Maria H. Oen

Chapter 13

The Locus of Truth: St Birgitta of Sweden and the Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

The Son of God speaks to blessed Birgitta, his bride, saying: “Go now and depart from Rome for Jerusalem! Why do you bring up the excuse of your age? I am the creator of nature. I can weaken or strengthen nature, just as I please. I shall be with you. I shall direct your way. I shall lead you there and bring you back to Rome, and I shall procure for you what you need, more sufficiently than you have ever had before.”¹

With these words, Christ exhorts the Swedish noblewoman Birgitta Birgersdotter (c.1303–1373) to leave the city that had been her home for more than two decades and to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The quotation is taken from Birgitta’s *Liber celestis revelacionum* (*The heavenly book of revelations*, hereafter referred to as *Revelaciones*), a work that claims to record divine visions she received from the time of her husband’s death, in Sweden in the mid-1340s, until her own death, in Rome in 1373.² Birgitta is said to have experienced hundreds of

¹ “Filius Dei loquitur beate Birgitte sponse sue dicens: ‘Ite iam et recedite de Roma ad Iherusalem! Quid causaris de etate? Ego sum nature conditor, ego possum infirmare et roborare naturam, sicut michi placet. Ego ero vobiscum, ego dirigam viam vestram, ego ducam et reducam vos ad Roman [sic] et procurabo vobis necessaria sufficiencius quam vmquam habuistis prius.’” Birgitta of Sweden, *Revelaciones Books I–VIII*, 8 vols, ed. Carl-Gustaf Undhagen, *et al.*, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm & Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell Boktryckeri AB, 1967–2002, (Rev. VII: 9). All translations from the *Revelaciones* are from *The Revelations of St. Birgitta of Sweden*, 4 vols, trans. Denis Searby, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006–2015.

² For critical editions of the textual corpus, see Birgitta of Sweden 1967–2002, *Revelaciones*; Birgitta of Sweden, *Opera minora*, 3 vols, ed. Sten Eklund, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm & Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell Boktryckeri AB, 1972–1991. For an introduction to Birgitta of Sweden and her life, see Bridget Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999) and Maria H. Oen (ed.), *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and Her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2019). On Birgitta’s visions, see also Maria H. Oen, “The Visions of St. Birgitta: A Study of the Making and Reception of Images in the Later Middle Ages,” PhD diss. (Oslo: University

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Maria H. Oen, Associate Professor of Art History and Deputy Director of The Swedish Institute of Classical Studies in Rome, Italy

visions, or revelations, concerning a wide variety of issues: the fate of souls in purgatory; divine instructions on political matters; and practical advice regarding her personal life, including her transfer from Sweden to Rome and later to Jerusalem. Additionally, she received a number of promises from Christ and the Virgin that one day she would come to the very place where Christ was born and died and that, upon arrival there, she would learn even more about the *true* circumstances of these sacred events.³ And so it seems she did. In November 1371, Birgitta, who was then approaching seventy years, left Rome and sailed from Naples to the port of Jaffa, via Cyprus, together with an entourage including two of her children, Katarina and Birger, her Swedish confessors, who had been residing with her in Rome, Master Peter Olofsson of Skänninge (1298–1378) and Prior Peter Olofsson of Alvastra (1307–1390), as well as her staunch supporter Alfonso Pecha (c.1330–1389), former bishop of Jaén in Spain.⁴ After about sixteen months, in the spring of 1373, the group returned to Rome, where Birgitta died on 23 July. Immediately after her death, Birgitta's followers, led by her fellow pilgrims to the Holy Land, set about the process of having her elevated to sainthood: the two Swedish confessors composed a *vita* that recorded Birgitta's virtuous life and miracles; paintings of her were commissioned for the promotion of the cult; and petitions for her canonisation were sent to the pope. As a part of this endeavour, Alfonso of Jaén, who had joined Birgitta's circle in Rome around 1367, compiled the first editions of her *Revelaciones*, and had the text copied and distributed among European royalties, nobility, and, importantly, the papal commission that would evaluate the orthodoxy of the text.

In this chapter, I will explore the pivotal role of Birgitta's pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the construction of her image of holiness. Birgitta's primary claim to sanctity was her *Revelaciones*, which recorded her supernatural visionary experiences. The authentication and validation of the Swedish laywoman's bold assertion of having access to transcendent realities and to truths that left even scriptural truth wanting was thus paramount to the campaign for proving her sanctity. In the following it will be argued

of Oslo, 2015), Claire L. Sahlin, *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001), and Julia Bolton Holloway, *Saint Bride and Her Book: Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1992).

³ For example, *Revelaciones*: 5, 172–5 (especially Rev. V: 13); 7, 114, 130 (Revs VII: 1, 6).

⁴ On Birgitta's journey, see Aron Andersson, *St. Birgitta and the Holy Land* (Stockholm: The Museum of National Antiquities, 1973); Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, 118–142; Sylvia Schein, "Bridget of Sweden, Margery Kempe and Women's Jerusalem Pilgrimages in the Middle Ages," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 14:1 (1999); Arne Jönsson, "Birgitta's pilgrimsfärd till det heliga landet," in *Birgitta av Vadstena. Pilgrim och profet 1303–1373*, ed. Per Beskow and Annette Landen (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2003); Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, "Brigida di Svevia e la reinvenzione della Storia Sacra. Il cammino la terra la visione," in *Predicatori, mercanti, pellegrini. L'Occidente medievale e lo sguardo letterario sull'Altro tra l'Europa e il Levante*, ed. Giuseppe Mascherpa and Giovanni Strinna (Mantua: Universitas Studiorum, 2018).

that, during the canonisation process, Birgitta's journey to the Holy Land and her visits to the shrines in and around Jerusalem were adduced to support the truthfulness of her *Revelaciones*. As a part of this process, and for the establishment of her saintly reputation, Birgitta is both explicitly and implicitly linked to *auctoritates*⁵ who were also famous Jerusalem travellers and whose presence in the Holy Land played a central role in their perceived access to the divine. Thus, the strategy chosen for the promotion of Birgitta differed from those employed for other holy women of the period, while nonetheless tying in directly with contemporary discourse from throughout the Middle Ages regarding the value of the Jerusalem pilgrimage and the significance of personal experience of the biblical sites for a deeper understanding of sacred history.⁶

By highlighting Birgitta's ties to the Holy Land and other well-established saints who travelled to the *loca sancta* of Palestine, Birgitta's supporters were able to form connections with existing debates on Jerusalem pilgrimage, and also on knowledge acquisition, especially concerning Scripture and spiritual knowledge. But this attempt to draw attention to Birgitta's presence in the Holy Land may also be related to her Swedish origin and the general perception of the Nordic region in the Middle Ages. In the canonisation bull of 1391, Boniface IX directly references a view commonly found in ancient and medieval literature that the North is the regional source of all evil [*ab Aquilone omne malum*].⁷ The visionary is described as being from afar, from remote

5 *Auctoritas* is a complex word to define. In medieval usage it refers to "authority", but it is also closely connected to the word *auctor* (author) – someone who *possesses* authority. *Auctoritates* can also be texts, i.e. works worthy of faith, obedience, and imitation. In his discussion of the concepts *auctor* and *auctoritas* in the Middle Ages, Albert Russell Ascoli emphasises the transpersonal and the transhistorical meaning of the terms. The ultimate *auctor/auctoritas* is God/Scripture, from which authority passes on to the human authors of Scripture, the evangelists and prophets, etc., and to the early interpreters, the Church Fathers and their texts. Saints too possess *auctoritas* and are worthy of faith and imitation. An important strategy in the promotion of a potential saint in the later Middle Ages, when "new" saints became common (i.e. recently deceased people who were venerated for their virtuous lives and perceived holiness, as opposed to the early Christian martyrs and confessors), would be to present this saint *in spe* as imitating, or emulating, an established saint of the past who was culturally understood to possess *auctoritas*. For a useful introduction to the concepts *auctor* and *auctoritas* in medieval usage, see Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. ch. 1, 2.

