

The Saint Barbara Altarpiece of Master Francke and its Birgittine Context¹

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Abstract This article discusses the iconography of the Virgin Mary cycle on the corpus and the inner wings of the St Barbara altarpiece in the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki. The retable is most famous for the paintings by the North German master called Francke depicting the legend of St Barbara. In the historiography of this altarpiece, the study of the paintings dominates over that of the reliefs. The aim of the article is to explain how and why its sculptural programme is influenced by Birgittine spirituality, and how it was connected to the bishop of Åbo/Turku, Magnus II Tavast, who, it is argued, is the most probable commissioner of the altarpiece.

Keywords Virgin Mary, St Birgitta, Birgittine spirituality, Master Francke, St Barbara Altarpiece, Magnus II Tavast, Turku Cathedral

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Fig. 1. The Saint Barbara Altarpiece. Corpus and the inner wings with scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary. The National Museum of Finland, Helsinki.

One of the most outstanding exhibits in the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki is the Late Medieval St Barbara altarpiece. It was purchased from Kalanti/Nykyrko Church in 1903.² This stone church is located about 70 kilometres north-west of Turku and was, according to different opinions, built either around 1400,³ or sometime during the 1430s or 1450s.⁴ It is certain, however, that the church was vaulted and covered with murals in 1470–71, a fact substantiated by two inscriptions on the sidewalls.⁵ It is not known how and when the altarpiece

came to this remote country church. But the fact that St Olav was the patron saint of the church,⁶ and the extraordinary quality of the altarpiece in the context of medieval art in Finland, argue against Kalanti being its original location.

The original appearance of the oaken altarpiece with its wings closed is unknown. During the restoration of the panels in the *Hamburger Kunsthalle* in 1922–1925 a layer of marbled sky-blue oil paint was removed to reveal a light grey tempera, painted onto a thin plaster ground.⁷ This raises the question of whether this was the original

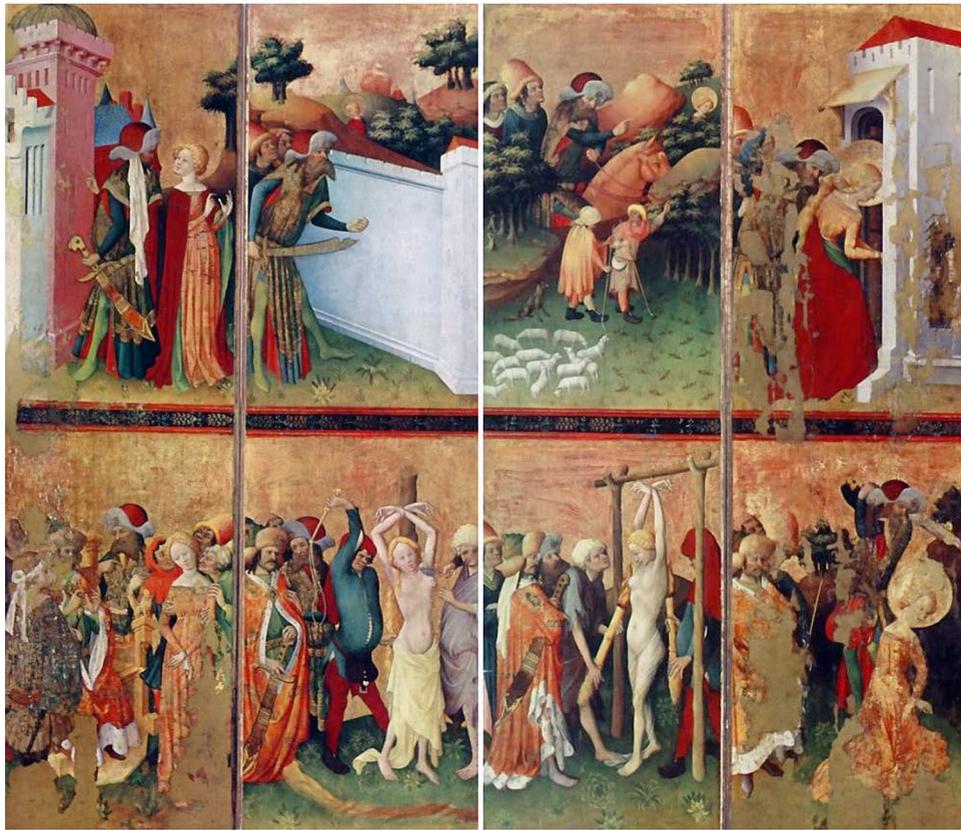


Fig. 2. *The Saint Barbara Altarpiece with the outer wings opened, showing the legend of St Barbara.* Master Francke. Tempera on wood. 200x260 cm. The National Museum of Finland, Helsinki.

paint, since one would expect figures on the outer wings of a medieval retablo. The second position, with open wings (width 260 cm), presents eight painted scenes from the legend of St Barbara (fig. 2). The third, fully open position shows scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary (fig. 1). The carved reliefs, also originally painted in tempera, were covered with a thick layer of oil paint in the 17th century.⁸

