



Saint Birgitta's Altar Screen

When the magnificent Birgitta altar screen was finally in its place in the abbey church Brother Rötger could breathe freely again. Now was the beginning of October 1459 and four years earlier the abbey had made a contract with the wood-carver Hans Hesse in Lübeck that he should make a special altar screen. Two years later on a visit to Vadstena Hesse had declared that the screen was finished. He was then paid in ready money as well as in kind, including cheese from Västergötland, a coat of Leyden cloth lined with polecat fur and a good grey horse. But the altar screen was not delivered despite Hesse's promises and the advance payment from the abbey. When Brother Rötger realized that Hesse had deceived the abbey and that the altar screen was only half-finished his patience gave out and another artist, Johannes Stenrat in Lübeck, took over the order and finished the work. It was an expensive work of art with carved figures and double doors with the most beautiful paintings honouring the Saviour, Virgin Mary and the founder of the order, St Birgitta. The great benefactor of the abbey, King Karl Knutsson, had contributed one third of the original costs. The bill amounted to approximately 600 Lübeck marks, double the calculated sum – a very large sum in those days.

The Birgitta altar screen is a unique work of art, its dimensions as well as its glorification of Birgitta and her life. The inhabitants of the abbey had certainly decided upon the contents themselves. The sculptures are thus carved by two different artists, they differ strikingly. This is obvious both in the art of carving and how the figures are shaped. The representation of Birgitta is neither typical of Hesse nor strikingly like Stenrat's other Birgitta figures in Sweden, the altar screens in Bälinge and Kråksmåla. It is

remarkable that the neck cloth fits tight around the neck and that golden hair can be seen under the veil. Could lack of time have made Stenrat take a half-finished Mary figure, perhaps meant for a pietà representation, and hastily recarved it into a Birgitta figure? From the paintings on the doors there remains enough for us to see points of similarity to an altar screen by the Master of the Nicolai altar screen in Rostock.

During medieval time the altar screen was placed in the pilgrims' end of the abbey church, approximately where the big organ is today. To this church of pilgrimage came a penitent, Kristina from Rinna, to get help for her severe illness at the grave of St Katarina. In her dream she then heard St Katarina urge her to walk on her bare knees around St Birgitta's altar. Penitents and benefactors could also leave their gifts in front of the altar.

The altar screen was still in the same place even after the Reformation, probably until 1829 when it was replaced by St Mary's altar screen from the demolished church of St Per. During centuries visitors have certainly been able to break away wooden details, and the painting has flaked but the sculptures are still relatively well preserved. The surface treatment, however, metals and painting, is not as well preserved. After the restoration of the church in the 1890s the Birgitta altar screen was placed together with the other medieval objects in a museum corner in the north-east end of the church. Some decades later the altar screen was moved to the south wall. Since the 1980s its place is here in the brothers' chancel.

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The scenes of Birgitta's altar screen

1-12. *The two inner doors open. Sculptured scenes depict the lives of Maria and Jesus.*

1. The Annunciation.

The Virgin Maria becomes pregnant when the angel Gabriel greets her "Hail to thee Maria full of grace!" and Maria answers "Look, I am the Lord's servant".

2. The Encounter of Maria and Elizabeth.

At Maria's greeting Elizabeth's child, John the Baptist, gave a start within her.

3. The Birth of Jesus.

Birgitta visited the Holy Land at the end of her life. In the birth cave she saw in a vision how the Child Jesus was born. The little child lies on the ground, Maria kneels quite close to him.

4. The Circumcision.

Jewish boys are circumcised on their eighth day which also happened to Jesus.

5. The worship of the Magi.

The Magi had followed the star which was to lead them to a new-born king. After finding the Child Jesus they brought him their gifts.

6. Maria in the Temple.

The pious Simeon had been promised to see Jesus before he died. When Joseph and Maria carried the Child Jesus to the temple Simeon took him in his arms and praised God.



7. The Slaughter of the Innocents.

King Herod felt threatened by the word that a new king was to be born. Therefore he let his soldiers kill all new-born baby boys.

8. The Escape to Egypt.

An angel urged Maria and Joseph to flee. Here the family is on its way to Egypt. Herod's horsemen broke off their pursuit when they heard that wheat had grown up where the family had passed. In the background horsemen and tall ears of wheat.

9. Jesus at the Age of Twelve in the Temple.

When Jesus was twelve years old he remained in the temple among the teachers, listened and asked questions. Those who heard him were amazed at his wisdom.

10. Maria's Death.

When Maria died she was surrounded by John, Peter and the other disciples.

11. Maria's Funeral Procession.

Disciples carry Maria's coffin, which a soldier tries to overturn. Another legend tells about a man who impeded the coffin and his hands got stuck.

12. The Reception of Maria in Heaven.

Maria sits on Christ's arm, like a small child. The angels rejoice and play in the surrounding circle of clouds.

I-XIII. *Sculptured scenes show the glorification of Birgitta. Next to her on both sides she is honoured by everybody in Heaven, on Earth and in the Underworld.*

I. The Saint Birgitta. Birgitta gives her revelations to two cardinals.

II-III. The Heavenly Crowds. The twelve apostles standing on blue circles of clouds honour Birgitta.

IV-V. The Heavenly Crowds. Virgin Maria, John the Baptist and a cardinal, a pope, a bishop and a monk honour Birgitta.

