

One Life, Many Hagiographers: The Earliest Vitae of Birgitta of Sweden

Silvia Nocentini

Birgitta died on 23 July 1373 and was buried in the Clarissan monastery of San Lorenzo in Panisperna in Rome.¹ However, it was important for Birgitta's religious family that her remains be brought back to Sweden to rest in the institution, Vadstena, that she had founded. Hence on 2 December Birgitta's son Birger, her daughter Catherine and her two confessors, Prior Peter and Master Peter, embarked upon a long journey from Rome which would end in Vadstena in July 1374. They made their first stop in Montefalco, where the bishop of Spoleto, Galhardus, set up a local inquiry into the life and miracles of Birgitta. Hence on 14 December 1373 a number of witnesses, including Gomez de Alborno, swore an oath in the church of San Francesco in Montefalco. On this occasion the last confessor of Birgitta, Alfonso Pecha, was not among the witnesses; he was, however, present there three days later on 17 December, when Prior Peter and Master Peter gave to the bishop's notaries a booklet (*quendam quaternum papireum*) that they had drawn up soon after Birgitta's death in Rome. The booklet contained the Vita of Birgitta and accounts of some of her miracles, and today remains the first known account of these. It was later formally included in the Acts of the canonization process, preceded by the so-called *Relacio Galhardi* – which recounts how the Spoleto bishop started

1 I will make use of the following abbreviations:

AP = *Acta et processus canonizacionis Beate Birgitte. Efter Cod. A 14 Holm., Cod. Ottob. Lat. 90 o. Cod. Harl. 612*, ed. I. Collijn, (Uppsala: 1924–1931);

BAI = *Biblioteca agiografica italiana (BAI)*, ed. Jacques Dalarun, Lino Leonardi, 2 vols., (Firenze: 2003).

BHL = *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina antiquae et mediae aetatis*, ed. Socii Bollandiani, 2 vols., (Bruxelles: 1911), *Novum Supplementum*, (Bruxelles: 1986);

C15 = BHL 1339 (*Vita brevis*, the shortest among the early Lives of Birgitta);

VP = BHL 1334 (*Vita Processus*, Life inserted in the canonization acts);

VPa = BHL 1334b (*Vita Panisperna*, the longest among the early Lives of Birgitta);

CL = BHL 1341 (*Commissio Lincopensis*: collection of 61 miracles gathered in 1376 by the bishop of Linköping);

RU = BHL 1342 (*Relatio Upsalensis*, account of miracles occurred during the journey of Birgitta's corpse from Rome to Vadstena, and authenticated by the bishop of Uppsala in 1375).

his inquiry – and followed by several depositions about miracles, the usual notarial *subscriptiones*, and the bishop's *confirmacio* of the Acts.

As stated above, this is the first account of Birgitta's life we know about: the reason for this is that the question remains unsolved as to whether the account we can read now in the Acts is the earliest Vita or not. In fact, there are three principal redactions of this Vita. In order from the shortest version to the longest, these are:² the so-called C15 Vita (BHL 1339), the so-called Process-Vita (BHL 1334), and the so-called Panisperna-Vita (BHL 1334b).

A number of other hagiographical texts also circulated with the early Vita and are relevant to the question of whether or not the text in question is indeed the earliest account of Birgitta's life.

In May 1375 Birgitta's daughter Catherine returned to Rome, bringing along with her a first collection of miracles – known as the *Relacio Upsaliensis* (BHL 1342, hereafter RU) after the archbishop of Uppsala who authenticated it – gathered after they were observed during the journey of Birgitta's corpse from Rome to Sweden and in the first year after she was buried in Vadstena. In the same year the bishop of Linköping, Nicolaus, set up a commission to revise the whole collection: the so-called *Commissio Lincopiensis* (BHL 1341) added 61 miracles, which were sent to Rome on 9 December 1376. In the meantime, since the first collection had not been compiled according to the stipulated format and lacked the information necessary for the canonization process to go ahead, Pope Gregory XI appointed two Danish bishops to review the *Relacio Upsaliensis*. They did so and sent the Pope their account in the form of a letter on 3 March 1377 (BHL 1340c). Two more collections of miracles were inserted into the Acts of the Process: the *Collectio Neapolitana*, authenticated by the bishop of Naples on 20 October 1376 (BHL 1343), and the *Collectio Suecicana*, which gathered miracles observed in Sweden between 1378 and 1390 (BHL 1345).

Since the Vita often circulated in manuscript volumes that also contained the *Revelations*, it is important to keep in mind that diverse stages of redactions characterized the dissemination of the *Liber celestis*:

1. the first redaction was copied in the so-called *Liber Alfonsi*, finished by 1377,³ which was sent to Vadstena in order to supply the newly founded monastery with an official Birgittine corpus. At this stage the *Revelationes* comprised seven books; no manuscripts are known which transmit this redaction or its contents.

2 For the sake of simplicity, I shall adopt the most commonly used terminology.

3 Although considered lost, the existence of the *Liber Alfonsi* is testified to by a number of documentary traces, carefully reconstructed by the *Revelationes* editors and in primis by C.-G. Undhagen. See. Rev. I: Introduction and Rev. IV: Introduction.

2. The second redaction was ready by 1380 and included in addition the eighth Book of Revelations (represented by the current class β of the extant Revelations manuscripts).
3. A final revision was made after the closing of the canonization inquiry (1380) and is known as the "Canonization redaction". It was later copied in the *Liber attestacionum*, a collection which includes the Revelations and the Acts of the Process.