6 On the role of matter and the physical realm in relation to truth and knowledge in the *Revelaciones* and the canonization proceedings, see Maria H. Oen, "'Apparuit ei Christus in eodem loco. . .': Physical Presence and Divine Truth in St. Birgitta of Sweden's Revelations from the Holy Land," in *Faith and Knowledge in Late Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavia*, ed. Karoline Kjesrud and Mikael Males (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020) and "Iconography and Visions: St. Birgitta's Revelation of the Nativity of Christ," in *The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art: Iconography, Iconology, and Interpreting the Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages*, ed. Lena Liepe (Kalamazoo MI – Berlin: Medieval Institute Publications, 2019).

7 This is also articulated in the Old Testament, where, in the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer 1:14), God expresses that "from the north shall evil break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land" [*ab aquilone pandetur malum super omnes habitatores terrae*], cf. the introduction to this book (Kristin

lands [*de ultimis finibus*], and that she was chosen by God “in order that something good might come even from the North” [*ut etiam ab Aquilone aliquid boni esset*].⁸ As Birgitta’s claim to sanctity differed greatly from that of the Scandinavian martyr kings of the conversion period, such as St Olav of Norway, it is possible to construe the strong focus on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem – the geographical centre of the world and of Christianity – as an element in the validation strategy. Birgitta’s journey toward sainthood entailed moving, literally, from the “evil” fringes of the world into its very heart. The emphasis on her pilgrimage makes clear this process, as does the tactic of enrolling established authoritative female saints from the upper classes of Rome who also made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They served as models for her to emulate as she, too, having left the North behind for good, embarked from the *caput mundi* to the *umbilicus mundi* and back again.

The chapter opens with a presentation of Birgitta’s pilgrimage and the particular access to divine truth that, according to the *Revelaciones* and the hagiographical texts, she acquired in the Holy Land. I will then proceed with a discussion of the concept of sacred places and their epistemological potential expressed in these sources, as well as a consideration of the *auctoritates* that Birgitta’s supporters employed to legitimize the claim of her access to divine knowledge beyond Scripture.

Birgitta and the *Loca Sancta* of the Holy Land

The last of the seven books of revelations compiled and edited by Alfonso of Jaén centres on Birgitta’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem.⁹ Thus, the roughly chronologically structured corpus culminates in the arrival of the visionary in the sacred city in 1372, where – exactly as Birgitta has been promised in previous revelations – she would learn the truth about the earthly lives of the main protagonists in her visions, namely, Christ and his mother.¹⁰ Birgitta’s pilgrimage, in this edition, is thus framed as a journey towards a deeper insight into sacred history that is expressly

B. Aavitsland), 21–4. All biblical references are made to the Clementine Vulgate. For the canonisation bull, see *Acta sanctorum*, 68 vols, ed. Johannes Bollandus and Godefridus Henschenius, Antwerp & Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1643–1940.

⁸ *Acta sanctorum* 1643–1940: 4, col. 469.

⁹ There is general consensus among the editors of the critical corpus that Alfonso made two redactions during the 1370s. The first one included only seven books, whereas the second redaction included another book, *Liber caelestis imperatoris ad reges*, consisting mainly of chapters already present in the foregoing books with a specific political content, as well as a prologue, written by Alfonso himself, which serves as an apology supporting the authenticity of Birgitta’s visions, the so-called *Epistola solitarii ad reges*. For the second redaction, see Birgitta of Sweden 1967–2002, *Revelaciones*: 8. For a discussion of Alfonso’s edition of the *Revelaciones*, see the introduction of Carl-Gustaf Undhagen in vol. 1, 1–37.

¹⁰ See, *Revelaciones*: 5, 172–5 (espc. Rev. V.13); 7, 114, 130 (Revs VII: 1, 6).

connected to the shrines marking the geographical sites described in the Gospels. What, then, did Birgitta learn upon her arrival in the Holy Land?

The first reference in the *Revelaciones* to Birgitta's presence in Jerusalem occurs in Alfonso's prologue to a vision she is said to have received upon first entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, on 11 May 1372.¹¹ Fittingly, the vision concerns the value of pilgrimage to this specific place. Since the early days of Christianity, the Fathers of the Church disagreed about the significance of Jerusalem. The question rested on whether it was necessary to go *there*, to earthly Jerusalem, in the quest for salvation. Does God not reside in Heavenly Jerusalem, in that spiritual place that every Christian can find in his or her heart? Or would a physical presence at the sites described in Scripture, where Christ had lived and died and his sacrifice had been prophesied, yield greater knowledge of sacred history and thus bring one closer to God? Writings by Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Augustine, Eusebius, and Cyril of Jerusalem provide varying answers to these questions; and the patristic debate on the value of pilgrimage to the city of Jerusalem continued throughout the Middle Ages.¹² In Birgitta's first vision from Jerusalem, God's opinion, according

11 *Revelaciones*: 7, 163 (Rev. VII: 14). The date is given in Alfonso's deposition in the canonisation proceedings: "... octaua ascensionis Domini ..."; see *Acta et processus canonizationis b. Birgitte*, ed. Isak Collijn, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, Ser. 2, Latinska skrifter, Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell boktryckeri, 1924–1931.

