

Erik Bergman. *Constructing Saint Birgitta: Birgittine Preaching and the Cult of Saint Birgitta in Vadstena Abbey, 1397–c. 1510*. Lund: Lund University, 2024. 329 pp.

This doctoral dissertation is a comprehensive and insightful analysis of how the figure of Saint Birgitta was constructed in hagiographical and liturgical texts and, even more, in the sermons that preachers active in Vadstena Abbey composed to honour this saintly woman, who died in Rome in 1373 and was soon canonized by Pope Boniface IX (c. 1350–1404) in 1391.

The work has a sort of double introduction. Chapters 1 and 2 present the *status quaestionis* of the research, the relevant methodology, and the medieval sources available. Next, Chapter 3 introduces the reader to Birgittine preaching in Vadstena Abbey, paying particular attention to the relationship between liturgy and preaching. Moving to the actual construction of the profile (and memory) of Saint Birgitta, Chapter 4 outlines the medieval hagiographical sources concerning this saint (from the canonization process to the main legends) and the liturgical texts written to celebrate Birgitta in her main feasts. This keen attention to the liturgical dimension is one of the main features of Erik Bergman's dissertation, which clearly connects with a recently growing attention to liturgy as a pivotal aspect of medieval (and post-medieval) cultures and practices. Still, the actual core of the dissertation is devoted to sermons on Saint Birgitta. Chapter 5 deals with sermons mainly from a rhetorical point of view, yet pointing out also the tools that Vadstena preachers used to expand their discourses on Birgitta, namely her *Revelations*, the hagiographical materials, natural metaphors, and biblical figures who gradually were considered as a prefiguration of this saint. Chapter 6 zooms in on the analysis of some specific sermons, beautifully presenting the interplay and intertextuality between some of the texts composed and used in Vadstena. Next, Chapter 7 evaluates,

from a global perspective, the multifaceted ways in which preachers presented Birgitta to the faithful not only as a saint, but also as a model to imitate. Finally, Chapter 8 summarizes the main findings of this work, and three appendices present important additional materials: (1) the list of *themata* (that is, the Biblical sentence that served as basis for a sermon) used by preachers, (2) the biographical data of sixteen identified Birgittine preachers who composed sermons on this saint, and (3) the edition of probably the earliest Birgittine sermon in Vadstena, one composed by Tore Andersson (d. 1418), arguably in 1397 (the edition is based on a previous transcription made by Maria Berggren and Stephan Borgehammar).

Overall, the dissertation shows beyond any doubt the ingenuity and inventiveness of the preachers who composed (and we assume also preached) sermons to celebrate Birgitta in Vadstena and who used this new saint as a pastoral tool and an opportunity to (try to) push many faithful to commit themselves to a more rigorous and rewarding form of Christian life, that is, to follow Birgitta's commitment to virtues. Among the many examples presented and discussed in Bergman's dissertation, we find preachers like brother Åke Jönsson (d. 1453), future bishop of Västerås, who employed the saint's name – Birgitta – as an acronym to structure his sermon, so that B stands for *benedicta* (blessed), I for *illuminata* (illuminated), R for *roborata* (strengthened), and so forth. Playing a bit with the rhetorical style of the very learned fifteenth-century priest brothers of Vadstena, one could say that this dissertation reflects well the author's name, since it is Excellent, Rich in Information, and Clear. In reviewing this dissertation, therefore, my goal is mainly to point out a few elements that I consider particularly relevant.

First, this work complements nicely a growing area of studies, which in the last few decades has investigated the religious and social function of new saints in the late middle ages and, in particular, the role of

preaching in this cultural dynamic. Bergman's dissertation is – first and foremost – a sort of conversation with several works by André Vauchez, who provided scholars with a general framework to investigate the dynamic between the dimension of the saints as “admirable” and/or as “imitable”, that is, mainly as powerful miracle-makers and/or as models of Christian life. Bergman clearly underlines that, also in the case of Birgitta, the presentation of an imitable saint prevails in pastoral discourses. And yet, this is not without tensions, due to her specific characteristics as a new kind of saint, in particular for her not being a virgin (the dominant model for medieval female saints), but a woman who got married, had children, and lived in the secular world. And even more, since Birgitta perceived and presented herself as a prophetess who enjoyed revelations directly from Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. Bergman's work shows well that the people most involved in the construction and the presentation of Birgitta as a saint considered these elements both as crucial assets, which made this Swedish woman stand out, and as potentially problematic – or at least sensitive – aspects, which required them to be handled with care.