Karl Konrad Meinander, a member of

the staff of the National Museum, was the first to associate the paintings with Master Francke in his doctoral thesis 1908.⁹ The master first appeared in art historical writings in connection with the retablo of Saint Thomas of Canterbury in Hamburg (now in the *Kunsthalle*), commissioned in 1424 by the *Englandfahrer* Society for their chapel in the church of the Dominican Monastery of St John. During the restoration of the paintings of St

Barbara's altarpiece in Hamburg, a close connection was established with the St Thomas retablo.¹⁰ Since the paintings on the St Barbara altarpiece clearly reveal an influence from early fifteenth-century French court miniature art, it was assumed to be a work from the master's youth and dated around 1410–1415.¹¹ Apart from the French influence, however, Otto Pächt identified a remarkably strong stylistic influence from the Netherlands: the scenes depicting the birth of Christ both on the St Barbara and St Thomas altarpieces follow a common Netherlandish model, not older than 1420. Thus it seems impossible that the Barbara altarpiece originated from the preceding decade.¹² The dendrochronological analysis carried out by Professor Peter Klein of the University of Hamburg in 1996 substantiated Pächt's idea: the retablo was made after 1421.¹³

In the historiography of the Barbara altarpiece, the study of style and technique clearly dominates over that of iconography and function.¹⁴ Similarly, the carnal beauty and magnificent clothing of St Barbara eclipse the body of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, I will focus on the iconography of the liturgically most significant scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary, and attempt an analysis in the context of ecclesiastical life during the first half of the 15th century. This will clarify the possible reasons for commissioning the altarpiece.

The Death of the Virgin Mary

With the inner wings of the retablo open, the viewer faces the death of the Virgin

Mary, the Dormition, and her subsequent coronation in Heaven. The two scenes cover the entire corpus (fig. 3). In a rather conventional setting, Mary is depicted in bed, covered with a bedspread. Earlier scenes from the death of Mary usually followed the Byzantine tradition, depicting her on the bed or hovering above it, but in the 15th century a more realistic and domestic view replaced this unworldly scene. In her doctoral thesis on the death of the Virgin Mary, Gertrud Holzherr has demonstrated that the causes for the change in the way of rendering her death lie in the contemporary poetry on Mary's life as well as in liturgical games in urban space. During the same period, Christ also ceases to appear among the characters present. Until then he had, as a rule, been there to receive Mary's soul, typically represented as sitting on his arm in the form of an infant.¹⁵

Around Mary's deathbed are convened the twelve apostles. The young John is holding Mary's hand in one of his hands while he closes her eyes with the other. Peter, standing at the foot of the bed, was probably holding an *aspersorium* for holy water and an *aspergillum* to sprinkle it, as was customary in representations of Mary's death. Next to him, one apostle is holding an open book with empty white pages, which may originally have been covered with text. The beardless apostle at the head of the bed is holding a censer.

While the aforementioned details are often found in other representations of Mary's death, the St Barbara altarpiece



Fig. 3. *The Saint Barbara Altarpiece. The central part, corpus, with the Dormition and the Coronation of Mary. The National Museum of Finland, Helsinki.*



Fig. 4. *The Dormition and the Coronation of Mary. Two panels from the so-called Golden Panel in Lüneburg, 1400–1420. From St Michael's monastery, Lüneburg, now in the Lower Saxony State Museum, Hannover (Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover). After Die deutschen und niederländischen Gemälde bis 1550, Hannover 1992.*

presents some that are rare, or even unique. The candle is the most significant. One of the apostles standing behind John is holding a giant candle and another is busy lighting it. They are at the very centre of the composition and presented as larger than the other figures. The usual place for the candle is in Mary's hands, with John supporting it. This is in consonance with the rite of dying. According to its precepts, the candle had to be lit *before* the anointment, since the demons were most active at the moment when the soul departed and light helped to protect the soul against them. Blessing with holy water was also part of the rite, as was reading prayers, whereas incense was not.¹⁶ Therefore, the scene of Mary's death in the Golden Panel of St Michael's monastery in

Lüneburg, dated approximately 1400–20, fully corresponds with the traditional rite of dying, and is also chronologically close to St Barbara's altarpiece (fig. 4).¹⁷

It is, however, impossible that the death rite is being depicted on the Barbara altarpiece, since Mary is already dead (John is closing her eyes) and the candle is still being lit. Should that giant candle be placed in Mary's hands, it would reach up to "the clouds", i.e. the scene of the coronation of the Virgin in Heaven. What we have here is rather a Paschal candle, whose flame symbolises the resurrected Christ as the light of the world (John 8:12) and which stands next to the coffin during the funeral service. Christ is, therefore, present in the death scene – in the form of light.