12 For an overview of the scriptural foundation of attitudes to Jerusalem, see Bianca Kühnel, *From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem: Representations of the Holy City in Christian Art of the First Millennium* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1987), 17–59. On the attitudes of the Church Fathers towards Jerusalem pilgrimage, see P. W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); John Wilkinson, "Jewish Holy Places and the Origins of Christian Pilgrimage," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert Ousterhout (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Hillel Isaac Newman, "Between Jerusalem and Bethlehem: Jerome and the Holy Places of Palestine," in *Sanctity of Time and Space in Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Alberdina Houtman, *et al.*, Jewish & Christian Perspectives Series (Leiden: Brill, 1998); and Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, "The Attitude of Church Fathers toward Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," in *Jerusalem: Its Sanctity and Centrality to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York: Continuum, 1999). On the origins of Christian pilgrimage and an evaluation of different theoretical positions, see Kenneth G. Holum, "Hadrian and St. Helena: Imperial Travel and the Origins of Christian Holy Land Pilgrimage," in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert Ousterhout (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990). There are numerous scholarly works on pilgrimage to Holy Land. For an overview of the early Christian period and the later medieval period, see E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Empire AD 312–460* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) and Nicole Chareyron, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages*, trans. Donald Wilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), respectively. On pilgrimage and the reception of the architecture of the Holy Land, see Kathryn Blair Moore, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land: Reception from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2017). For Scandinavian pilgrimages to Jerusalem, see Chapter 11 (Denys Pringle) in the present book, 198–217. While pilgrimage to the Holy Land increased dramatically in the time after the Crusades, voices from the monastic realm were not exclusively positive. An example is the ambivalent attitude expressed by Bernard of Clairvaux, in the years before the Second

to the visionary (or the editor Alfonso), is made clear: special grace is indeed to be obtained upon arrival at the shrine, but only for those who come “. . . with the perfect intention of rectifying themselves according to their better conscience and do not wish to fall back into their former sins.”¹³ Thus, in the *Revelaciones* the materiality of Jerusalem and its holy sites do play a significant role for an individual's salvation, but this can occur only if the individual has first gone to that spiritual place in her or his heart. In other words, it is not sufficient to travel to the Holy Land; the pilgrim must also come with the right attitude, purpose, and virtues.¹⁴ The following chapters in the *Revelaciones* make it clear that the reader should understand Birgitta herself to have arrived with such perfect intention.

Three days after the first visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, on Friday, 14 May, Birgitta returned to the shrine accompanied by her fellow pilgrims.¹⁵ Again, she

Crusade; see Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistola LXIV*, PL, 182, cols 169–170, and *De laude novae militiae ad milites templi liber*, PL, 182, cols 917–40.

13 “. . . cum voluntate perfecta se emendandi iuxta meliorem conscienciam suam nec volentes reciduiare in priora peccata . . .”, Birgitta of Sweden 1967–2002, *Revelaciones*: 7, 163 (Rev. VII: 14.3). In this connection, it is worth mentioning that pilgrimage was central to Birgitta's spirituality. In addition to the final pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she had visited Santiago de Compostela, St Olav's shrine in Nidaros, and numerous shrines on the Italian peninsula. On Birgitta's pilgrimages, see Jane Tylus, “‘Su dunque, peregrino!': Pilgrimage and Female Spirituality in the Writings of Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena,” in *Sanctity and Female Authorship: Birgitta of Sweden & Catherine of Siena*, ed. Maria H. Oen and Unn Falkeid (New York: Routledge, 2020).

14 This point is also made in a revelation in the fifth book; see, *Revelaciones*: 5, 175 (Rev. V: 13.23). The emphasis on the traveller's purpose for, and attitude towards, the pilgrimage can also be seen as an expression of Birgitta's rejection of some of the activities of the Franciscan “custodians” of the Holy Land who guided the pilgrims around at all times (see Chareyron 2005, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages*: 82–83). In the later Middle Ages, the business of indulgences, i.e. remission of a specified time of punishment in purgatory, played a major role in Jerusalem pilgrimage, where the devotees could obtain leaflets from the Franciscans with specifications regarding which prayers to say at which shrines in order to attain indulgences. On this practice, see Michele Bacci, “Locative Memory and the Pilgrim's Experience of Jerusalem,” in *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, ed. Bianca Kühnel, *et al.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014,) 69–70, n. 7. In fact, the *Revelaciones* makes a point of the Virgin not wanting Birgitta to stay at the Franciscan monastery at Mount Sion, but rather in the humbler pilgrim's hospice to set a good example. See *Revelaciones*: 7, 173 (Rev. VII: 17). It should be noted, however, that Birgitta was not opposed to Franciscans. Far from it, she was highly devoted to St Francis, as numerous of the revelations bear testimony to, and in Rome she kept a close contact with the Poor Clares of S. Lorenzo in Panisperna. On Birgitta's interest in Francis and the Franciscans, see Henrik Roelvink, “Andlig släktskap mellan Franciskus och Birgitta,” in *Heliga Birgitta – Budskapet och förebilden. Föredrag vid jubileumssymposiet i Vadstena 3–7 oktober 1991*, Konferenser 28. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993) and Unn Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested: An Intellectual History from Dante to Catherine of Siena* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2017,) 140–143. On Birgitta's connection to the Poor Clares in Rome, see Isak Collijn, *Birgittinska gestalter. Forskningar i italienska arkiv och bibliotek* (Stockholm: Michaelisgillet, 1929,) 65–92.

15 For a discussion of the dating of Birgitta's visit, see Bridget Morris, in Birgitta of Sweden 2006–2015, *The Revelations*: 3, 234, n. 1.

is said to have experienced a vision while she is, as Alfonso carefully notes, in ecstasy, or “taken in spirit” [*rapta in spiritu*]. The description of this revelation immediately follows the previous revelation from the same site, only now there is an emphatic shift in the text from the usual third person to the first person, when Birgitta states: “As I was weeping in sorrow at Mount Calvary, I saw my Lord, naked and scourged, led out to be crucified . . .”¹⁶ She then offers a long and detailed account of the Crucifixion of Christ as she witnessed it while standing in the Chapel of Mount Calvary, on the very site where it supposedly had happened on the same day of the week more than a millennium before. In a minute description of the torture of the body of Christ and the reactions of some of the “historical” eyewitnesses – the Virgin, St John, and a surrounding group of Jews – she discusses how Christ was fastened to the cross, his blood and his pain, as well as her own reaction to the emotional torment of the Virgin. This chapter in the *Revelaciones* evokes contemporary devotional literature, notably the genre of *meditaciones* (referring to meditations on the life of Christ), in which the reader is invited to visualise internally scenes from the Gospels, such as the Crucifixion, in order to emotionally engage with the protagonists, as if the meditator her- or himself were physically present as a witness.¹⁷ In the Birgittine text, as in other examples of such *meditaciones*, familiar iconographical themes not corresponding to the Gospels are conjured up; for example, the motif of the *Pietà* is called up in the mind of the reader when Birgitta describes how she saw Mary take the dead body of Christ in her arms “. . . and sat down with him, all torn, wounded and bruised, placed on her lap”.¹⁸

From the *Revelaciones* we also learn that Birgitta had a similar vision when she travelled to Bethlehem with her entourage to visit the cave that, since the second century, had been venerated as the birthplace of Christ, now located under the apse of the fourth-century basilica, the Church of the Nativity. In his prologue to this revelation, Alfonso reminds the reader that what Birgitta experienced upon entering the cave was precisely what she had been promised by the Virgin in a vision many years earlier: to see for herself exactly how Mary gave birth to Christ (Fig. 13.1).¹⁹ The chapter of the

¹⁶ “Ad montem Caluarie dum essem mestissima plorans, vidi Dominum meum nudum et flagellatum ductum per Iudeos ad crucifigendum . . .” *Revelaciones*: 7, 164 (Rev. VII: 15.1). For the whole chapter, see 164–8.