Within this framework, in the pastoral communication, these peculiar aspects were at times domesticated, downplayed, somehow to present a more standard model of Christian woman by emphasising, instead, Birgitta's patience or her obedience to spiritual fathers. It is exactly these “tensions” (a word that Bergman rightly uses several times in the dissertation) that make this case study so interesting. Those who composed texts on Saint Birgitta (mainly sermons but also *vitae* or liturgical offices) had to face never-ending negotiation between different (and at time competing) elements, which means that these authors had to be quite nuanced in constructing their message. Indeed, this is a case in which not only words, but also silence matters, since leaving out certain aspects of Birgitta's life (for example, her prophetic

role or her harshest penitential practices) was meaningful. To be more specific, one of the key tensions that Bergman's dissertation unravels is that around the presentation of Birgitta as a prophetess. In the texts discussed in the dissertation, I see not only a process of construction of a saint but also, at least in part, of deconstruction; two terms used already by Phyllis B. Roberts (1932–2018) in a 1996 contribution on models of holiness in medieval sermons. While Birgitta's profile as prophetess was firstly considered as relevant (in particular for pushing her canonization in the unstable era of the schism), it was later also perceived as problematic, as it is visible already in her canonization sermon. With some notable exceptions, the Birgitta sermons increasingly presented her as an imitable saint. Entangled with very concrete (and wisely identified) pastoral needs, probably a process of “domestication”, if not even “banalization”, of her profile was also at play, as when preachers underlined her obedience to clerical figures. As a historian, therefore, these sermons looked to me also as a space of negotiation (and interplay) between actual pastoral needs and (gendered) dynamics of power, something that would be interesting to investigate further.

Within the scholarship that investigates the construction of medieval saints through preaching, this dissertation follows the examples set by Phyllis B. Roberts, Stanislava Kuzmová, Eleonora Lombardo, and, in particular, Ottó Gecser. Gecser's 2012 book on Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–1231) is the closest interlocutor of Bergman's work, since the two female saints – Elizabeth and Birgitta – had evident similarities, to the point that sermons composed to celebrate the former were used to build new sermons to celebrate the Swedish saint.

Bergman's dissertation contributes to this already established line of research with its own peculiar elements, which are clearly outlined in the first chapters. The construction of the preaching tradition concerning Saint Birgitta is somehow unique for its

geographical density, centred on Vadstena Abbey and its sermons production. After a sort of prologue at the papal curia, very important to enucleate key features in defining the profile of Birgitta as saint, once the canonization was achieved, the powerhouse for the development of the cult of this saint became Vadstena, both as popular centre of pilgrimage and as home of a peculiar monastic community (where men and priests were – at least nominally – at the service of women). It is in this specific place that the interplay between liturgy, preaching practices, and overlapping and at times competing pastoral priorities converges. Each late medieval text discussed in the dissertation – ultimately – participates in such intense dialogue, where – for once – we are quite sure that the different actors involved were clearly aware of what was going on and of the different options available to them. The level of intertextuality and interdiscursivity is therefore exceptional, since these are model sermons clearly connected with a specific place and the cultural and pastoral practices shared by the brother priests serving at Vadstena.

The surviving 125 written sermons composed in about as many years to celebrate Birgitta and to present her as a model to the faithful (and as a support to the authority of the preachers too, I would add) show not only the theological and cultural skills of the preachers who worked in the abbey, but also how relevant it was for them in what way Birgitta was presented to the faithful. Bergman navigates this rich material pointing out the dynamic between repetition of key elements (the drip-drip effect that assured the interiorization of the message, to quote a concept famously introduced by David d'Avrey to point out the role of model sermons in forming and imposing shared ideas) and variations obtained by stressing different elements. For instance, just to exemplify the different ways in which preachers used to speak of Birgitta, the effect was clearly different if one depicted her as a devout widow who engaged in charitable acts or stressed

that she had been a powerful prophetess, similar to Moses, or that her imitation of Christ brought Birgitta to perform a sort of stigmatization that put her at the same level as Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226). As in a kaleidoscope, the face of Saint Birgitta that the preachers presented to the listeners gathering in Vadstena for her main feasts was, at the same time, very familiar and continuously changing.