When a medieval viewer was standing

in front of the altarpiece, his attention would, no doubt, have been attracted by an apostle in front of the bed removing a thorn from the sole of his foot, located precisely at eye level (fig. 5). The book in his lap and the long, narrow beard indicate that it could be Paul. If so, we are dealing with his vision in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, where he speaks about a thorn in his flesh sent by Satan (12:7). In comparison to Mary, who did not have any thorn at all, he was a sinner. Paul asked the Lord to remove the thorn, but was not heard. The Church Fathers' interpretation of this was that "The more trials we face, the more grace we are capable of receiving",¹⁸ and this may well be the message expressed by his posture. While the other apostles in front of the deathbed appear inward-looking, praying and meditating, this one is looking up with an absent glance, thereby attracting the viewer's attention. Similar strategies for catching the audience's attention are known from scenes of Christ's Passion, where negative characters (such as Jews and children) often mock Christ, and by their actions direct the gaze to the central motif. Just as children throwing stones could guide the viewer from familiar reality to sacred narrative,¹⁹ so the thorn in Paul's flesh reminds the penitent of his own sins and leads his mind towards the Lord's grace and Mary's flawless purity.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the topic of the upper panel of the right wing of the St Barbara altarpiece is Mary's dead body (fig. 6). John and Peter are leading



Fig. 5. St Paul withdrawing a thorn. The Saint Barbara Altarpiece, detail of the corpus. Photo Kersti Markus 2013.

her funeral procession, which according to legend, headed towards the Valley of Josaphat in Jerusalem, where it was intended to bury Mary. The Jews, who heard the angels and the singing of the women in the procession and thereby learnt who was to be buried, attempted to lift the body from the bier in order to burn it, but their arms became paralysed and their eyes blind.²⁰ Different versions of these events

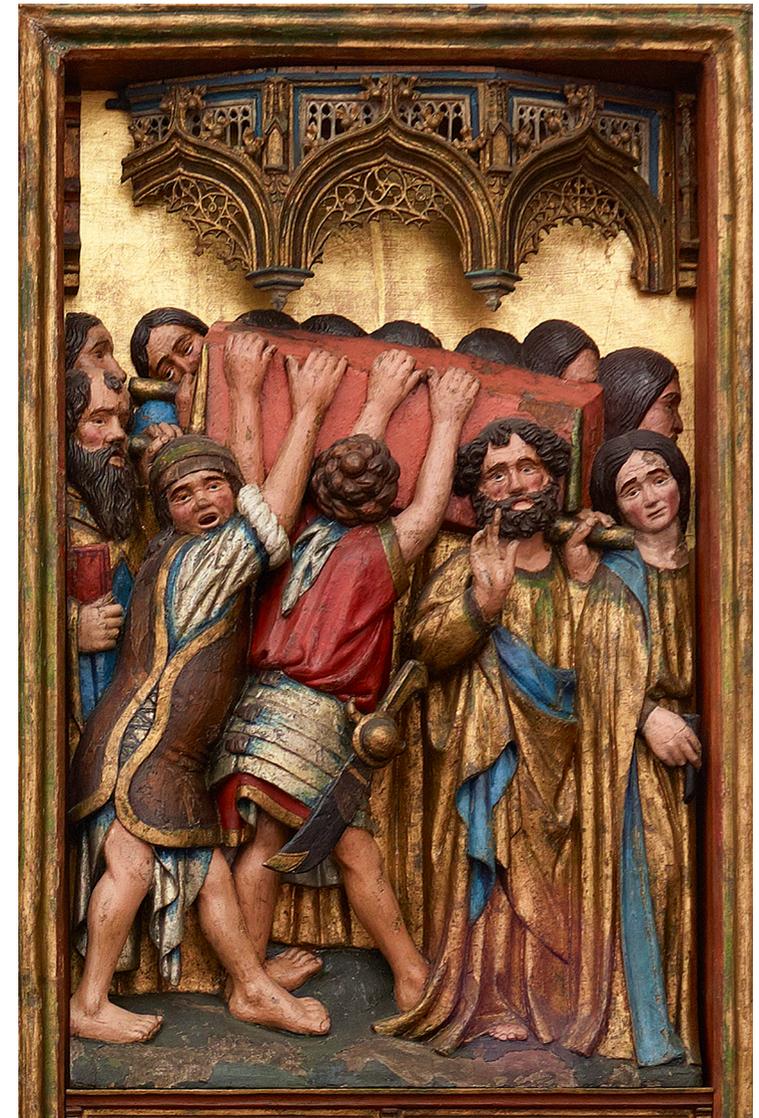


Fig. 6. The funeral procession of the Virgin Mary. The Saint Barbara Altarpiece, the upper panel of the right, inner wing. Photo Kersti Markus 2013.

flourished throughout the Middle Ages: however, the commissioner of the Barbara altarpiece seems to have been primarily influenced by the earliest version of the

Virgin's Dormition, attributed to Melito of Sardis (+ c. 180).²¹ There an angel with a palm frond comes to tell Mary that her hour of departure had come. The frond