Proceeding from the shortest to the longest version, this article first describes the relevant manuscript tradition and the editions (if any) of these hagiographical texts. It then makes an attempt to understand the relationships between the various versions. By tracing the hagiographic activity of the promoters of Birgitta's cult, it describes the diffusion of these earliest Vitae in Italy, both in the Latin and in the Italian version.

A table illustrating the distribution of the hagiographic material in the three Vitae (together *Vita confessorum*) will be of some help in following my subsequent argumentations.

Legenda:

C15 = BHL 1339 (*Vita brevis*)

VP = BHL 1334 (*Vita Processus, formae A et B*)

VPa = BHL 1334b (*Vita Panisperna, formae A et B*)

Mir. = Miracles added in longer Lives

Chapters	C15	VP	VPa
1–28	x	x	x
Mir. I		x	x
29–38	x	x	x
Mir. II		x	x
39–54	x	x	x
Mir. III			x
45–49	x	x	x
Mir. IV			x
50–54	x	x	x
Mir. V		x	x
55–65	x	x	x
Mir. VI			x (VPaB)
66–67	x	x	x

(cont.)

Chapters	C15	VP	VPa
Mir. VII			x
68–70	x	x	x
Mir. VIII		x	x (VPaA)
Mir. IX			x (VPaB)

The Latin *Vitae*

BHL 1339 = C15

Inc.: “Sicut legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et sancto Nicholao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseveret in finem”, expl.: “Deinde appropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus personarum predictarum emisit spiritum” (inc. verses: “Post ortum domini Christi regnantis ubique”, expl. verses: “Celitus ut verba data testificantur eidem”). It is preserved in three manuscripts:⁴

1. (U) Uppsala, Universitetsbibliotek, C15 (XIV–XV sec.), fols. 70r–84r;
2. (Ga) Lincoln, Cathedral Chapter Library, 114 (XV sec.), fols. 54v–61v;
3. (F) Lund, Universitetsbiblioteket, Medeltidshandskrift 21 (XV sec. in., acephalous), fols. 353r–358r.

U and F come from Vadstena and are collections of Birgittine texts, with F being the most complete Revelation manuscript this cloister preserved. Ga, on the other hand, is of Dutch provenance, copied by a German hand.

There is an edition based on the Uppsala manuscript (the only known so far):

J. Kruse, “Vita metrica S. Birgittae”, *Meddelanden från det litteraturhistoriska seminariet i Lund*, 1, *Lunds Universitets års-skrift*, 28 (1891–92): 10–28.

4 I have seen a digital copy of the Life in ms. Berlin, SBS, Magd. 138 (XV, post 1459), fols. 54–57v (incipit: “Sancta Birgitta tria festa habet annuatim”), which is not our C15 Vita, but the *Legenda* written by Iohannes Tortsch, one of whose works is precisely a *Festa beatae Birgittae* beginning like the reported entry in the Berlin manuscript. Cfr. Ursula Winter, Kurt Heydeck, *Die Manuscripta Magdeburgica der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, Teil 2: *Ms. Magdeb. 76–168* (Wiesbaden: 2004), 123, where, on the contrary, the Vita is indicated as BHL 1339.

BHL 1334 = VP (*Process-Vita*)

Inc. prol.: “Sciendum est quod humillima ancilla Dei numquam presumeret se vocare vel vocari facere sponsa Christi vel eius canale”; inc.: “Sicut legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et de sancto Nicolao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseveret in finem” expl.: “Deinde appropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei Christus consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus praedictarum personarum emisit spiritum”.

It is preserved in six manuscripts. Three of these manuscripts transmit the entire collection of files of the Acts of the Process and are copies of the so-called *Liber attestacionum*:⁵

1. (R) Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ottob. lat. 90 (1391), fols. 10r–132;
2. (S) Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, A 14 (XIV ex.–XV), fols. 28–41;
3. (L) London, British Library, Harley 612 (1440), fols. 208r–288v (this manuscript also includes the Book of Revelations).

The *Liber attestacionum* was the volume which collected all the depositions and the Vita and was handed over to Pope Boniface IX after August 10, 1391. Since the Cardinals were enormously interested in the *Liber*, sixteen copies of it were transcribed (one for each cardinal), to be ready by the time of the canonization on October 7, 1391. One of these copies was manuscript R.

The remaining three manuscripts hand down the *Vita*, along with other Birgittine texts.

One of the manuscripts also preserves a part of the Acts of the Process (Vita + CL +RU):

4. (Ha) München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 18361 (XV sec.), fols. 209v–232v (the manuscript includes the Book of Revelations).

The other two include only the Vita (along with the *Relatio Galhardi*) and the Revelations (the entire corpus or a part of it). These are also the earliest witnesses of the *Vita*,⁶ previous to the one copied in the *Liber attestacionum*:

5. (A) Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, 1073 (sec. XIV ex./ante 1386), fols. 1r–10r;

5 According to a note in L, f. 1: “Quatuordecim libri beate Brigide ex quibus ... 13us est liber attestacionum”. For R and S see AP: XVII and Rev. I: 33, n. 158.

6 This dating is due to two circumstances: the composition date of Alfonso’s *Conscriptio bona*, in which the possessor of the A manuscript is cited (1385–1386), and the entry for the P manuscript in the ancient catalogue of the S. Martino alle Scale Library (1386). See also Nocentini, “Un eremita, due confessori, tre redazioni: i primordi dell’agiografia brigidina in Italia,” *Hagiographica* 26 (2019), 303, in which I propose with more confidence an even earlier dating. To be more cautious, I adopt a wider chronological range in the present chapter.