¹⁷ For example, see the meditation on the Crucifixion in the popular fourteenth-century pseudo-Bonaventurian *Meditaciones vite Christi* in John of Caulibus, *Meditaciones vite Christi, olim S. Bonaventuro attributae*, ed. Mary Stallings-Taney, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, 153, Turnhout: Brepols, 1997, ch. 78.

¹⁸ “. . . et reclinauit eum sedens in genu totum dilaceratum, vulneratum et liuidum,” *Revelaciones*: 7, 168 (Rev. VII: 15.32).

¹⁹ *Revelaciones*: 7, 187 (Rev. VII: 21, prologue). This vision, *Revelaciones*: 7, 114 (Rev. VII: 1) is quoted below. On the cave and the church in Bethlehem, see Michele Bacci, *The Mystic Cave: A History of the Nativity Church in Bethlehem* (Brno: Masaryk University; Rome: Viella, 2017).

Fig. 13.1: Niccolò di Tommaso, Birgitta of Sweden at the cave in Bethlehem, beholding the vision of the Nativity of Christ. This is the earliest known image of Birgitta. It was painted in the period between 1373–1375 by a Tuscan artist who made two more versions of the same motif. Tempera on panel. Vatican City, Pinacoteca Vaticana.

Bethlehem vision opens in the same manner as the previous vision from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: the specific geographical placement of Birgitta in the moment of the vision is explicitly stated – “When I was at the manger of the Lord in Bethlehem . . .” [*Cum essem ad presepe Domini in Bethleem . . .*] – and there is again the rare use of the first person when the visionary states “I saw” [*vidi*].²⁰ The focus on Birgitta’s personal and sensorial perception of the contents of these visions, as well her own voice in the witness reports that we find in the two chapters referring to her visits to the Nativity Cave and the Chapel of Mount Calvary, is conspicuous in the context of the *Revelaciones*, where, in general, Birgitta is formulaically referred to as “the bride of Christ” or simply as “a person”. The remainder of the text describing the vision of the Nativity is also similar to the one of the Crucifixion on Mount Calvary. Birgitta observes the birth of Christ in its entirety, assiduously presenting every detail

²⁰ *Revelaciones*: 7, 187 (Rev. VII: 21.1). For the whole chapter, see 187–90.

of the holy event. In another chapter, she describes the arrival of the shepherds coming to adore the new-born together with Joseph and the Virgin, which she saw in another vision while still in Bethlehem. Again, the description of Birgitta's experience of the Nativity in the *Revelaciones* bears a strong resemblance to the kind of participatory visual meditation on the life of Christ encouraged and taught by contemporary manuals.²¹

Birgitta's experiences at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Nativity Cave as related in the *Revelaciones* can be compared with those of other pilgrims to the Holy Land, and in many ways the Swedish visionary seems to offer yet another account of the kind of meditation generally practised by pilgrims visiting the sacred sites in Palestine. Several studies demonstrate how the *loca sancta*, and also the buildings marking the holy places, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Nativity, functioned as cues for evoking memory images.²² These images then structured the pilgrim's perception of sacred history based on previous reading of Scripture or biblical knowledge derived from sermons, liturgy, and artworks. In their meditations *in situ*, the pilgrims would re-enact the sacred narrative connected to the place visited based on these recollected mental images, just as in the visualising meditations on the life of Christ encouraged by the devotional manuals (such as the *meditaciones* described above). As Robert Ousterhout explains, all pilgrims came to the holy sites preconditioned; they knew the role of the specific place in relation to sacred history and had imagined them numerous times before in their devotions. Once they arrived at the site, the memories of biblical narratives that had taken place at the shrines were brought forth and experienced, often much more intensely and powerfully due to the pilgrims' physical presence at the *actual* site.²³ As the many descriptions of the experiences of Jerusalem pilgrims suggest, their presence at sites understood to have been the physical stage of the sacred narratives they re-enacted in their meditations seems

21 On this similarity and Birgitta's "meditational" visions, see Oen, "Iconography and Visions: St. Birgitta's Revelation of the Nativity of Christ".

22 For example, Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40–4; Ora Limor, "Reading Sacred Space: Egeria, Paula, and the Christian Holy Land," in *De Sion exhibit lex et verbum domini de Hierusalem: Essays on Medieval Law, Liturgy, and Literature in Honour of Amnon Linder*, ed. Y. Hen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001); Robert Ousterhout, "'Sweetly Refreshed in Imagination': Remembering Jerusalem in Words and Images," *Gesta: Making Thoughts, Making Pictures, Making Memories: A Special Issue in Honor of Mary J. Carruthers* 48, no. 2 (2009); Thomas O'Loughlin, "'Remembering Sion': Early Medieval Latin Recollections of the Basilica on Mount Sion and the Interplay of Relics, Tradition, and Images," in *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, ed. Bianca Kühnel, et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014). On the visual aspect of memory and cognition in medieval thinking and practice, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On the reception of the architecture in Jerusalem, see Moore, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land*.

23 Ousterhout 2009, "'Sweetly Refreshed in Imagination'". See also Chapter 10 (Anthony Bale) on pilgrims' preconditioned emotional responses, 191–7.

to have led to an experience of the *real presence* of the biblical characters and the actual events. This notion of real presence was also likely to have been further strengthened and confirmed by the architecture of the shrines that marked the sites and created a space of holiness, enhanced by incense, burning candles, and liturgical rituals.²⁴ It does not come as a surprise, then, that many pilgrim accounts describe the responses of various co-travellers in terms of visionary experiences of the *actual* events. A letter by the fourth-century pilgrim to the Holy Land, the Church Father Jerome, provides an example: he retells the response of his fellow pilgrim Paula when she entered the Nativity Cave in Bethlehem:

. . . with me listening, she swore that she could see with the eyes of faith the infant Lord wrapped in clothes and crying in the manger, the worshipping Magi, the star shining above, the Virgin mother, the attentive foster-father, the shepherds coming by night to see the word that had been made . . .²⁵

Whereas Paula's visionary experience appears similar to Birgitta's from almost a millennium later, other pilgrims left the shrines disappointed. The late thirteenth-century pilgrim Riccoldo di Monte Croce had expected to see "with his bodily eyes" Christ hanging on the cross, when he visited the Chapel of Mount Calvary, but he had to leave with his wish unfulfilled.²⁶

When considering these rituals practised by pilgrims to the Holy Land since the very beginning of Christian pilgrimage – worshippers visiting sites connected to biblical events, and conjuring up memory images based on their knowledge of Scripture, from texts and graphic images, and then engaging emotionally with the protagonists of these events in imaginative meditations, intensified by the physical presence at the actual site – Birgitta's visions of the birth and death of Christ appear as "ordinary" pilgrim's activities. Taken in this light, the *Revelaciones* offer us an interesting insight into the emotional and intellectual response of a Scandinavian woman visiting the Holy Land in the late fourteenth century, and how she configured in her own particular manner the scenes of the birth and death of Christ. However, in the *Revelaciones* the holy places do not function merely as *loci of memory*. Rather, the text suggests that for the Swedish visionary the Nativity Cave and Mount Calvary should be understood as

²⁴ On the construction of a holy place, and the role of the architecture, artworks, rituals and more, see Cynthia Hahn, "Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Shrines," *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (1997); Robert Ousterhout, "Architecture as Relic and the Construction of Sanctity: The Stones of the Holy Sepulchre," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62, no. 1 (2003); Moore, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land*. See also Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²⁵ ". . . me audiente jurabat, cernere se oculis fidei infantem pannis involutum, vagientem in prae-sepi Dominum, Magos adorantes, stellam fulgentem desuper, matrem Virginem, nutricium sedulum, pastores nocte venientes, ut viderent verbum, quod factum erat . . .", Jerome, *Epistola CVIII*, PL, 22, cols 878–906.

