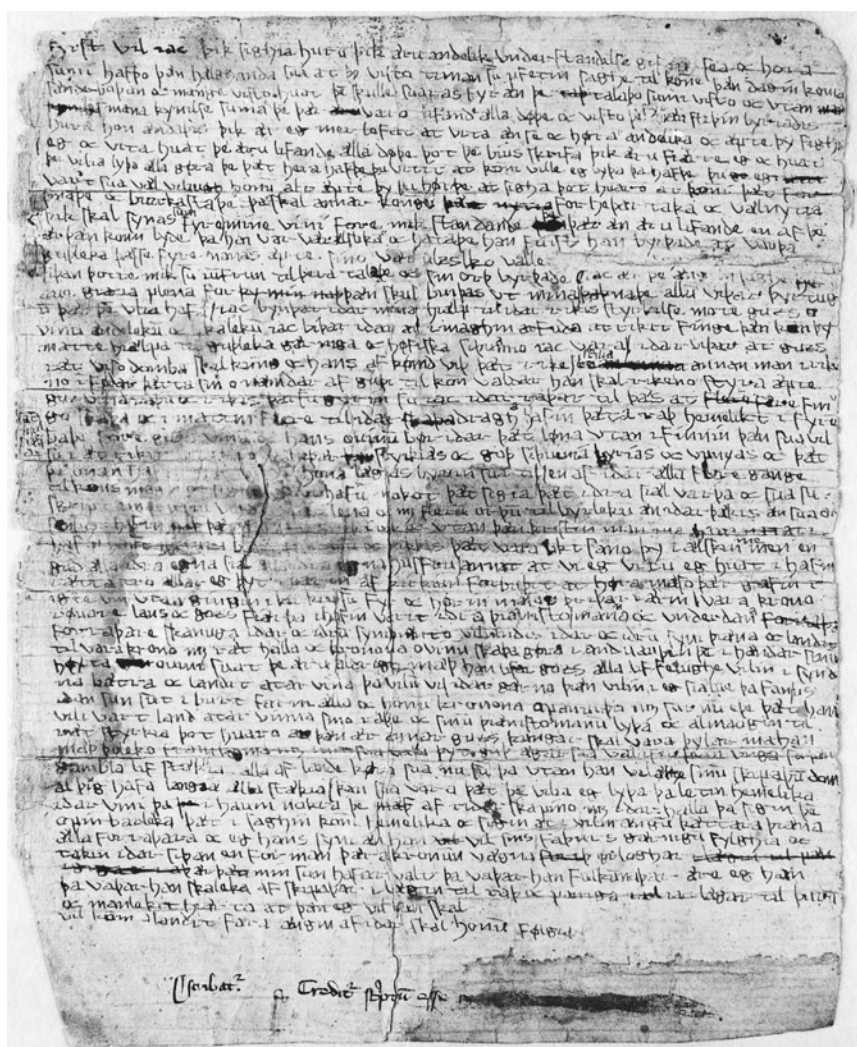


FIGURE 2. One of the two surviving fragments written in Birgitta's own hand. MS A 65, Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm.

# General Introduction

## I. Swedish Prophet and Visionary

The *Revelationes* of St. Birgitta of Sweden are the repository of a vast outpouring of locutions and visions, received over a period of thirty years, from the time of her widowhood in the mid-1340s until her death in 1373. In judgmental and prophetic language, the *Revelationes* make observations on the human condition and convey a critique of the church and an appeal for reform. At the same time they embody a tender devotion to the humanity of Christ and a personal identification with the Virgin Mary. Through the somewhat clumsy prose there emerges an image of a commanding and charismatic visionary who develops a contemplative mysticism that is always interwoven with social engagement and a commitment to the salvation of the world. Collectively, the *Revelationes* are an evocative embodiment of a deep inner piety and a passionate desire for regeneration and renewal; beneath them all beats the Swedish saint's great heart: candid, stern, imaginative, and demanding.