6. (P) Palermo, Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Sicilia, IV.G.2 (XIV sec./ ante 1386), fols. 202va-209rb.

The history of these manuscripts is quite unique: the Arsenal codex belonged to the famous writer and counselor Philippe de Mézières, who was probably gifted it by Alfonso himself; the Palermo manuscript is a lavishly illuminated volume containing the Revelations made in the Neapolitan scriptorium also directed by Alfonso. The edition is based on the manuscript n. 2 (S):

AP: 71-105.

BHL 1344b = VPa (*Panisperna Vita*)

This version is known as *Panisperna Vita* after the most ancient manuscript in which it is handed down: the *Panisperna* codex, written on 18 November 1378 by a German clerk, *Nicolaus Misner alias dictus Vyogeler*, and once preserved in the monastery of San Lorenzo in *Panisperna*. On the basis of a preliminary observation of the external characteristics of the codices, the manuscript tradition of this *Vita* can be classified into two groups.

Group A includes the prologue and some additional episodes that are unique to it (4 chapters inside *Mir. IV* and *Mir. VIII* in the table): inc. prol. “*Sciendum est quod humillima ancilla Dei numquam presumeret se vocare vel vocari facere sponsa Christi vel eius canale*”; inc.: “*Sicut legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et de sancto Nicholao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseverent usque in finem*” expl.: “*Deinde appropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei Christus consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus dictarum personarum emisit spiritum*”. There are two manuscripts:

- A1. (Si) Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, G.XI.20 (XIV sec.), fols. 1r-20r;
 A2. (Za) Helsinki, Kansalliskirjasto, Nordenskiöld Collection, Mscr. 4 (ca. 1400), fols. 91r-110r.

None of these manuscripts hands down the Revelations; they do, however, include a series of Birgittine texts, mostly devoted to liturgy and addressed to sisters and friars of the Saint Saviour Order.⁷ While we do not know where

7 Si: fols. 20rb-26vb *Collectio miraculorum sanctae Brigidae* (RU), fols. 27ra-46ra *Sermo angelicus*, fols. 46rb-52ra *Orationes IV*, fols. 52rb-63va *Regula s. Salvatoris* (not complete, in the first person). Za: fols. 1-16r *Regula Salvatoris*, fols. 16r-20r 18 *Revelationes extravagantes*, fols. 21r-41r *Sermo angelicus*, fols. 44r-50r *Orationes IV*, fols. 51r-69v *Cantus sororum*, fols. 73r-90v *Summarium Processi*.

Si comes from, we can trace Za back to the Hieronymite Quarto monastery (Genoa), founded by Alfonso of Jaén, who died there on August 19, 1389.

Group B: inc.: “Sicud legimus de beato Iohanne Baptista et de sancto Nicholao, multotiens cooperantur merita parentum ut filiis accrescat gratia maior et perseveret usque ad finem” expl.: “Deinde adpropinquante die quinta in ipsa aurora, iterum apparuit ei Christus consolando eam, dicta vero missa et sacramentis perceptis, inter manus dictarum personarum emisit spiritum”. This version is characterized by some additional chapters, among which there is a letter from the Count of Nola (Mir. VI and Mir. IX in the table). Five manuscripts, most of them unknown so far:

- B1. (Pa) Roma, Archivum OFM, Panisperna (18.11.1378), fols. 1r–20r (expl.: “latius continetur”), 22v–23r (inc.: “Contigit deinde”, expl.: “emisit spiritum”);
- B2. (B) Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Magd. 98 (ca. 1400), fols. 244r–257v;
- B3. (W) Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Aug. 59. 2. 2° (1417), fols. 289r–306r;
- B4. (g) Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, theol. 202 (1469), fols. 317–330;
- B5. (Au) Augsburg, Universitätsbibliothek, II.1.2°.201 (a. 1458), fols. 364v–383r.

Pa is the most ancient manuscript of the Panisperna Vita and was once preserved in the same place Birgitta was buried in Rome before her return to Sweden; it was written by a German monk or priest, *Nicolaus Misner alias dictus Vogeler*, but this probably has nothing to do with the actual German dissemination of the manuscripts.

The manuscripts of this group omit the prologue and contain the same series of miracles and testimonies except for the last *post mortem* miracle (Mir. IX.2), which can be found only in the Panisperna manuscript. Manuscripts B2–B5 also contain the Revelations.

The *Vita* Panisperna has been partially edited on the basis of the Panisperna codex (B1) by Collijn, who collated manuscripts A1 and A2; this edition does not include the last five common chapters (“Neapoli etiam ... emisit spiritum”, nn. 66–70 in the table) and therefore the five additional ones, which are unique to this form, *i. e.* Mir. VI (B) and Mir. VII (A and B).

Ed.: AP, pp. 614–40.

The Relationships

What do we know about the relationships between these three versions? Which is the earliest form and which is the latest? So far, when scholars have discussed these issues, they have based their argumentation on old editions of the texts. It must be said that textual criticism of the Vita has always been subordinate to that of other Birgittine texts, and primarily to the Revelations and to Alfonso's works. Hence there are no specific studies of the Vita, except for that of Sara Ekwall and my preliminary survey for the edition.⁸ Likewise, no true critical editions have ever been published, mostly because no one has ever taken into consideration the entire manuscript tradition of the diverse forms that we know.

As we have seen, the C₁₅ is edited according to a single manuscript preserved in Vadstena: surely not an impartial place and not immune to manipulations.