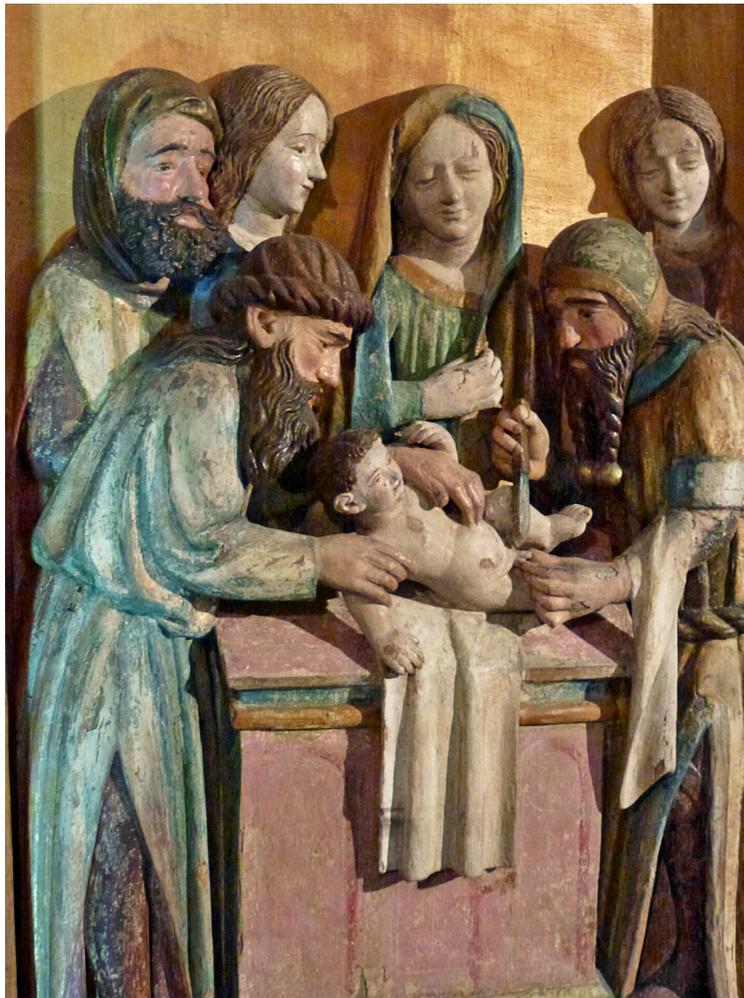


Fig. 7. The Circumcision. The Saint Barbara Altarpiece, the lower panel of the left, inner wing. Photo Kersti Markus 2013.

should be carried at the head of the funeral procession, but Peter and John could not decide who was worthy of this dignity. John was the only virgin among the apostles, among whom he was one of the most favoured, and was therefore chosen. On the panel, it is clearly visible that John is holding something in his hand, and

closer examination showed me that it is a cylindrical object with small hole in the top, perfectly suited for the insertion of a palm frond. Peter, standing next to John, has his hand raised in an eloquent gesture indicating that he is having a conversation with a tortured Jew who has turned to the apostle for help. Peter urges him to

go to Mary instead and when he follows this advice he is immediately healed. Peter then sends the Jew off to Jerusalem with the palm frond in order to convert other Jews to Christianity and treat the sick. People were indeed healed by the touch of the frond, proving that it was sacred and that Mary's body possessed the power of performing miracles.

According to Melito of Sardis, Mary's soul had been transferred to heaven in the presence of the apostles in the Virgin's house, but brought back by the archangel Michael and reunited with her body in the sepulchre. Then Mary was lifted up and carried by the angels into Paradise. The bodily assumption seems to be the central topic of Melito's story; he did not pay much attention to the soul's departure but emphasised its whiteness and brightness. St. John the Theologian, apostle and evangelist, who was an eyewitness, gives some more details. The most important of them is the casting of incense, which announced the coming of Christ with a host of angels.²² This explains the prominent position of the apostle holding a censer.

More interesting, however, is what is happening in the upper part of the corpus. This depicts the Coronation of the Virgin surrounded by adoring angels and a wreath of clouds resembling a garland of roses. This represents the moment of the elevation of the earthly mother to her celestial and regal position, but the usual iconography of the subject deviates from the one we see here. In traditional renderings the Queen of Heaven is seated on the right, i.e.

the blessed, side of her Son but here she is placed on the left,²³ and her prayerful pose gives the impression that she is kneeling in front of him. Another modification is that Christ wears a crown. It is interesting to notice that, apart from the left-sided position, this iconographic model was preferred in the area of Hamburg at the time, e.g. in the Buxtehude altar by Master Bertram (c. 1410) and the Golden Panel of Lüneburg (1400–20; fig. 4). Both of them offer an elegant depiction of the Virgin as the Bride of Christ, with its source in the Song of Songs.²⁴ The Bride of Christ represents the soul of every believer (Rev. 22:21), thus allowing identification with Mary.

The central part of the altarpiece thus presents us with a visual expression of deep religious insight and contemplation. The gaze of a sinner leads the viewer to the reason for meditative prayer: Mary's contribution to the work of redemption, her suffering, triumph and role as the benevolent advocate for mankind. On the lower panel of the left wing Mary's suffering is emphasised in the scene of the Circumcision (fig. 7), where she is anxiously watching her son's blood being spilt for the first time. Since it takes place on an altar-like table, it serves as a prophecy of the Sacrifice of the Mass. On the lower panel of the right wing, Mary's advocacy is visualised in the legend of Theophilus (fig. 8)²⁵, who signed a contract with the Devil but was set free with the help of Our Lady and died with a clear conscience.