### *Historical Background*

Saint Birgitta lived in a time of political and spiritual uncertainty. During her childhood in Sweden the royal fratricidal conflicts of the first decades of the fourteenth century led to the election of three-year-old Magnus Eriksson as king in 1319. During her married years there was a short-lived period of relative stability when Magnus reached his majority in 1332, but that was broken by internal dissension and an economic crisis precipitated mainly by the purchase in the same year of the southern province of Skåne (Scania) from Den-



mark, and also by Magnus's failed expansionist campaign in the eastern Baltic from 1348 to 1351, and the ravages of the Black Death from 1349 through 1350. Magnus's attempts to increase revenue by stringent taxation caused deep resentment, not least among the traditional aristocracy—Birgitta's own class—which was further deepened as Magnus rejected the aristocracy and elevated his own favorites. The king also borrowed money that was intended for the papal treasury and was excommunicated for defaulting on the payments. In the 1350s, indeed, Birgitta issued a revolutionary manifesto against him (Ex. 80). The aristocracy deposed Magnus in 1364 and replaced him with Albrecht of Mecklenburg, who, in turn, was overthrown in 1389. The Union of Kalmar was established in 1397, uniting for the first time in their history the three Scandinavian kingdoms of Sweden with Finland, Norway, and Denmark under Queen Margareta of Denmark, who became queen of the three kingdoms.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the Swedish countryside in the Middle Ages was inhospitable forest terrain, and primarily it was only the central regions that were inhabited; communications were best achieved by means of coastal and inland waterways, whereas the vast areas of forestland easily separated small provincial communities. The meager population was engaged mostly in farming, animal husbandry, and fishing, although in some central areas, men worked in iron mines. Urban centers emerged slowly and by the end of the medieval period there were some twenty towns, many of which, especially in the coastal regions, attributed their growth to the Hanseatic League and trading arrangements with German merchants.

Although Sweden hovered on the verge of civil war for parts of the fourteenth century, it was nevertheless a time when a cultural awakening was taking place. The provincial laws were unified in *Magnus Erikssons Landslag*, which formed the constitutional basis of society for centuries to come, and the town law, *Magnus Erikssons Stadslag*, was issued around the same time. The polemical treatise *Um styrilse konunga ok höfdinga* [*On the government of kings and leaders*], based on Giles of Rome's treatise on kingship c. 1280, was paraphrased probably for Magnus's sons in c. 1345; it raises new issues for the role of the monarchy, arguing for strong royal power rather than group government by the king in council with the aristocracy, and suggesting that kingship by inheritance is preferable to kingship by election. The church had been expanding since the archbishopric in Uppsala was founded in 1164 and the country was divided into six mainland dioceses and one in Finland. Regarding the monastic orders, the Cistercians were established in the twelfth century and became owners of large portions of land who subsequently developed a network of houses for both men and women throughout Sweden. In the following century the Dominicans and Franciscans established strong links in the urban centers in the central regions around Mälardalen. Other monastic orders, such as the unreformed Benedictines, made little impact, and the Carthusians were not introduced until 1493. The cathedral schools introduced continental learning and many Swedish-born clerics and scholars were educated abroad, first in Paris and then in Prague, and later in Northern Germany (mostly Leipzig or

Rostock). Sweden did not have a university until Uppsala University was founded in 1477.

In the wider sphere, in the international church, there were deep divisions, and for almost the entire fourteenth century the papacy had its seat in Avignon. The popes, Clement VI (1342–52), Innocent VI (1352–62), and Urban V (1362–70), lacked the political means and will to end the “Babylonian captivity” of the papacy and return to Rome; and when eventually there was a return to the Holy City by Gregory XI (1370–78), it was followed soon afterward by the Great Schism in 1378, with two competing popes in Avignon and Rome. Bereft of the presence of the papacy for almost the entire fourteenth century, therefore, the Eternal City was in an impoverished and dilapidated state, affected by civil unrest, disease, and continual power struggles within the nobility. It was to this city, which had lost much of its sacred stature, that Birgitta came in 1349, and where she spent the next twenty-four years of her life working for the restoration of the papacy there. She saw her mission not just as an expedient moral or political act but also, more apocalyptically, as the fulfillment of historical necessity and destiny, and as a signal for the dawning of a new age.