The VP, on the other hand, has been published according to the readings of the sole manuscript S, which can be demonstrated to be the worst choice. This edition is not philologically reliable, least of all if we are seeking to work out whether it could be the earliest version of the Vita or not.

The VP_a is not yet critically edited, except for the transcription made by Collijn in the AP and based upon the Panisperna manuscript (Group B). The existence of a certain number of other witnesses in Group B and of a further version (Group A) of this text complicates our understandings not only of VP_a's position in the timeline of the three versions, but also of the mutual relationship between Group A and Group B.

Having said that, it is clear that the debate on the dating of the Vitae of Birgitta is weakened by the fact that it is not based on critical texts.

So far, two theories have been proposed: Sara Ekwall is sure that the Vita C₁₅ is the original Vita brought to Sweden by the two Peters returning from Italy. She presumes that the variant readings of VP versus C₁₅ are the most significant evidence of an eventual later interpolation made by Alfonso in order to enrich the Vita and to link it to the Book of Revelations upon which the entire canonization process was based. In Ekwall's view, this means that this redaction was written before Alfonso Pecha could make his typical editorial interventions, which Ekwall dates to around 1378/1380.

8 Sara Ekwall, *Vår äldsta Birgittavita och dennas viktigaste varianter* (Stockholm: 1965). Some general information is in Extrav.: 85; Rev. I: 4 (note 1); Rev. V: 15; ES: 90–97; *Birger Gregerssons Birgitta-Officium. Birgerus Gregorii officium Sancte Birgitta*, ed. Carl-Gustav Undhagen (Stockholm: 1960), 81–92; and more recently, Cordelia Hess, *Heilige machen im spätmittelalterlichen Ostseeraum: die Kanonisationsprozesse von Birgitta von Schweden, Nikolaus von Linköping und Dorothea von Montau*, (Berlin: 2008), 99–165. See also Silvia Nocentini, "Which Is the Earliest Vita of Birgitta of Sweden?," *Hagiographica* 28 (2021), 317–52.

In contrast to Ekwall's contention that the Vita C15 is the earliest version, Jönsson is sure that the VP is the earliest one.⁹ He bases his opinion on the simple fact that it is included among the bishop Galhardus' documents: documents which attest that the Vita was handed over to the bishop by the two Peters. Yet we know that medieval Latin literature had been subject to a long series of falsifications and manipulations. In fact, even VPa (A), as we have seen, is inserted between the *Relatio Galhardi* and the notarial documents, which is not a guarantee either about the truth of the attestations or about the year of composition of the Vita. The simple fact that VP in the Collijn edition is the transcription of what was included in the *Liber attestacionum* (1391, a good fourteen years after the composition of the Life) should raise a red flag about the dating of the Vita.

After all, continuing to study such portions of misedited texts as these could lead scholars to draw wrong conclusions, since it can be demonstrated that VP is a highly interpolated version which could possibly include many layers overlapping each other.

No theory has ever been proposed about VPa. Based on my analysis of iconographic evidence, I have argued that this long version of the Vita had an important role at the beginning of the dissemination of Birgittine hagiography in Italy, as we will see.

My analysis of the manuscript tradition of the three forms of the earliest Life of saint Birgitta of Sweden has led to some preliminary conclusions; such an analysis allows us to contextualize the external features of the texts, such as the length of each one, the content of its supplementary material, the spreading and the fortune of the single versions in Italy and in Europe, and the value of the hagiographical model to each version:¹⁰

- the shortest text (C15) is most likely to be the earliest composed by the authors and is known in two versions: one of Italian (U) and one of Swedish tradition (F and Ga);
- the two longer texts were derived almost in parallel from the first hagiographical portrait, though having different aims and different readers from it, and leading to different hagiographical models;

9 Arne Jönsson, *Alfonso of Jaén. His Life and Works with Critical Editions of the "Epistola solitarii", the "Informaciones", and the "Epistola serui Christi"* (Lund: 1989).

10 A thorough analysis of the manuscript transmission based on philological issues is beyond the scope of this chapter. My forthcoming edition of Vita C15 will include it. For a preliminary survey, see Nocentini, "Which Is the Earliest" and Silvia Nocentini, "The Transmission of Birgittine and Catherinian Works within the Mystical Tradition: Exchanges, Cross-readings, Connections," in *Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. Authorship and Sanctity in the 14th Century and Beyond*, ed. Maria Husabö Oen and Unn Falkeid, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (New York and London: 2020): 93–112.

- the text included in the Acts of the Process (VP) is known in two forms:
 1. one (AP) depending on the same codex which served as a model for VPa (A) and including the most ancient manuscripts we have;
 2. one representing the official form to be recorded in the *Liber attestacionum*;
- VPa, in turn, is transmitted in two versions:
 1. VPa (A) composed in line with the same codex which served as a model for VP (AP);
 2. VPa (B), dated 1377–1378, was intended to be the model Life of Birgitta, to be spread with her cult.

We note that the shortest text (C15) depicts a mostly prophetic saint who exercises her main virtues by acting as the channel of God whilst also being a good, penitent – and yet powerful – woman. It is a very short portrait, most likely because it was principally intended to be read in mensa at the new Birgittine monasteries or as part of the liturgy; the authors' interest was to celebrate Birgitta as a prophet and as the founder of the Saint Saviour Order. The rewriting (BHL 1335) by Birger Gregersson, who a few years later used this brief Vita to compose a liturgical Officium for the feast of Saint Birgitta, is significant in this sense. The puzzling dates and chronological clues may be signs that the composition was carried out in multiple steps: the confessors were writing during Birgitta's last year (1372), when she seemed to be close to death; they then, possibly at a later date (before December 1373, when they left the Vita with bishop Galhardus), added the typological section introduced by chapter 56, driven by the will to better characterize the figure of the saint.