²⁶ See Ousterhout, "Sweetly Refreshed in Imagination," 160.

loci of truth. That Birgitta and her fellow pilgrims engaged in meditation as described above when visiting the holy sites can be assumed beyond doubt (as this was the main point of visiting the shrines). But this is not how Birgitta's supporters wanted the audience of the *Revelaciones* to understand the descriptions of her experiences in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, which are persistently referred to as "heavenly visions" and were therefore of such a nature that they could confer sanctity on their recipient. In fact, what these supporters ask are for the *Revelaciones* to be given an even higher status than Scripture. When Birgitta arrived *there* in the Holy Land, she learned the *truth* about the sacred events, truths that had not been available to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The Gospel According to Birgitta

In her retelling of the Nativity and the Crucifixion, Birgitta departs from the Gospels by means of elaboration and the addition of numerous details. Against the background of literary and artistic traditions some of these details appear to be highly idiosyncratic, such as the attention she gives to the afterbirth and the umbilical cord in the Nativity vision, the shepherds' request to see the newborn's genitals in order to verify the sex of the Saviour (or possibly Saviouress), and the specific mode in which Christ was fastened to the cross, to mention a few of Birgitta's more peculiar details. Despite the distinctive character of these features, they would fit well into the kind of meditations encouraged by works such as the popular Pseudo-Bonaventurian *Meditaciones vite Christi*, in which the devotees are invited to appropriate sacred history into something personal, and to draw on their own individual experiences – to make their own personal choices – to intensify their emotional engagement in the biblical narrative.²⁷ This is indeed what Birgitta, *qua* meditator, does in the *Revelaciones*. However, it can be argued that the text serves an end greater than Birgitta's emotional identification with the Virgin. This argument is based in the recurring allusions in both the *Revelaciones* and the canonisation proceedings to a promise the Virgin had given Birgitta fifteen years earlier, when Mary tells her: ". . . go on pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem . . . From there you will travel to Bethlehem where, in the place itself, I shall show you *fully* how I gave birth to my Son, Jesus Christ."²⁸ This view is strengthened in the chapter following the revelation of the Nativity, in which we are told that the Virgin again showed

²⁷ Caulibus, *Meditaciones vite Christi*, olim S. Bonaventuro attributae.

²⁸ Italics added. ". . . tu ibis in sanctam ciuitatem Iherusalem peregrinando . . . Et inde ibis ad Bethleem ibique ostendam tibi in loco proprio totum modum, qualiter ego peperii eundem filium meum Ihesum Christum . . .", *Revelaciones*: 7, 114 (Rev. VII: 1.5–6).

herself to Birgitta, who was still present in the cave, to ensure her of the truthfulness of what she had seen:

Despite the attempts of people to assert that my Son was born in the ordinary way according to their human way of understanding, you can rest assured that it is undoubtedly more true that he was born as I have told you elsewhere and as you have now seen for yourself.²⁹

Thus, the *Revelaciones* explicitly affirms the deviation of Birgitta's account vis à vis Scripture and that this account is the true one.

The claim to scriptural status and the challenge of the Gospels found in the chapters describing Birgitta's Holy Land visions is audaciously affirmed in Birgitta's *vita* composed by her two confessors, Peter and Peter, and most likely revised and expanded on by Alfonso.³⁰ After having described Birgitta's prophetic skills – implicitly creating an equivalence between her and some of the authors of the Old Testament as well as St John, author of Apocalypse – the hagiographers comment on her ability to elucidate dubious biblical narratives and, notably, they compare Birgitta directly with the authors of the Gospels:

Like the holy evangelists, she wrote also about the birth of Christ and about his glorious life, and, in a similar way, about his death and about his resurrection and about his eternal glory, as is shown clearly enough in her revelations.³¹

Because the bulk of the visions related in the *Revelaciones* do not concern the life and death of Christ, it seems evident that the authors of the *vita* are here referring to the revelations from Jerusalem and Bethlehem.³² Again, it will be remembered, the connection between Birgitta's arrival at true knowledge of sacred history and her pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its holy places is spelled out in the visions leading up to her departure.³³ This link between truth and place is also laid out at the canonisation trial in the

²⁹ “Et ideo scias veraciter, quod, quamvis homines secundum humanum sensum conantur asserere, quod filius meus nascebatur per modum communem, verius tamen est et absque dubio aliquo, quod ipse natus est, sicut ego dixi alias tibi et sicut nunc tu vidisti.” *Revelaciones*: 7,191 (Rev. VII: 22.6).

³⁰ See Sara Ekwall, *Vår äldsta Birgittavita och dennas viktigaste varianter*, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Historiska Serien (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965).

³¹ “Scripsit eciam vt sancti ewangeliste de Christi natiuitate et de eius gloriosa vita, similiter et de morte et de resurrectione et de eius eterna gloria, sicut in eius reuelacionibus ostenditur satis clare . . .”, *Acta et processus*, 86.

³² The *Vita* also refers to the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Virgin's promise to Birgitta fifteen years earlier, that Birgitta should go to Jerusalem and Bethlehem and once there she will be shown how Mary gave birth to her son: “Propter nimium amorem, quem habes ad me, dico tibi, quod tu ibis ad Ierusalem, quando placuerit filio meo, et tunc ibis eciam ad Bethleem, et ego tunc ostendam tibi, quomodo peperit filium meum Jhesum Christum.” Quam promissionem adimpleuit virgo Maria post xvj annos, quando domina Brigida fuit in dictis locis, vt in libris reuelacionum lacius continetur in quadam reuelacione facta ei in Beethleem, que loquitur de partu virginis Marie.” *Acta et processus*, 96. For the journey to the Holy Land, see 95–6, and 98.