### *The Prophetic Tradition*

Birgitta ranks among several female visionaries and mystics of the Middle Ages. Others from this same time period include Elizabeth of Hungary (d. 1231) whom Birgitta herself acknowledges (Book IV 4); Dorothea of Montau (d. 1394), a widowed saint whose prophecies were in a similar vein as Birgitta’s; and the English housewife Margery Kempe (1373–c. 1438), an ardent admirer of Birgitta’s, who followed in her footsteps to Rome. Nor was she unique in issuing prophetic calls for the reform of the church and the salvation of mankind. Her name was—and is—frequently set between Hildegard of Bingen, the erudite and staunchly orthodox twelfth-century mystic; and Joan of Arc, the fierce political campaigner in the fifteenth century; and she is commonly set alongside her younger contemporary, Catherine of Siena (1347–80). Catherine, although of different background from Birgitta, corresponded with princes and was consulted by papal legates, and she attempted to heal the rifts and civil unrest that ravaged Italy in her time; at the outbreak of the Great Schism she implored Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon and to reform the clergy and the administration of the papal states.<sup>2</sup> With Catherine, Birgitta was one of the truly forceful prophetic voices of the fourteenth century. Her popularity is explained in part because she reflected the spirit of her times and articulated what others wanted to hear: people systematically searched her prophecies for the message to reform society, which they then used in varied contexts and for decades after her death to address the uncertainties of their own time. Prophetic voices such as hers were not, of course, all female; another of Birgitta’s contemporaries is the Franciscan John of Roquetaillade (b. 1322), whose writings, visions, and oracles were written from his prison cell in Avignon. Drawing on the biblical book of the Apocalypse, he warns of the things

that are destined to happen, including a great persecution of the clergy for their loose way of living, and their death by sword, fire, hunger, plague, and other miseries. He also predicts that the cardinals would leave their pleasant abode (*requies*) in Avignon, that apocalyptic happenings in nature would occur, mob justice (*justitia popularis*) would arise, and the rich and powerful would be robbed of all their wealth and means. A pontiff would come as the “*reparator*” of the world, who would restore and redeem Rome and banish all corruption from the Holy City.<sup>3</sup>

Birgitta, too, draws heavily on the Book of the Apocalypse, in a mystical state that has been described thus by Anders Piltz: “The process of revelation, in Birgitta’s case, is not a kind of delirium, it is a mental activity on the highest possible level of intellectual presence, in close contact with the Bible text. In the biblical narratives, mainly in the Apocalypse, the receptive Birgitta achieved a means of rationalizing and structuring the flood of images and impressions which had invaded her imagination.”<sup>4</sup>

Views of Birgitta’s spirituality vacillate between comparisons with the affective states of the southern German mystics, and their graphic and stark devotion to the passion of Christ, to the suggestion that she is not a mystic at all, and instead an author of instructive religious literature. As Piltz suggests, she comes somewhere in between these two extremes. Although there are many strands to Birgitta’s spirituality, some predominant themes may be briefly outlined. The most dominant theme is her apostolic mission and work toward the salvation of humankind, which she sees as degenerate, and work toward the reform of the church, which she sees as emasculated and morally bankrupt.<sup>5</sup> With reforming zeal she preaches conversion to all levels of society, but mainly to the higher ranks and to religious, and she continually states that the personal will and sound intention of the individual—from the lowly layman right up to the pope himself—must be a necessary condition to enact change. Not only does she address clerics and their leaders, she also directs her message at secular leaders in authority and at those responsible for monastic reform, pointing to human weakness, and emphasizing the workings of God’s mercy and justice. Further, she expresses her aspiration for a new monastic order, outlining not only details of daily life in a new foundation but also the general guiding principles to be upheld. Another theme is her messages to friends and family, and she is also concerned with her own spiritual life and development, voicing her doubts and uncertainties, especially in the early years of her calling. In an age of deep affective piety toward the physical aspects of the incarnation, her great devotions are the nativity and passion of Christ; and in addition, a constant feature of her spirituality is a close identification with the Virgin, as friend, mother, and confidant.

### *Visionary States*

As a mother of eight children, who had close family connections with the Swedish church, the court, the nobility, and the royal house of Sweden, Birgitta had a strong practical mind and was a powerful and enterprising organizer

and administrator.<sup>6</sup> Although she espoused a visionary mysticism, which had a prophetic tone of admonition and censorship, generally in her visions she remained close to everyday experience. She seems to have had no difficulty in becoming rapt in spirit, and spent much of her time in prayer, meditation, and ecstatic states; many of the “revelations,” indeed, vacillate freely among these spheres. Her asceticism was nurtured and stirred up by tears, mortification, and other physical privations, as well as by reading the scriptures, reciting the Office, and contemplating liturgical texts or psalms in private. During her marriage she composed a number of prayers and four longer meditations in her native tongue. These formative pieces remain outside the official textual canon, but they mark the beginnings of a process toward deeper spiritual states and are written in an unadorned, unself-conscious style, as is illustrated here:

My Lord, I bewail to you how my heart seems to be inclined. It seems as if there is a boil in my heart. There are also through my heart two thorns and around the outside of it is drawn a membrane which constricts it and oppresses me very severely. My dear Lord God, this is impossible for me to do myself without your help; therefore I ask you for the sake of all the humility which you revealed in the world: tear out the membrane which I associate with pride, and weave about it the humility which without beginning has been in the virtue of your divinity. My Lord God, I pray to you because your head was crowned with thorns: rip out the thorn that is in my heart, which is bodily love for my husband or children, friends or relatives, and replace it instead with divine love for the gain of my fellow Christian. I ask you, my dear Lord, because your blessed hands and feet were torn asunder by the nails: rip out of my heart that thorn which is worldly desire and place there instead longing and desire for your service and for your eternal kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

Birgitta's widowhood in her early forties was accompanied by her conversion to a life of service to God, and she dispensed with her wealth and made provisions for her children, some of whom were still very young. Her revelations often came in response to personal crises, in times of upheaval, loss, and self-denial, and the spiritual journey upon which she embarked in the tumultuous years of her early widowhood was indeed the most productive of her visionary life: in just a few years she received well over half of her entire output of visions, including the vision of a new monastic rule. Her “calling” revelation, received a few days after her husband's death, describes the point of her conversion:

After some days, when the bride of Christ was worried about the change in her status and its bearing on her service of God, and while she was praying about this in her chapel, she became rapt in spirit; and while she was in ecstasy, she saw a bright cloud from which she heard a voice saying to her: “Woman, hear me.” Completely terrified, and fearing that it was an illusion, she fled to her

chamber; and at once she confessed and received the body of Christ. Then after some days, when she was at prayer in the same chapel, again that bright cloud appeared to her; and from it, she again heard a voice uttering words like those before, namely "Woman, hear me." Then the lady, thoroughly terrified, again fled to her chamber; and she confessed and communicated, fearing as before that the voice was an illusion. Then, after some days, when she was praying, she was indeed rapt in spirit, and again saw the bright cloud and in it a human likeness, who said this: "Woman, hear me; I am your God, who wishes to speak with you." Terrified, therefore, and thinking it was an illusion, she heard again: "Fear not," he said, "for I am the Creator, not the deceiver, of all. I do not speak to you for your sake alone, but for the sake of the salvation of others. Hear the things that I speak; and go to Master Mathias, your confessor, who has the experience of discerning the two types of spirit. Say to him on my behalf what I now say to you: for you shall be my bride and my channel, and you shall hear and see spiritual things, and my Spirit shall remain with you even until your death."<sup>8</sup>

Some of her visions are clearly apprehended intellectual illuminations in which the content and meaning are at once understood, whereas at other times the sense is uncertain. Primarily, the revelations are locutionary, although some carry a visual element. Sound and sight are the projection of an intellectual debate, and what she hears and sees are general issues in a sharp form, where the detail or metaphorical image shines out vividly, but the meaning is not always immediately clear.<sup>9</sup> When she was roused from her vision she retained a clear memory of what she had seen and attached importance to it even though she may not always have understood it. Then, in collaboration with her confessors, an interpretation was imposed upon it. Sometimes there were repeated attempts to explore a vision further and additional revelations on the same subject are recorded, either with a similar wording, or with a stylistic reworking, or else offering a new interpretation of the same visual imagery. For example, a revelation that deals with Magnus Eriksson's Baltic campaign (Book IV 2), using imaginative visual imagery, is further explored in a more sober exegesis on the same theme (Book IV 129), and messages about the expediency of the crusades occur sporadically in several books, with significant overlapping and interweaving in both language and imagery. Whether these were all distinct and separate "revelations" or "visions" received over a period of months and years, or whether they were repeated attempts to understand a smaller number of visionary experiences remains an open question that cannot be entered into here.

Although in her "calling" vision, Birgitta was summoned to be Christ's "bride and channel" (*sponsa et canale*), she is not the passive bride of traditional mysticism, and only rarely does she transcend into a unitive experience with the divine or adopt the standard metaphors of love favored by earlier mystics.<sup>10</sup> Instead, she is called to an active life: "It is good for the bride to grow tired