Both VP and VPa add so many episodes and miracles (mostly healings and conversions) that they portray Birgitta as a saint who, in addition to living a pious life and talking to God and the Virgin, founds a new religious Order, collects all kind of relics when making pilgrimages, and most of all is very popular because of her superhuman ability to ward off sicknesses of body and soul. It is not by chance that VPa was known as *Liber de miraculis* (Book of Miracles), a feature which casts Birgitta as a saint in a more traditional light: this hagiographical model fits better with canonization. It is not simply a switch from a shorter Vita to a longer, unbalanced one; it is a change of hagiographic paradigm that characterizes the difference between C15 and VP/VPa. This is also the reason why the shorter Life had to be modified: because a possible canonization commission would not have found a biography with such scarce and vague references to people and to actual miraculous facts to be sufficient. The aims of her religious family were now more ambitious and pointed in the direction of canonization, hence the Vita had to be consistent with this aim. The new insertions were likely to have been made by a team of editors, including the confessors – that is, the authors of the text – and Alfonso of Jaén. In fact, it can

be proved that the VP has been subject to many layers of interventions: a future edition will have to take these into account. Besides, as the edition of Birgitta's writings advanced, references to the Revelations were incorporated in the text so that the canonization commission could easily find them in the edition it had at its disposal.

The hagiographic material to be included in the Vita progressively grew and ran in parallel to the canonization project in Italy. The sets of additions regarding the Swedish period in Alvastra may have been included after May 1375, when Birgitta's daughter Catherine returned to Rome, bringing along with her a first collection of miracles known as *Relacio Upsaliensis* (BHL 1342).

However, not all the additions were inserted at once, as is demonstrated by the existence of Si (VPaA): this version lacks 5 miracles, one of which can be dated precisely to 1377, thus allowing us to date the remaining four as later insertions. The additions we have now in the two longer versions were inserted one by one in an attempt to clarify names, places and references to the Revelations for the benefit of the canonization commission, and also to complete the account of miracles in view of the future spreading of the cult. VP was indeed chosen to be part of the acts of the canonization process and so had to be rich in details; VPa, meanwhile, was meant as a *Liber de miraculis*, a volume usually preserved at the saint's tomb and which served to record every miracle observed in that place. In this sense VPa served to collect all the additional materials which would have built a traditional hagiography; in fact, one of the manuscripts originates from San Lorenzo in Panisperna, where Birgitta was first buried before she could be transferred to Sweden and where the archive preserved all Birgittine documents collected in preparation for the process. This was meant to be the authoritative reference Life, as we have seen.

The Reception

That Alfonso regarded the VPa as the authoritative reference Life is also clear from his statements at the Process.

In AP he refers to the *legenda* as including the *cedula*, the letter of the Count of Nola, which is precisely the case for VPa (B).: “[The Count of Nola] wrote to this speaking witness [Alfonso] and afterwards he sent a letter to Rome, where he described that miracle. This letter was inserted in the *legenda* her confessors had written under oath about lady Birgitta's deeds”.¹¹ In fact, the *cedula* is

11 His deposition is dated 16 September 1379 in AP: 389: “Super quo isti testi loquenti, vt asseruit, scripsit et misit postea unam cedulam in Roma, in qua scriptum est, et fuit miraculum hoc. Que quidem cedula inclusa est in illa legenda, quam dicti confessores

handed down as a part of *Vita Panisperna* (form B), a re-elaborated form dated to 1377/1378.

It is possible to demonstrate that this version (VPaB) had a key role in the Italian reception of Birgittine hagiography. Indeed, sometime after Alfonso of Jaén brought a book with Birgittine materials (*historie*) to the Dominican nun Chiara Gambacorta, prioress of San Domenico in Pisa, in the autumn of 1378. Gambacorta had a polyptych made for her convent's church which shows, in its predella, some scenes from the life of Birgitta. One of these scenes can only be found in the VPa, and another of them is only in the RU, which happens to be handed down with VPa (A) in Si.¹²

We know that a special devotion to Birgitta developed among the Dominicans throughout Europe; in particular, Sylvie Duval and Ann Roberts have demonstrated that the observant Dominican monastery of Pisa had a pioneering role in spreading the cult of Birgitta in Tuscany.¹³ Chiara Gambacorta's Life tells us that Alfonso – in Pisa at the invitation of her father Pietro Gambacorta, *signore* of the city who had traveled along with Birgitta to Jerusalem in 1372 – had a fundamental conversation with Pietro's daughter, who went by Tora before she entered the convent. The hagiography presents a father in pain for his daughter who, being widowed at a very young age, had made the resolution not to remarry and enter the monastery of the Poor Clares of San Martino.¹⁴ But Pietro had other plans for her and intervened with armed men on horseback to forcibly bring his daughter back to her house, where he kept her segregated while waiting to find a better match for her. Alfonso, who had been Birgitta's confessor and had some experience of women's spirituality, sensed a sincere vocation in Tora and therefore advised her to follow the example of Birgitta. If we are to believe the story written by the anonymous hagiographer of Tora/Chiara Gambacorta, he also gives her a book with the story of Birgitta, so that she could be inspired by it:

At that time the bishop Alfonso, who had been the confessor of saint Birgitta, arrived in Pisa. And being the aforesaid bishop servant of her

scripserunt sub juramento de gestis predictae domine Brigide". What is more, Alfonso here ascribes the authorship of the *Vita* to the two Peters, without mentioning his possible involvement in the arrangement of the text.