Fig. 8. *The Virgin Mary frees Knight Theophilus from his pact with the devil. The Saint Barbara Altarpiece, the lower panel of the right, inner wing. Photo Kersti Markus 2013.*

St Birgitta and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary

St Birgitta's vision of the Nativity,²⁶ depicted on the upper panel of the left wing (fig. 9), conveys a message similar to that of the giant candle in the corpus: "She gave birth to a Son, from whom there went out such great and ineffable light and splendour that the sun could not be compared to it" (Rev. VII: 21). Even though the child of the Barbara altarpiece is missing, the Nativity scene from the St Thomas altarpiece gives an idea of Master Francke's visual interpretation of St Birgitta's vision: rays of light emanating from God the Father are falling directly upon the luminous child (fig. 10).

There is yet another element in St Birgitta's vision that was of prime importance to the commissioner of the altarpiece:

Mary's flawless purity. She was a virgin when the child was conceived and so remained after the birth. "And so sudden and momentary was that manner of giving birth that I was unable to notice or discern how or in what member she was giving birth" (Rev. VII: 21).

Even during Birgitta's lifetime, there were discussions in ecclesiastical circles regarding whether it was only Mary's soul or her body as well that had been taken up to Heaven. In the latter case, Mary's body had to be free from all sin. It is, therefore, not surprising that, in describing her vision of the nativity, Birgitta emphasised Mary's clean white dress and praying position, as well as the fact that the body of the Infant Jesus was thoroughly pure after birth: "His flesh was most clean of all filth and uncleanness" (Rev. VII: 21). Birgitta and

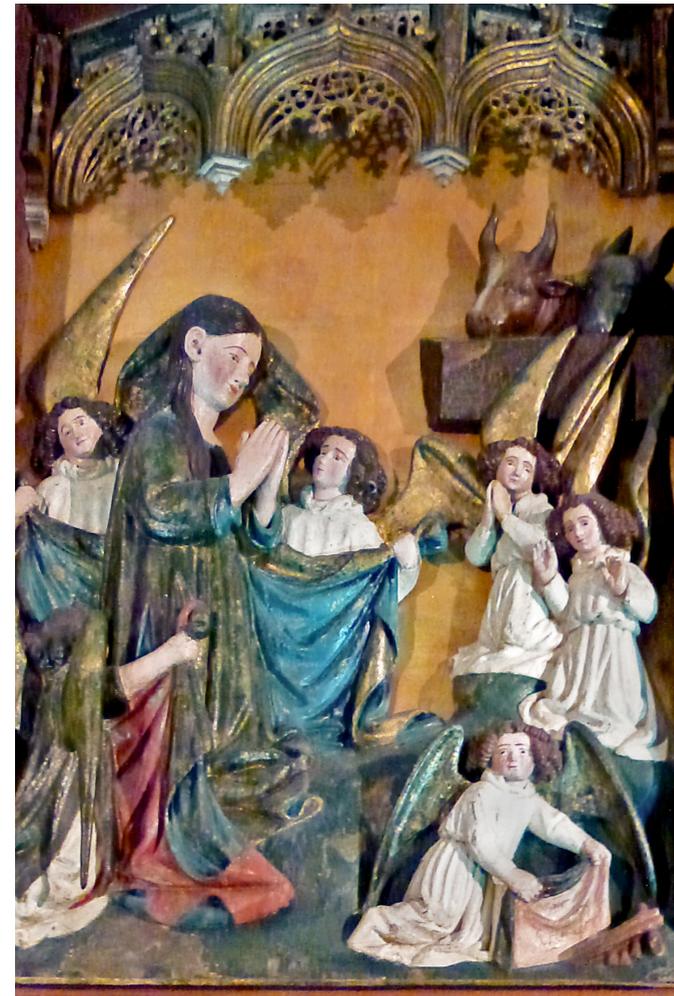


Fig. 9. *St Birgitta's vision of the Nativity. The Saint Barbara Altarpiece, the upper panel of the left, inner wing. Photo Kersti Markus 2013.*

the Birgittine Order were passionate supporters of the theory that Mary's body had been taken up to Heaven.²⁷ The Catholic Church recognised the ascension of Mary's soul and body to Heaven as dogma only in 1950,²⁸ and the Immaculate Conception, i.e. that Mary's womb was free from original sin, which was hotly debated already at

Council of Basel in 1439 was not officially recognised until 1854.²⁹

The depiction of the birth of Jesus according to St Birgitta's vision and the emphasis on the purity and sacredness of Mary's body were not common in the visual art of the 1420s. However, in the circles of Birgittine spirituality, which had