The possibility to carry out a close textual comparison allows us to see this interplay between sermons and, therefore, the way the Vadstena preachers thought and worked. One of the finest examples is presented in Chapter 6, which shows – with a level of precision that is exciting for scholars working on medieval preaching – how a model sermon was used and transformed. The chapter analyzes how a model sermon for Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, written by the Franciscan Johannes Contractus (allegedly active in the second half of the fourteenth century), is the basis of the earliest surviving model sermon on Saint Birgitta composed in Vadstena. The latter is the already-mentioned sermon written by the priest brother Tore Andersson, who transformed its model by tapping into what makes the Swedish saint exceptional compared to her predecessor, namely, by inserting abundant quotations taken from Birgitta's *Revelations*. Still, this was not the only intervention. Andersson also adapted his discourse – especially in the last part – to present down-to-earth recommendations to women in his audience, discussing at length the necessity to avoid luxury clothes and other vanities. The text – published in the appendix of the volume – is an excellent example of how theological and pastoral topics can be combined in the same discourse. In turn, a few decades later, Andersson's sermon was transformed by other preachers, who reworked it according to their own sensibilities and, perhaps, to their own expected audiences. For instance, Hans Borkvardsson (d. 1447) put an “emphasis on humility over wisdom” (p. 201), cutting out all

references to the *Revelations* and presenting a more spiritualized version of Birgitta.

Borkvardsson probably considered it more useful for his listeners to leave out completely Birgitta's profile as prophetess and as, let's say, radical follower of Christ. This might be done mainly for pastoral reasons, as this dissertation underlines in different points, recalling how much the need to present an imitable model was central in the construction of these sermons. And yet, I suggest to consider that preachers knew also that certain aspects of the new saint were contested or even seen as potentially dangerous. Predictably, in the sermons to celebrate Birgitta, objections and doubts about her saintly profile surface only to be vanquished, as it happens in some beautiful *exempla* (that is, short narratives used in sermons to present effectively a moral point). For instance, a sermon by Nils Ragvaldsson (d. 1514) tells the vivid story of a Dominican lector who had been a fierce adversary of the new cult, and yet he was converted and became a great devotee of Saint Birgitta. What happened? Once this friar was suffering from a terrible toothache, and he was cured only thanks to Birgitta's intercession, so much so that in his following preachings he not only divulged this miracle but also "made public confession of his sins, saying: 'I, a sinner, have constantly slandered blessed Birgitta, and I have stupidly (*stulte*) spoken against those who spoke well about her'" (p. 263).

Still, doubts about the special spiritual gifts of Birgitta did not pertain only to adversaries but could harbour also in the people who had a favourable disposition towards her. This is perfectly explained by another *exemplum*, which stems from the *Revelations* of Birgitta and was used several times by preachers to present her as prophetess. For instance, an anonymous priest brother active around 1400 tells that while Birgitta was on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, a Cistercian who was travelling with her had a vision in which he saw Birgitta crowned by seven crowns that represented the "tiara

of God's sevenfold grace". Still, he "had difficulties believing the grace given to lady Birgitta", so he received another "ecstatic vision of the lady with fire from heaven descending upon her". Was that enough? No, because the friar «was marvelling at the vision and thought it an illusion (*illusionem*), so he fell asleep again and heard the divine voice telling him not just once but twice: 'No one can stop this fire from going forth. For I, the power itself, will send this fire to east and west, north and south, and it will set many aflame (*inflammabit multos*)'" (p. 249). Imbued in hagiographical common places, the *exemplum* encapsulates well how Birgitta's profile was somehow challenging (and at the same time exciting) within a manly and clerically dominated late medieval Church. Overall, the sermons studied by Bergman do not only show how the Vadstena (male) preachers of the time negotiated with this new and towering (female) figure, but also how speaking of Birgitta became an opportunity to introduce the faithful to theological and moral topics, such as the spiritual dimension of life and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, as in the case of the sermon just mentioned.