12 See Nocentini, "Un eremita, due confessori", 317–21.

13 Cf. Sylvie Duval, *"La beata Chiara conduttrice". Le Vite di Chiara Gambacorta e Maria Mancini e i testi dell'Osservanza domenicana pisana* (Rome: 2016); Ann M. Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art. The Convent of San Domenico of Pisa* (London: 2016).

14 Tora Gambacorta was born in Pisa in 1362, she was married early and soon widowed, at the age of 15.

lord father, because they met once in Hierusalem, and because of this familiarity, having a great feast together, he [Pietro] told the case of his beloved daughter, praying him to exhort and comfort her to do the will of her parents. Hence he willingly accepted this undertaking and coming to the devout girl, and speaking a little with her, and understanding her burning and fervent desire, and seeing her fervor and ready will to serve God, he comforted her to continue what she had begun and for her comfort he told her about saint Birgitta, and gave her a book with the story of this saint. And she took her in such devotion as her advocate, that she received from her many graces. And she had sermons [on Birgitta] preached in Pisa, and today her feast is solemnly celebrated every year in her monastery.¹⁵

Pietro was forced to support the decision of her daughter, who took the religious name of Chiara and, after spending a few years among the Dominicans of Santa Croce in Fossabanda, founded the first Dominican observant female monastery in Europe in 1385. A few years later Chiara conceived an iconographic cycle for her new foundation which also involves her devotion to Birgitta and reflects the reading of her Life. The paintings therefore testify to the presence in the monastery of one or more codices with the works and the Life of Birgitta, although today these are considered lost or dispersed in external archival collections.¹⁶ The most significant element for the identification of the version of Birgitta's Life that Alfonso gave to Gambacorta is the presence

15 "In quel tempo capitò in Pisa il veschovo Alfonso, che hera stato confessoro di santa Brigida. Et essendo il dicto veschovo, domesticho del suo signior padre perché si ritrovorno una volta insieme in Hierusalem, et per questa familiarità, facendosi insieme gran festa, disseli il caso della sua diletissima figlia, preghandolo che la esortasse et confortasse a far la volontà de' suo' parenti. Onde elli volentieri accettò tale impresa. Et venendo alla devota fanciulla, et parlando alquanto con essa, et intendendo il suo acceso et fervente desiderio, et vedendo il suo fervore et pronta volontà di servire a Dio, la confortò a seguitare quello che haveva cominciato et per suo conforto li disse di Santa Brigida, et delli il libro della sua istoria. Et ella la prese in tanta devozione et fecela sua avochata et da lei ricevette molte gratie. Et ella la fece in primamente predichare in Pisa, et oggi di nel suo monasterio ogni anno si celebra solennemente la sua festa". Cf. Duval, "*La beata Chiara conduttrice*", 142.

16 We know that Giovanni Dominici taught the observant Dominican nuns in Venice to make liturgical manuscripts and exchange them and other books with the sisters in Pisa. They include, among others, the manuscript Venezia, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, lat. III. 25 (c.1400), a witness of the first Book of the Revelations (Rev. I: 164). See Giovanni Dominici, *Lettere spirituali*, ed. Maria Teresa Casella and Giovanni Pozzi (Fribourg: 1969), no. 19, 128–31, and Sylvie Duval, "Usages du livre et de l'écrit chez les moniales dominicaines observantes (Italie, 1400–1450 ca.)," in *Entre stabilité et itinérance: livres et culture des*

of two miracles in the predella of the altarpiece that Chiara had made, around 1404, to be exhibited in the public part of the monastery church.¹⁷ A Madonna enthroned with the child between saint Dominic and saint Magdalene on the left, and saint John the Evangelist and saint Birgitta on the right, surmounted a predella with five scenes: the largest, in a central position, depicts the famous vision of the Nativity, described in Book VII of the *Revelations*;¹⁸ two compartments present Birgitta as a writer, receiving and transcribing the Revelations from an angel or from Christ and the Virgin; the other two compartments show the vision of a pilgrim in Montefalco and a miracle, the rescue from the shipwreck. While the source of inspiration for the compartments relating to the figure of Birgitta as a visionary and writer can be identified in the typical iconography found in the volumes of the *Revelations*, the last two episodes are certainly taken respectively from the VPa and the RU and do not find correspondence in the contemporary iconographic models of the Birgittine cult.¹⁹ Martino di Bartolomeo, the painter of this altarpiece, had another important commission when working in Pisa: the astonishing cycle of frescoes in the Hieronymite church of Saint John the Baptist in Cascina (Pisa), dated to 1398. It should be noted that the Hieronymite Order was founded by Alfonso Pecha, who was in contact with Chiara Gambacorta, as we have seen, and with the Dominicans in Pisa, in whose *Studium* the complex theological project at the base of the iconography of the Cascina church was elaborated. Martino shows here a considerable freedom in the choice of the narrative elements and the relevant iconography. He seems to have worked on the altarpiece and its predella in the same way, a few years later.

The miracle of Montefalco is only narrated in the VPa and in the deposition of Prior Peter at the canonization process.²⁰ A noble Swedish pilgrim, living in Montefalco as a recluse, sees in a dream a woman of small stature set above a column, and venerated by a group of devotees, while white and red roses come out of her mouth; the woman, it is then revealed to the recluse, is Birgitta, bringing wine and roses to the thirsty pilgrims.²¹ The scene of the dream is

ordres mendiants, XIII^e-XV^e siècle, ed. Nicole Bériou, Martin Morard, Donatella Nebbiai, and Dalla Guarda (Turnhout: 2014), 215–28.