³³ Most explicitly in the revelation opening book VII, see *Revelaciones*: 7, 114 (Rev. VII: 1.5–6).

depositions of several of the witnesses who had accompanied the visionary on the pilgrimage. For instance, Birgitta's daughter Katarina (1331–1381) and the fellow Swede Magnus Petri (d. 1396) comment on her reception of visions in the Nativity Cave and in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and they also confirm their own presence at the time of the miraculous events, which had been experienced only by Birgitta and not the others in her company (who were “simply” meditating we can presume).³⁴ Alfonso offers a more detailed report of the events and even presents a model for understanding the miracle of these visions. In his description of the Crucifixion vision he is not content with only stating that it happened in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; he also notes *exactly* where Birgitta stood, that is, by the hole in the rock of the mountain where the cross of Christ had been placed, now located inside the Chapel of Mount Calvary, and he also specifies his own position – near the Chapel of Mary and the column of Christ's flagellation – when Birgitta recounted what she had seen.³⁵ Alfonso also mentions that in the vision Birgitta related to him, Christ had shown her the specific place and the hole in the rock, as is also stated in the *Revelaciones*, where Christ asks Birgitta to pay special attention to this physical point.³⁶ In addition to his concern for topographical details, Alfonso emphasises that Birgitta had seen the Passion in its entirety “one by one and in detail” [*singillatim et seriose*]; he subsequently uses this to argue that Birgitta's vision of the birth of Christ is more true than the quoted vision of Paula related by Jerome (discussed further below).³⁷ In his account of the miraculous aspect of Birgitta's experience of the Crucifixion, Alfonso compares her revelation with a famous incident from the life of St Francis of Assisi, when a wooden crucifix in the church of San Damiano came alive and Christ spoke to him through it. In other words, for Alfonso, Birgitta's supernatural perception of transcendent truth in all its concrete details regarding the death of Christ, which she experienced in *that* specific place where it had happened, resembled principally the event in Assisi, wherein the wooden crucifix had suddenly erupted into life, according to Francis' two hagiographers, Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure.³⁸ Just as the wood of the cross miraculously became animated and Christ manifested himself in the mundane object, so too Christ became instantiated in that church, in that chapel, on that rock, for Birgitta. Alfonso seems to present Birgitta's experience in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as something akin to what Caroline Walker Bynum has referred to as “holy matter”: phenomena appearing in the later Middle Ages, including miraculously bleeding

³⁴ For Katarina's deposition, see *Acta et processus*, 328, and for Magnus's, see 270.

³⁵ *Acta et processus*, 385.

³⁶ “. . . ostendit ei locum et foramen in monte, vbi crux eius infixata fuerat tempore passionis . . .”, *Acta et processus*, 385; *Revelaciones*: 7, 164 (Rev. VII: 15.2–3).

³⁷ *Acta et processus*, 385–386.

³⁸ Thomas of Celano, *Vita Secunda S. Francisci Assisiensis in Analecta Franciscana*, ed. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, X, Quaracchi, 1927, 3–221 and Bonaventure, *Legenda sancti Francisci*, 10 vols, Doctor Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera omnia, 8, Quaracchi, 1882–1902, 502–549.

hosts, panel paintings and frescoes that bleed and cry, and animated statues such as the cross in San Damiano.³⁹ But unlike Francis, and despite Alfonso's comparison, Birgitta is not experiencing Christ but a *place*, and not just any significant place, but the *loca sancta* of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Moreover, Birgitta does not simply claim to see or experience an animated Christ; she (or the editor Alfonso) also asserts, through the voice of the Virgin, that regarding certain highly significant events in the life of Christ, the Gospels are wrong and she is right, because she was shown the truth *there, in that place*. How, then, should we construe the notion of "holy place" as we encounter it in the case of Birgitta?

The Testimony of a Holy Place

Nearly all the references to the Bethlehem Nativity vision presented in the Birgittine sources stress that Birgitta had been promised such a divine vision, and that it was *there*, in the cave in Bethlehem, that knowledge about how Christ had truly been born would be revealed – and that it was indeed the Virgin herself who would reveal this. And this particular vision serves as the strongest claim regarding Birgitta's access to higher truth, i.e. where she is contradicting Scripture and existing traditions.⁴⁰ This point is central to the assertion in her *vita* that Birgitta could clarify scriptural matters that were obscure or doubtful.⁴¹ The biblical references to the birth of Christ, for example, are very few. Only Matthew and Luke describe the event, and the only information these Gospels provide is that the child was Mary's firstborn, he was born in Bethlehem, laid in a manger, and adored by three Magi and shepherds to whom the arrival of a king had been announced by celestial means. Later apocryphal texts, such as the eighth-century Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, which claims to be an authentic translation by Jerome and was widely disseminated through its inclusion in Jacobus de Voragine's

³⁹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011).

⁴⁰ However, Birgitta is certainly not opposing doctrine in this text. What is distinctive about her description of the birth is the constant insistence on Mary's virginity, before, during, and after the birth, and the uniqueness of the event in relation to normal childbirth. In Birgitta's account, the Virgin gives birth as if it was a vision, that is, she is kneeling in prayer and suddenly the child manifests itself on the ground in front of her. Thus, she gave an explanation to a mystery that had been accepted as part and parcel of the Church since at least the seventh century, the so-called "perpetual virginity of Mary." This may also explain why Birgitta's description of the birth was so successful as an iconographical model, as it gave artists an opportunity to visually distinguish between the virginal birth of Christ and that of other biblical figures. On this, see Oen 2019, "Iconography and Visions: St. Birgitta's Revelation of the Nativity of Christ". The influence of Birgitta's vision on artistic representations of the Nativity of Christ was first acknowledged by Henrik Cornell, see Henrik Cornell, "The Iconography of the Nativity," *Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift* (1924). See also Morris, *St Birgitta of Sweden*, 138–9.

⁴¹ *Acta et processus*, 86.

Legenda aurea, elaborate on the event; but even the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew does not explain *how* the birth took place, as Birgitta's revelation does. What this apocryphal text does say, however, is that the Virgin was alone in the cave when giving birth because Joseph had gone in search of a midwife.⁴² Birgitta also notes that Joseph left the site at the special moment of the arrival of Christ incarnated. Thus, the only witness to the sacred moment in history was the Virgin herself – and the cave. The evangelists Matthew and Luke were certainly not present. When the Virgin chose to show Birgitta the birth of Christ, inside the physical space, which, other than the Virgin, was the only “witness” to the event, Birgitta gained claim to a validity for her “gospel” that surpassed those of Luke and Matthew; for neither of those two evangelists had been present at the site or moment of the birth, and thus they lack the detailed knowledge about the event which Birgitta now possesses through direct visual perception.