XIV. The Predella.

The frame on which stands the Birgitta altar screen probably comes from another of the many disappeared altar screens of the abbey church. In the centre the resurrected Christ and the instruments of torture with which he was tortured before the crucifixion. Christ is surrounded by the Fathers of the Church, from the left; Ambrose, Gregory, Hieronymus and Augustine.

VI. The Wordly Estates. A king, a prince and other powerful men honour Birgitta.

VII. The Clergy. A pope, a cardinal, a bishop and two priests honour Birgitta.

VIII-IX. The Birgittine Order, the Order of the Most Holy Saviour. Birgittine sisters and Birgittine brothers.

X-XI. Purgatory. In the Underworld devils throw sinners into the jaws of the monster Leviathan. Sinners are tortured in the fire to be purged of their sins.

XII-XIII. The Last Stage of Purgatory. The sinners are tormented by fatigue and finally the souls have been cleansed white and their torment is to long for Heaven.

C- H and J - O.

The two outer doors open.

Painted pictures show scenes from Birgitta's legend.

C. Birgitta's Birth.

This scene probably represents a priest seeing Maria in a cloud of light, she said "To Birger has been born a daughter whose wonderful voice shall be heard all over the world". Maria, surrounded by a circle of clouds and dressed in red-patterned gold brocade and a blue mantle, is holding a rose-coloured book.

D. Birgitta at the Age of Seven.

Just opposite to her bed Birgitta saw a lady in shining clothes asking "Do you want this crown?" The lady put the crown on Birgitta's head. To the right an altar, where a woman in red-patterned gold brocade sits on a throne.

E. Birgitta sees Christ.

Two different buildings. A blood-stained body is dimly to be seen. Has probably represented the crucified Christ who showed himself to the ten-year-old Birgitta and said "Look how tortured I am".

F. Maria Helps Birgitta.

The twelve-year-old Birgitta was doing needlework in gold and silk with bad results. When her aunt Katarina entered she saw an unknown virgin sitting

beside Birgitta, helping her. Here are several girls doing embroidery on the same ribbon, put up on a wooden frame.

G. Unknown Motif.

Indoor scene with several figures.

H. Maria Prevents Birgitta from Being Punished.

Birgitta's aunt Katarina wanted to punish Birgitta for excessive religious zeal, but the rod broke. The scene shows a bed, a stool and a standing woman dressed in green-patterned gold brocade.

The painted scenes



P-U. *The two inner doors closed. The painted pictures of the scenes show the story of the Passion.*

P. The Riding into Jerusalem. Christ is riding on a donkey. People put twigs and mantles on the ground in front of them.

Q. The Gethsemane Garden. Judas, in yellow, betrays Jesus, in grey, in the Gethsemane Garden in front of the soldiers.

R. The Scourging. Jesus is tied to a martyr pole, his body is blood-stained. An executioner swings a scourge towards him.

S. The Way to Golgotha. Jesus carries the cross on his way to Golgotha.

T. The Deposition. Jesus is taken down from the cross by a man in a grey dress. A ladder is leaning against the trunk of the cross. Maria in a blue mantle stands to the left.

U. The Resurrection of Christ. Christ dressed in a red mantle holds a cross-banner in his left hand. Around the sealed grave the soldiers, who should keep watch, are asleep.

J. Maybe the Calling Vision. When Birgitta was praying in her chapel she heard a voice saying: "Woman hear me. You shall be my bride and my mouthpiece". Birgitta is kneeling, her eyes turned upwards, in front of a desk with an open book. Birgitta in a rosy dress and mantle of blue-patterned gold brocade.

K. The Angel's Dictation.

Birgitta asked Christ for advice how to write prayers for the sisters in the intended convent. An angel then dictated to Birgitta who took down what she had heard. The prayers are called "The Angel's Song of Praise". An angel and Birgitta with book and pen.

L. The Birth Vision.

The birth of Jesus was revealed to Birgitta in Bethlehem. She saw the little new-born child lying naked on the ground. Two small angels are kneeling in worship, Maria's blue mantle can be seen in fragments and in the background Joseph with a candle in his hand.

M. Birgitta's Death.

After her return to Rome the 70-year-old Birgitta died surrounded by her confessors, children and friends. She lies on the floor on a straw mattress, on the altar is Christ, in agony.

N. Birgitta's Journey Home.

On a bier with carrier bars is a plane coffin covered with silver brocade. To the left behind the bier a bishop, perhaps Alfonso of Jaen, in red-patterned gold brocade. One of the women is certainly Birgitta's daughter Katarina, the monk with the book bag possibly Master Petrus. The scene depicts how Birgitta's relics are carried in triumph through Europe home to Vadstena.

O. Possibly the Canonization.

Birgitta was canonized in 1391 and enshrined in the abbey church. Several persons are assembled around a green object in the centre. Two persons in grey are to be seen of whom the left one carries the crown of the sisters.

The two outer doors entirely closed.

The paintings on the doors of Birgitta's altar screen are severely damaged by damp and great fluctuations of temperature. In 1849 the art historian CG Brunius described the deplorable condition of the altar screen. It had then been kept unsheltered for several years since it was moved in 1829. After the Reformation in the 16th century some of the sculptures and paintings had also been damaged.



A. Unknown motif.

Here most of the painting has disappeared. Traces of halos and colour fragments of figures are dimly to be seen.

B. The Crucifixion.

Crucifixion scene with Jesus in the middle, surrounded by the two thieves. In the foreground to the left Maria in a blue dress and Johannes in a red dress may be seen. Some executioners and soldiers are dimly to be seen furthest to the right.