- 17 The altarpiece is nowadays at the Museo Nazionale di San Matteo in Pisa, while the predella is preserved in Berlin, at the Gemäldegalerie.
- 18 Rev. VII: 187–90.
- 19 Roberts argues that Martino di Bartolomeo could have been inspired by the earliest illuminations in the Revelations manuscripts, see Roberts, *Dominican Women*. For the biography of Martino, see Michela Becchis, “Martino di Bartolomeo,” in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 71 (2008), 298–300.
- 20 S, f. 12va–12vb (VPa), ed. in AP: 632 (VPa) and 503–4 (Deposition of Prior Peter).
- 21 “Quedam nobilis mulier de regno Suecie, cum esset in peregrinatione prope sanctum Iacobum de Galitia, in quadam ecclesia vidit unum crucifixum in pariete depinctum.

rendered by dividing the picture in two parts: on the right, the noblewoman lying in a bed; on the left the vision with Birgitta amazing the small crowd with the prodigy of the roses.

The miracle of the shipwreck is recounted only in the RU (BHL 1342): a group of men is surprised by a storm while going to the fair of Saint Botvid, in the North of Sweden, and is praying to saint Birgitta for salvation; the ship is then raised above the waves and miraculously placed ashore by an invisible hand. However, while the men are safe, they realize that the child who was traveling with them is missing, so the group turns again to the saint, *who intervenes from a cloud high up in the still stormy sky* and brings the child back to shore. This is the moment depicted in the panel; the shattered boat remains on the right, while at the center, the child, wearing a bright yellow dress, is embraced by the father. The rest of the men are kneeling and looking gratefully to Birgitta.²² According to Ann Roberts, both visions were chosen for their relevance to Chiara and her natural and religious family: her sister nun Maria Mancini often had inspired visions and once received an apparition of Birgitta herself, as in the scene of the recluse of Montefalco; on the other hand, the miracle of the castaways of Saint Botvid could refer to the seafaring culture of

Quod diligenter intuens cum devotione et compassione, audivit tunc unam vocem dicentem sibi sic: 'Ubicumque – inquit – imaginem istam videris et loquentem audiveris, ibi manebis et ibi morieris'. Igitur hec mulier, rediens ad patriam, aliquo tempore mansit domi. Postea vero agrediens iter ad Romam, cum venisset ad civitatem Montis Falconis, vidit in domo cuiusdam domine eandem imaginem quam in Spaniam viderat et dixit ei: 'Hic – inquit – ingredieris et permanebis. Ego enim inclinabo animum domine istius domus ut tradat eam tibi'. Quod sic factum est igitur reclusa illa perseveravit ibidem in lacrimis et in ieiuniis et vitam duxit exemplarem et miraculosam. Hec autem mulier vidit semel in sompnis unam columpnam, super quam stabat quedam domina mediocris stature, quam multe turbe circumstantes aspiciebant et mirabantur. Et de ore eius exibat quasi ros et rose albe et rubee, quarum odore homines intuentes delectabant. Et vigilans igitur reclusa illa sequenti nocte etiam similia vidit et audivit vocem dicentem sibi: 'Mulier quam vidisti est domina Brigida, domina tua, et stat Rome: ipsa enim affert vinum de longinquis partibus cum rosis mixtum et dabit sitientibus peregrinis'. S, f. 12v. The transcription is mine, with corrections of minor errors.

- 22 "Quidam transeuntes navigio ad nundinas sancti Botvidi, in the upper part Suecie, adveniente gravissima tempestate nimis anxii sunt, quoniam ex procellarum impulsibus navis increpuit et aquis replebatur. Here almost nichil aliud quam subversionem expectantes domine Brigide devote implorabant auxilium. Et mox almost quadam manu navis levata est et a quadam procella in terram iactata. Here tandem cognoscentes se unum perdidisse puerulum flexis genibus eandem dominam Brigidam acclamabant. Et statim alia procella puerum iactabat in terram sanum et inlesum. Et hii qui in navi fuerunt ad monasterium Vaztena come properabant, laudantes Christi gloriam, here for eandem dominam tot et so miracula operari dignatus est, nobis cum gaudio talia referentes". S, f. 22ra–22rb. The transcription is mine. The transcription is mine, with corrections of minor errors.

Pisa.²³ However, we now know what their source may be. In fact, since there is no preceding iconographic model for these two scenes, it can be assumed that the textual source is to be found in the *Life of Birgitta* left with Chiara by Alfonso. This manuscript had to include both the VP_a and the RU, just like Si. There was also a restricted circle of lay devotees, who asked for and read Birgitta's writings and her *Life*. The examples of Philippe de Mézières and Lapo Mazzei are significant in this respect.

The first, chancellor of the Reign of Cyprus and counselor of the king of France, was in possession of a copy of Birgitta's *Life*, the *Process Vita* (version A), which he bequeathed to the Library of the Celestine friars. Having being preserved until today, we know exactly which manuscript he had in his hands.²⁴ It is possible that Philippe, a well-educated man connected to the mystical tradition and a supporter of the Avignon Papacy may have been given the *Life* by Alfonso directly.

Lapo Mazzei, the renowned Florentine notary, wrote in his letters about his devotion to Birgitta. He succeeded in obtaining a *Life of Birgitta*, though we do not know which one; maybe one of those disseminated during the canonization process, and certainly a text including miracles, which he mentioned in his letters. He possessed the *Rule of the Saint Saviour Order* as well, and complained that, at the end of 1395, it was still too difficult for lay people to access the *Revelations*, a reading reserved to the high ecclesiastical sphere.