To conclude, this excellent study of the sermons on Saint Birgitta from Vadstena Abbey contributes to a better understanding of the development of the cult of this saint, and addresses also broader issues, such as the richness of preaching in fifteenth-century Sweden and the sophisticated rhetorical and theological culture of the preachers active in Vadstena. In doing that, Bergman provides readers with a precious insight in the quality of the pastoral and spiritual discourses that – at least in specific solemn occasions – were presented to the faithful. Even in an era of increasing literacy, liturgy and preaching remained for them the main access to religious and theological knowledge. Building on the work of previous generations of scholars who contributed to present – also to an international readership – the sermons composed, copied, and transmitted at Vadstena (here

I just mention Stephan Borgehammar and Roger Andersson) and in an attentive dialogue with recent trends in medieval sermon studies, this dissertation on the one hand advances our understandings of how Saint Birgitta's profile was constructed (and the struggles around this cultural process), while on the other hand it also sheds light on the great treasure of the sermons composed and used in Vadstena, which represents one of the most intriguing corpus of sermons in late medieval Europe. From that perspective, the material analyzed in this dissertation and the issues that arise from it are a perfect starting point to further develop this investigation. Personally, given the premises, I hope this would be done soon by Bergman in the form of a monograph that expands in an engaging way on the findings of this dissertation, the reading of which – however – already will be an enrichment for any scholar interested in medieval pastoral care, preaching, and the cult of saints.

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Kasper Bro Larsen. *Jesus: En historisk crash course*. Stockholm: Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm. 2023. 88 s.

Kasper Bro Larsens bok om den historiske Jesus gavs först ut på danska 2018 och har nu utkommit i svensk översättning. I inledningen får vi ta del av Larsens ambition att beskriva Jesus från flera olika synvinklar: det handlar om historievetenskapens Jesus, de tidiga kristnas Jesus, Bibelns Jesus och till sist får vi även del av författarens personliga och existentiella reflektioner kring bokens huvudperson. Med andra ord är det ganska mycket som ska hinnas med på knappt åttio sidor, och vi serveras därmed ett axplock av frågeställningar, teorier, forskningsresultat och reflektioner kring vem den historiske Jesus kan ha varit. Givet att boken har ett tydligt populärvetenskapligt format

måste den bedömas utifrån en sådan horisont. Författarens förmåga att skriva lättläst, kortfattat och medryckande är en stor tillgång i detta avseende. Boken förutsätter inte heller några långtgående förkunskaper när det gäller kännedom om evangeliernas berättelser, utan författaren återberättar ofta dessa och placerar dem i ett sammanhang åt läsaren.

Larsen anknyter till samtiden och skapar kopplingar till populärkulturella fenomen och mer moderna historiska händelser på ett sätt som kan skapa igenkänning hos läsaren och ge en känsla av relevans. Till exempel skriver han om Jesus många följare, vars antal inte ens kan överträffas i dagens digitala värld. Jesus intåg i Jerusalem och hans rensning av templet beskrivs som profetiska "happenings" (s. 62) och författaren kallar med glimten i ögat Toran för "en judisk kombination av *Sveriges Rikes lag* och *Vett och etikett*" (s. 32). Mindre lyckat blir det dock när han väljer att jämföra de tidiga kristnas upphöjelse av den korsfäste Jesus med att kalla Usama bin Ladin (1957–2011) för en hjälte. Nog för att det var kontroversiellt att kalla en brottsling som korsfästes av romarna för Guds son, men det innebär inte att det är relevant att jämföra honom med en terrorist och massmördare. Larsen fastslår senare att det brott som Jesus dömdes för var hans kritik mot templet och hans rensning av detsamma, ett handlande som snarare skulle kunna liknas vid någon form av civil olydnad.

Inledningsvis slår författaren hål på den seglivade myten om att Jesus kanske aldrig har existerat som historisk person. De fyra evangelierna i Nya testamentet, som uppges ha nedtecknats när första generationens ögonvittnen till Jesus liv började gå ur tiden, anges som den primära källan till den historiske Jesus. Naturligtvis nämns också de utombibliska källor som vi har att tillgå, även om dessa ger oss mer knapphändig information. De delar ur Jesus liv som framför allt diskuteras i boken är födelseberättelserna, korsfästelsen och de händelser som ledde