Fig. 10. *The Nativity, according to St Birgitta's vision. Detail of the St Thomas Altarpiece by Master Francke, 1424–36. Tempera on wood (oak). 99x89 cm. From St John's Dominican Monastery, Hamburg, now in the Hamburger Kunsthalle. (CC BY-SA 3.0)*

its roots in Carthusian mysticism and the *devotio bohémica* movement in Prague,³⁰ they were widely accepted. In such a context even the coronation scene appears in a different light. Bridal mysticism is an essential topic in Birgitta's Revelations as well as in the sermons of the Vadstena brothers.³¹ Birgitta is referred to as a "new bride" (Rev. I: 38, 58) and the "chosen wife of Christ" (Rev. I: 40), while Christ is described as "the bridegroom Jesus" (Rev. I: 21).³² Actually, the whole composition of

the coronation leaves an impression of a monastic milieu rather than the courtly setting of the heavenly ruler. This raises the question of what may have influenced the commissioner towards an iconography such as that displayed on the altarpiece.

Depictions of Mary's death have, as a rule, been associated with the rite of *Comendatio Animae* with its prayer to God to receive the soul of the deceased. Seeing Mary die a peaceful and painless death was supposed to convey a feeling of security to

the believers. This aspect is not, however, a primary one in the Barbara altarpiece. The altar of Mary's Dormition in the Chapel of Our Lady in Frankfurt's St Bartholomew's Cathedral, from 1434, offers a clear parallel.³³ Here, too, only apostles surround Mary's bed. Peter is holding an *aspergillum* and another apostle a censer. There is no candle. The apostle next to Peter is holding an open book with the text: *Assumpta est Maria in caelum: gaudent Angeli, laudantes benedicunt Dominum* (Mary is assumed into heaven: the Angels do rejoice, and they give laud to bless our Lord). The next apostle is pointing at the cross he is holding, thus indicating who raised Mary up to Heaven. We are dealing here with the Office of Our Blessed Lady, the Antiphon of the First Lauds. The altar was, therefore, used for the Liturgy of the Hours.

Regarding the Barbara altarpiece, we should look for the sources of inspiration in the Offices of Our Lady created by St Birgitta and her confessor St Peter of Skänninge. What is new in them, compared to the traditional liturgy of Our Lady? The Swedish theologian Tryggve Lundén has researched the topic exhaustively.³⁴ According to him, the Blessed Virgin was usually remembered on major church holidays but, as this was not considered sufficient, the Little Office of Our Lady was added to the Liturgy of the Hours. In Birgitta's lifetime, it was practised on a daily basis both in convent and parish churches, and also gained popularity among laymen who acquired Books of Hours. While the traditional Liturgy of the Hours varied ac-

ording to the progress of the ecclesiastical year, those of Birgitta and Peter varied on a weekly basis. Therefore, there was an Office of our Lady for each day. Among them, the one for Saturday stands out, since it was dedicated to the Death and Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The one for Wednesday was also remarkable, as it dealt with the Immaculate Conception (*conceptio immaculata beatae Mariae Virginis*), actively promoting the idea of Mary's purity. In Birgitta's lifetime, this was a disputed theological issue: the Franciscans supported it, whereas the Dominicans were against it. The Thursday Office gave opportunity to meditate on the birth of Jesus, who was conceived without Original Sin, and the one for Friday focused on the Passion of Christ and the Compassion of Mary.³⁵

If we compare the scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary on the Barbara altarpiece with those on the Birgitta altarpiece (consecrated in 1459) in the Vadstena convent,³⁶ the result is that they are all, except for the legend of Theophilus, present in both: St Birgitta's vision of the birth of Jesus, the Circumcision of Jesus, the Death and Burial of the Virgin Mary and the Assumption. Hence, it is possible to conclude that the commissioner of the Barbara altarpiece was well aware of the Birgittines' characteristic Liturgy of the Hours of the Virgin Mary, and that this could have motivated the commissioning of the sculptural programme. Since there was no direct model available – the Vadstena altarpiece is several decades younger than that in Ka-

lanti – the impulse must have originated in a sphere of Birgittine spirituality.

The Commissioner of the Altarpiece

Earlier researchers usually link the Barbara altarpiece to Turku Cathedral and consider Bishop Magnus II Tavast (1412–1450) the most likely commissioner.³⁷ I share this view, but I do not consider that acquiring a retable for St Barbara's altar the only reason for commissioning it. Magnus studied at the University of Prague, where he was awarded a bachelor's degree in 1396 and a master's in 1398. He became chancellor to King Erik (of Pomerania) of the Kalmar Union at a time when the Vadstena convent was the intellectual centre of the Union.³⁸ Queen Margrete I had been raised by Birgitta's daughter Märta Ulfsson, and both Margrete and her stepson Erik were fervent supporters of St Birgitta's ideas. Märta's daughter Ingegärd became the first official abbess of Vadstena convent.³⁹

When Magnus was appointed bishop of Turku in 1412, he remained loyal to King Erik. In May 1413 Magnus accompanied Erik when he visited Vadstena convent for the first time after the death of Queen Margrete (1412). During the visit, the king promised to support the building of Vadstena convent and the founding of a new Birgittine convent on Lolland. In 1416–1420 Magnus was actively involved in politics, often visiting Denmark and, when possible, Vadstena.⁴⁰ A visit to Vadstena marked the canonisation process of three Swedish saints: Bishop Nils Hermandsson, Bishop Brynolf of Skara and the

Dominican sister Ingrid from Skänninge – all three with connections to Birgitta.⁴¹ Considering this background, it is not surprising that it was Magnus who in 1438 founded a Birgittine convent in Nådendal/Naantali, and who also acted as its greatest benefactor until his death in 1452.