Ser Lapo was in close connection with Antonio di Niccolò degli Alberti, sponsor of the first Birgittine monastery in Italy, the *Paradiso* in Florence. This Birgittine house played a key-role in the dissemination of the Italian translation of Birgitta's *Life*.

The Italian Translation (BAI BriSve II.214)

At the present state of the research, the known manuscript witnesses of the Italian translation are:

1. Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, I.V.26 (1399), fols. 277r–296v (*Vita*), fols. 297r–303v (*Miracles*);
2. Siena, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, T.II.6 (post 1425), fols. 132r–160r (*Vita*), fols. 161–173 (*Miracles*);
3. Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, S. Marco 917 (1490–1520), fols. 53r–85v (*Vita*), fols. 86r–102r (*Miracles*);
4. Firenze, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni religiose soppresse, 179.49 (XV sec.), fols. 1–36r (*Vita*), fols. 36v–52v (*Miracles*);

23 Roberts, *Dominican Women*, 90–91.

24 Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, 1073.

5. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. xxxviii.15 (XV–XVI sec.), fols. 2r–69r (Vita), fols. 69r–99v (Miracles)
6. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. xxxviii.93 (XVI sec.), fols. 2r–58v (Vita);
7. Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl. xxxviii.128 (30.11.1458), fols. 1r–58r (Vita), fols. 58r–82v (Miracles);
8. Roma, Biblioteca Angelica, 1367 (post 1425), fols. 1–23 (Vita), fols. 23–34 (Miracles);
9. Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, A 71 (1497/1499), fols. 1–40 (Vita).

The translation is composed of two sections: the proper Life, in 10 chapters, and the Miracles drawn from the RU, in 16 chapters. Both Life and Miracles have an original prologue, which is not in the Latin and has to be ascribed to the translator. However, the earliest manuscript lacks the prologue to the Miracles (n. 1 in the list), while the remaining witnesses bring two additional miracles (chap. 17 and 18).

I have *recently* studied this translation, drawing the following conclusions.²⁵

The translation was made after the canonization (1391) and before 1399 (date of the earliest witness), possibly in the mid-Nineties, when the Paradiso was founded (1394). In the same years, the Miracles (BHL 1342) were *also* translated, although a new version of them was made around 1425, when two additional chapters were added to the collection of miracles.

The translator did not work from a single Latin text, nor did he/she use one of the three earliest proper Lives as the main exemplar. On the contrary, he/she assembled two sources: the liturgical Office of Birger Gregersson (BHL 1335), and one of the longer Lives, maybe the *Liber de miraculis* (BHL 1334b). Moreover, he/she had at his/her disposal a copy of the *Revelations*, from which some supplementary information is drawn. In addition to these features, the translation arranges the diverse materials in a different way in respect to the relevant Latin hagiographic sources, and, what is very interesting, intertwines with the last chapter of the Life an *Indulgenziario* (list of holy places and of the indulgences that could be gained there), a typical Franciscan text of the Late Trecento.

Because the main model for the translation is the liturgical Office (BHL 1335) by Birger Gregersson, this translation could have originated in a monastic or ecclesiastical milieu, where the Office was actually used for the common prayer starting from the end of the Trecento. Hence, it is possible that the promoting center for such an initiative had been the Paradiso in Florence, founded in the same years to which the translation can be dated. Certainly, it was here that the text was modified with the addition of chapter 17 and 18 to

25 I have presented a thorough analysis of this translation at the last Medieval Translator Congress in Bologna (June 2021) and will soon be printed in that series.

Miracles. However, we have no elements to suggest that it was translated by a Birgittine nun or friar, for two reasons: the Birgittine spirituality was nurtured of diverse religious traditions, such as the Dominican, the Franciscan, and the Carthusian ones; each one of these spiritual traditions was interested in the figure and writings of Birgitta, in copying and disseminating her works, in promoting her cult by preaching sermons and through artistic patronages. Secondly, the translator appears to be very close to the Franciscan milieu, given some explicit references to saint Francis and his cult, and the inclusion in the Life of an *Indulgenziario*.

Conclusion

The hagiography of Birgitta is a unique opportunity to enter the scriptorium of Alfonso of Jaén and take a look inside. In fact, the multiple versions of the Latin Life (1373–1391) represent the multiple attempts to build the image of Birgitta as a saint for diverse audiences; sometimes they are merely drafts of subsequent works, in order to refine her biography. We can see, through the many layers composing the text, how the promoters of her cult, especially Alfonso, worked on it and for which aim.

The slightly later Italian translation (1391–1399) is a turning point in the later reception of Birgitta's cult. In Florence, at the end of Trecento, the first Birgittine house in Italy, the Paradiso, was founded, which would become in the subsequent years an important center for Italian translations, and possibly also the source of the Italian translation of Birgitta's Life. It was not made on the basis of one of the previous Latin Lives, but on the liturgical Office, which means that it was made in ecclesiastical or monastic environments and for Birgittine circles.

I think it is necessary to continue the philological research on such texts, in order to better understand where and for whom they were written and disseminated. Because this is a fundamental question: who was reading Birgitta, or her hagiography? And why? As the reader will clearly see by going through the essays of this volume, Birgitta was a kaleidoscope for those who wanted her to be known and venerated: philology can answer these questions, as long as we interrogate the texts.²⁶

26 Comment for the readers: I would like to thank both readers for their highly appreciated comments.