The concept of Christian *loca sancta* in late antiquity hinged on the physical space commemorated at the very site of a biblical event; this space served as a witness to the episode and could therefore bear witness to its veracity. For Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386), who was bishop of the holy city in the fourth century and a key figure in the promotion of the sacred topography of the region and its value to Christians, it was precisely the role of the physical places *as witnesses* to Christ and his miracles, his birth, death, and resurrection, his humanity and his divinity, that gave places like the cave, the rock of Calvary, and the tomb their special significance and, indeed, holiness.⁴³ Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures*, delivered to catechumens to instruct them and strengthen their faith, serve as the primary source of his views about the shrines.⁴⁴ When he composed his catechesis, the process of conversion to Christianity was ongoing, and Jerusalem had a large Jewish population for whom Jesus was not the resurrected saviour. The strong focus on producing witnesses to Jesus as the *true* Saviour in the rhetoric of Cyril – witnesses he finds in the sacred topography of his city, in nature, as well as in the Old Testament prophecies and the New Testament protagonists, and all considered equally – must be understood in this specific context in which

42 “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew” in *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelations*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, 16, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867–1873.

43 On the role of Cyril of Jerusalem, as well as that of Eusebius, in promoting Christian pilgrimage and the notion of the Christian *loca sancta*, see Walker 1990, *Holy City, Holy Places?*. On attitudes towards the sacred topography of the Holy Land, see also Moore, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land*.

44 Cyril of Jerusalem, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, 2 vols, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, Fathers of the Church Patristic Series, Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1969–1970. See especially vol. 1, 208–209 (10.19) on the testimony of the wood of the cross and the rock of Golgotha; vol. 2, 28 (13.35), where he again mentions the testimony of the rock of Golgotha and the stone closing the Sepulchre while he comments on its visible presence there in his day; and vol. 2, 29–30 (13.38), where he adds that the Garden of Gethsemane, the Mount of Olives and the House of Caiaphas – all of which were local places well known to the listeners – as witnesses to Christ. Similar descriptions are also found in vol. 2, 30 (13.39).

Cyril had to convince his listeners of the veridicality of the role of Jesus Christ offered by the Christian religion. In addition to the importance of places as bearers of witness to events, which after the conversion process became part and parcel of the pilgrim's approach to holy sites, Cyril's catechesis touches on another issue of consequence for those visiting the Holy Land throughout the Middle Ages. When he speaks to his catechumens about the testimony of holy places and physical objects, such as the wood of the cross, the manger in the cave in Bethlehem, and the rock of Calvary, the bishop is also careful to note that the places and objects are *still visible*, and that those who are present there in Jerusalem (as all his listeners were) could experience directly this physical reality that bore witness to the transcendent reality.

The enthusiasm for the sensuous experience of the *loca sancta* and their ties to salvation history and the truth of Scripture that Cyril expresses when he notes that "others merely hear, but we see and touch" is also found in other sources of a more exegetic than apologetic nature.⁴⁵ In his work on the early development in, and attitudes towards, pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the fourth and fifth centuries, E. D. Hunt points out that Christian pilgrimage to the shrines in the Holy Land was, from the very beginning, connected to Scripture, both with respect to establishing a biblical canon and to exegetical interpretation.⁴⁶ The late-fourth-century pilgrim Egeria, probably a contemporary of Cyril's, was reading the relevant parts of the scriptures on site as she came to the various shrines. For her, seeing the holy places was "intimately related to her understanding of the Bible."⁴⁷ And for Jerome (347–420), the visual perception of the places described in the text was imperative to an understanding of the sacred texts. While he was engaged in the great project of producing a new Latin translation of Scripture, the Vulgate, Jerome left Rome together with his fellow pilgrim, Paula, and her daughter Eustochium and set out for the Holy Land never to return. As a result, when he embarked on the task of producing the new translation of the Old Testament, Jerome not only went to the original Hebrew version – as opposed to the Greek Septuagint, which formed the basis of the Latin Bible of the time, the *Vetus Latina* – but he also went to the original places described in the biblical texts. In a famous quotation taken from the prologue to his version of Chronicles, Jerome states:

As those who saw Athens will better understand Greek histories . . . so a clearer understanding of the sacred Scripture for whoever will see Judea with his own eyes, and will recognize the memories of the ancient cities or places under their own or under changed names.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem 1969–1970, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*: 2, 19 (13.22).

⁴⁶ Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 83–106.

⁴⁷ Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 88.

⁴⁸ "Quomodo Graecorum historias magis intelligunt, qui Athenas viderint . . . ita sanctam Scripturam lucidius intuebitur, qui Judaeam oculis contemplatus est, et antiquarum urbium memorias, locorumque vel eadem vocabula, vel mutata cognoverit." Jerome, *Prefatio Hieronymi in librum Paralipomenon juxta LXX interpretes*, PL, 29, cols 401–4.

According to Hunt, Jerome thus shows that he clearly associates his exploration of the Holy Land with the ancient scholarly tradition of travelling to the sites of classical history.⁴⁹ This comparison of the biblical “tourism” of his day with ancient Greek and Roman scholars who would journey to see the places described in the Homeric tradition allowed Jerome to underline the intellectual and scholarly purposes of seeing the holy sites of the Bible. And he emphasises the value of visual perception for the establishment of knowledge in another work, when he notes his reaction upon arriving in Jerusalem: “. . . what I previously had heard by report, I verified by the evidence of my own eyes.”⁵⁰

Jerome, his translation project, and his approach to the *loca sancta* are all especially relevant to connections drawn in the sources reviewed above between Birgitta’s presence at the shrines and her access to spiritual truth. First, it should be noted that when Birgitta and her entourage came to the Church of the Nativity, one of the sacred sites these Holy pilgrims spent time at was a vaulted chamber near the cloister of the building, where Jerome supposedly sat when he produced his translation. In the late fourteenth century, pilgrims visiting this site were aware of the relation between Jerome’s presence in the Holy Land, in Bethlehem specifically, and his version of Scripture; and it was here that Birgitta would be able to grasp a higher meaning of Scripture beyond the text available to her.

Alfonso of Jaén provides a more explicit comparison between Birgitta’s Nativity vision and Jerome. In his deposition from the canonisation process he states that Birgitta’s vision is more miraculous than the one Paula experienced, narrated by Jerome [*quod narrat Jeronimus*], because Birgitta “saw the Nativity of the Lord *more clearly and in detail*” [*seriosius et clarius vidit natiuitatem Domini*].⁵¹ This link between the *Revelaciones* and Jerome is clearly intended to lend authority to Birgitta’s new

49 See Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 94.

50 “. . . quae prius ad me fama pertulerat, oculorum iudicio comprobavi.” Jerome, *Apologia adversus libros Rufini*, PL, 23, cols 395–492.