When Magnus took office, in 1412, he added the feast of St Barbara to the calendar of feasts at Turku Cathedral. This is reflected in a letter of indulgence issued 9 November 1412 in which four cardinals grant an indulgence of 100 days to those attending Turku Cathedral on certain feast days, e.g. on the feast of St Barbara.⁴² Shortly before, Magnus had been ordained bishop in St Catherine's Church in Rome.⁴³ It is likely that the altar in Turku Cathedral was constructed in the same year but we do not know exactly where. St Catherine's Chapel, erected by Bishop Johannes III Westfal (1370–1385),⁴⁴ is the place generally preferred in the existing historiography;⁴⁵ the written sources, however, do not corroborate this. The archaeologist Juhani Rinne, who conducted thorough restoration work in the cathedral in 1922–29 and published the results in three volumes, does not explain the placement of altars in the St Catherine's Chapel. The same applies to the position of the altars in the entire church.⁴⁶ In actual fact, we do not even know where St Catherine's Chapel was originally located. There is a two-bay chapel (*Ristikuori* or *Agricolan kappeli*) on the southern side of the present chancel with an ambulatory covered in stellar vaults with garlands of leaves and flowers.

While the main cells of the western vault present the symbols of the evangelists among the garlands, those of the eastern bay depict St Anne and the Holy Virgins, St Barbara, St Catherine and St Ursula. The chancel with an ambulatory, however, was erected only in the 1430s or 1440s⁴⁷ and the two originally separated chapels were combined into a single, two-bay chapel in the 1470s. The vaults also date back to the same period.⁴⁸ The current layout of the chapel and the possible locations of the altars do not, therefore, reflect the situation in Turku Cathedral when the St Barbara altar was constructed.

Even though we do not know where the Barbara altarpiece was initially located, the erection of the Corpus Christi altar and chapel offer interesting parallels to the retable. According to the bishop's chronicles, Magnus erected the Corpus Christi Chapel in the cathedral, where he was later buried.⁴⁹ The chapel became the burial place of the Tavast family. There were plans to erect an altar before the time of Magnus, but they were realised only in 1421. The bishop consecrated the altar to Corpus Christi, the Holy Angels and St Birgitta, and provided it with a large prebend. The festive consecration of the altar and the chapel took place on 10 June 1425, on the Sunday following the Feast of Corpus Christi. Magnus purchased an expensive monstrance from Venice for the altar and provided all the other necessary items.⁵⁰

Both angels and Christ's Passion were significant in Birgitta's visions. It is, there-

fore, possible to observe the clear influence of the Birgittines in the choice of the saints for the Corpus Christi altar. Birgit Klockars has associated the deep meditations on Christ's Passion with the influence of the Birgittine spirituality on Bishop Magnus.⁵¹ The bishop's chronicles draw attention to his custom of following this approach.⁵² Other researchers, however, have not supported Klockars' opinion.⁵³ This is understandable, since Magnus visited the Holy Land before the consecration of the altar, and that could have been the reason for introducing the cult of Corpus Christi in Turku Cathedral. However, Klockars' opinion is supported by the fact that, in the *Missale Aboense, Conceptio Mariae* is regarded as *totum duplex*, i.e. of the highest possible category. In Finland, the feast was first mentioned in the diocese of Turku in 1430.⁵⁴ The liturgy of Turku Cathedral followed the Dominican model, and since the Dominicans did not recognise the innate purity of the Virgin Mary, it had to be Birgittine spirituality that influenced Magnus to introduce the feast in his cathedral. The commissioning of the retable may, therefore, well have taken place in the second half of the 1420s.

The St Barbara altarpiece probably came to Kalanti Church in the 17th century, when it was also repainted. During this century, the wealthier town churches in Sweden, and thus in Finland, renewed their furnishing and decor on quite an extensive scale and surplus articles such as medieval altarpieces were often sold or donated to small country parish churches.⁵⁵ The re-

used retables, frequently considerably reduced in size and the number of statues, very often depict the life of the Virgin Mary, including the scene of the Coronation – just like the one in Kalanti.

Conclusion

The cycle of the Virgin Mary in the Barbara altarpiece is strongly focused on Mary's bodily assumption, a theme that elevates her above the other saints and renders her equal to the Son of God. The retable may well have served as a devotional image, and the layout of the scenes seems to support this opinion. Mary's purity and the sanctity of her body are shown in the upper register, and both scenes expand the central theme of Mary's death and assumption. The Circumcision of Jesus is located at the viewer's eye level, encouraging meditation on the suffering of both Mary and Christ. The meditating apostles in the corpus are positioned on the same level, in line with the depiction of the legend of Theophilus, and showing that prayers directed to Mary could result in miracles and relief from sin. In this connection, it is worth remembering that the feast of St Barbara was first mentioned in the context of Turku Cathedral in a letter of indulgence.

Even though the present article does not discuss the paintings depicting the legend of St Barbara, it is significant that the two scenes representing physical suffering are also positioned in the middle of the retable, at a kneeling viewer's eye level. They show a beautiful female body that, despite horrible injuries, is able to heal

itself immediately. The divine body appears to be the central message of the entire altarpiece.

The depiction of the birth of Jesus according to St Birgitta's vision provides a significant clue to the commissioner's connections with Birgittine spirituality. However, the study of the whole Virgin Mary cycle demonstrates that the connections and influences were much stronger than may be explained only by the cult of the Saint or prevailing trends in the shaping of the altarpieces. The stress placed on Mary's purity and the sacredness of her body were not common subjects in the art of the 1420s and this indicates that the commissioner was well acquainted with the mysticism of the Birgittines. In my opinion, there was only one man in Finland who, during the first half of the fifteenth century, filled all the necessary requisites: the bishop of Turku, Magnus II Tavast. He had the means, the connections, the artistic awareness and a clearly demonstrated desire to support the Birgittines.

Notes

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- 2 Waismaa-Pietarila 1994, 173.
- 3 Riska 1959; Nallinmaa-Luoto & Alifrosti 1999, 179–180.
- 4 Hiekkänen 2003, 185.
- 5 Ibidem.
- 6 Nallinmaa-Luoto & Alifrosti 1999, 165.
- 7 Martens 1929, 50, notes 56, 108, 109.
- 8 Pylkkänen 1966.
- 9 Meinander 1908, 157–177.
- 10 Martens 1929; Grohn 1969, 17.
- 11 Pylkkänen 1966.
- 12 Pächt 1969, 27.
- 13 Bericht über die dendrochronologische Untersuchung des „Hl. Barbara Altars“ (Meister Francke, Inv.-Nr. 4329.6), 13.03.1996. The results of the survey were presented to the participants of the conference mentioned above in note 1.
- 14 Meinander 1908; Goldschmidt 1914/15; Martens 1929; Nurmi 1952; Pylkkänen 1966; Waismaa-Pietarila 1994; Räsänen 2006; Reijonen 2011.
- 15 Holzherr 1971, 30–33, 45.
- 16 Fallberg Sundmark 2008, 69–88, 129–133, 214–215.
- 17 http://www.landesmuseum-hannover.niedersachsen.de/portal/live.php?navigation_id=30786&article_id=105978&_psmand=183 (accessed 20.11.2014).
- 18 Bray 2012, 304.
- 19 Mänd 2006, 313, 318.
- 20 Kretzenbacher 1999, 10ff.
- 21 James 1924, 310; (Ps.-)Melito of Sardis, *The Passing of Blessed Mary*: <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~sshoemak/texts/dormitionL/dormitionL1.htm> (accessed 4.12.2014).
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- 24 Schiller 1976 (1988), 94–96; Schiller 1980, 149.
- 25 Fryer 1926 (1967); Cothren 1984.
- 26 On the earliest depictions of St Birgitta's vision, see Svanberg 2003.
- 27 Härdelin 2005, 421–422; Lundén 1979, 37.
- 28 Beumer & Zigenaus 1988, 277.
- 29 Meuthen 2003, 1520.
- 30 Härdelin 2001, 286–288.
- 31 Härdelin 1998, 350–353.
- 32 Searby, Morris 2006, 44.
- 33 de Weerth 1999, 91.
- 34 Lundén 1976.
- 35 Lundén 1979, 34–37.
- 36 Andersson 1983, 45, 52–55.
- 37 Pylkkänen 1966; Waismaa-Pietarila 1994; Palola 1997, 248. Markus Hiekkänen prefers Kalanti Church as the original site for the altarpiece. Hiekkänen 2003, 185. In her conference paper "Nykyrko, dess altarskåp och de målade bilderna av donatorparet på östra väggen", presented at the 24th Nordic Symposium on Iconographic Research in Tallinn on 28–31 August 2014, Elinä Räsänen supported this opinion.
- 38 Palola 1997, 116–123.
- 39 Etting 1997, 251.
- 40 Palola 1997, 307–310.
- 41 Klockars 1976, 26–30.

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- 43 Palola 1997, 155–156.
- 44 Juusten 1988, 44.
- 45 Pylkkänen 1966.
- 46 Rinne 1941, 1948.
- 47 Drake 2001, 90.
- 48 Under bishop Konrad Bitz (1460–89) the Chapel of All Saints was constructed in the eastern part of the chancel, which prompted the relocation of numerous altars, including the reshaping of the *Ristikuori*.
- 49 Juusten 1988, 45.
- 50 Palola 1997, 182, 246; Klockars 1976, 31.
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