51 Italics added. *Acta et processus*, 386. In his critical edition, Collijn says that the vision narrated by Jerome concerns St Eustace. This reading, however, is not very likely as indicated by one of the three surviving codices containing the complete acts and depositions of the canonization process. The MS A 14 of Kungliga Biblioteket (the Royal Library) in Stockholm describes the saint in question clearly as a woman – “illa sancta” (fol. clviii, original pagination). According to Collijn’s conclusions, this MS is produced by one hand alone, in Italy, most likely in Rome, in the late fourteenth century. The other principal MS for his edition, Vatican City, BAV, Ottob. lat. 90, is written by 13 different hands, and belong to the 16 copies that were commissioned to be distributed among the cardinals in the 1390s. The different scribes responsible for the quires containing the deposition of Alfonso in the two MSS both refer to the saint in question as “Eustachio” (in the ablative). The fact that St Eustace is not specifically known in medieval cults, nor from the hagiography, to have had a vision of the Nativity of Christ, makes Collijn’s reading less plausible. I believe the scribe responsible for the Stockholm MS was correct, and that it is far more likely that Alfonso is discussing St Eustochium (whose ablative form, *Eustochio*, is indeed very similar to the ablative of Eustace, *Eustachio*), Paula’s daughter, and to whom the letter in which Paula’s famous vision of the Nativity

version of the Gospel as presented in her text. Like Jerome, who better apprehended Scripture by going to the Holy Land and seeing for himself the places described, so too did Birgitta, resulting in the *Revelaciones*. Interestingly, with his new translation predicated directly on the “Hebrew truth” – a translation highly controversial when it was written – Jerome’s primary aim was to make Scripture more clear and detailed. As he states in the prologue to his translation of the Book of Job, he did not undertake the task in disregard of the Septuagint “. . . but rather so that those things in it which are either obscure or missing or certainly corrupted by the error of scribes may be made more clear by our interpretation.”⁵² This is also what Birgitta does in her *Revelaciones*, which, like Jerome’s Vulgate, was claimed to convey the true *historia sacra*. And it should also be remembered that in the *vita* submitted to the canonisation committee, which in all probability Alfonso edited, Birgitta is praised for her exegetical skills and her ability to clarify “. . . many things concerning certain doubtful matters in Sacred Scripture.”⁵³ For Alfonso, Jerome thus becomes an important *auctoritas* with which Birgitta is compared, and who can, in turn, confer authority on Birgitta’s claim to sanctity and possession of divine truth. Like her predecessor, Birgitta arrives at a more truthful and correct understanding of sacred history on the basis of her presence at, and physical perception of, the *loca sancta* in the Holy Land, so that she too could correct, or augment, the scriptures like a true evangelical author [*auctor*], that is, as someone who possesses *auctoritas*.⁵⁴ Ironically, the sacred text Birgitta was revising, and whose revision Jerome is evoked to sanctify, was indeed the Vulgate of Jerome.

is addressed. Although this unusual female name may have been strange to the scribe responsible for this particular section in the BAV copy – and who is therefore likely to have changed it into the masculine form, and thus to the more well known saint Eustace – the particular letter to Eustochium that I argue Alfonso is referring to, was in fact also very well known in the fourteenth century, as it was included in Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea*, though here it appears under the name of St Paula. I have not been able to examine the third extant copy of the canonisation acts, namely London, British Library, MS Harley 612. This MS is, however, of a much later date, second or third quarter of the fifteenth century. For Collijn’s discussion of the three MSS in question, see his Introduction in *Acta et processus* 1924–1931: i–xiv. For Jerome’s letter in the *Legenda aurea*, see Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 2 vols, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, Florence: SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1998. On Alfonso of Jaén and the Hieronymite Order; see Arne Jönsson, ed. *Alfonso of Jaén: His Life and Works with Critical Editions of the Epistola Solitarii, the Informaciones and the Epistola Serui Christi*, Studia Graeca et Latina Lundensia (Lund: Lund University Press, 1989), 31–82.

⁵² “. . . sed ut ea, quae in illa aut obscura sunt, aut ommissa, aut certe scriptorum vitio depravata, manifestiora nostra interpretatione fierent . . .,” Jerome, *Praefatio S. Hieronymi in librum Job*, PL, 28, cols 1079–1084.

⁵³ “. . . de aliquibus dubijs sacre scripture plurima,” *Acta et processus* 1924–1931: 86. On Alfonso’s contribution to the *vita*, see Ekwall, *Vår äldsta Birgittavita*.

⁵⁴ On the interconnected meaning of *auctor/auctoritas*, see n. 5 above.

The Authority of the Jerusalem Pilgrim

Jerome is not the only *auctoritas* employed by Birgitta's hagiographers and supporters to confirm Birgitta's saintly image and to validate her *Revelaciones*. In fact, the narratives and hagiographical texts associated with women who made the pilgrimage from Rome to Jerusalem in late antiquity represent perhaps the most important models for Birgitta's *vita*. In late medieval biographical legends written to promote laywomen, there is, as argued by Bynum and others, a strong focus on the physical aspects of their devotion to Christ and their bodily identification with him.⁵⁵ Birgitta's contemporaries and predecessors, such as Marie d'Oignies (1177–1213), Margaret of Cortona (1247–1297), and Chiara of Rimini (1282–1348), to mention a few, are portrayed as imitators of Christ in a highly physical manner; they practise extreme corporal punishment in a fashion modelled on the torture of Christ during the Passion, and many of them receive stigmata. Furthermore, in the hagiography pertaining to venerated laywomen in the later Middle Ages there is a recurrent emphasis on their linguistic ignorance and illiteracy – a point used to bolster the divine origin of their visions and their biblical knowledge in a time when religious women who claimed to possess such knowledge and, even worse, instructed others (especially men), were viewed with grave suspicion by the Church.⁵⁶ Seen against the backdrop of contemporary hagiography, Birgitta's *vita* stands out. The Swedish visionary is portrayed as a wealthy *domina* who, after the death of her husband, began to practise an ascetic lifestyle – though not at all in such an excessive manner as found in contemporary *vitae* – before she renounces her wealth and departs on a lifelong pilgrimage. More conspicuously, she began to study Latin and she wrote down her revelations “in her own hand” [*manu sua propria*], albeit in her native Swedish language, as her hagiographers take care to note.⁵⁷ This image of the wealthy, pious, and *highly literate* noblewoman who is not only a great philanthropist but also travels around freely on pilgrimages, significantly to Rome and to the Holy Land, is reminiscent of the rhetoric found in the *vitae* of the saintly women and Jerusalem pilgrims Augusta Helena (d. 329), mother of

⁵⁵ For an overview, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

⁵⁶ On the hostility towards women preaching, teaching, and writing, see Alastair Minnis, “Religious Roles: Public and Private,” in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c.1100–c.1500*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010) and Dyan Elliott, “Dominae or Dominatae? Female Mysticism and the Trauma of Textuality,” in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom: Essays in Memory of Michael M. Sheehan, C.S.B.*, ed. Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal (Kalamazoo MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998). On the illiteracy and xenoglossia of holy women, see Christine F. Cooper-Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women's Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

⁵⁷ *Acta et processus*, 84.

Constantine; St Paula (d. 404), Jerome's close friend and companion in the Holy Land; and Melania the Younger (d. 439), Roman matron and visionary.⁵⁸

Regarding the first of these three, Helena, it can be noted that most of Birgitta's Holy Land visions are in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, the former being the place where Helena founded the basilica commemorating the cave of the Nativity of Christ, and where Birgitta would have her vision of the true circumstances of the event. And the emphasis on Birgitta's disclosure of a hidden truth can be compared with the popular legend that the emperor's famous mother also discovered the True Cross. In other words, Helena, whose *vita*, according to Lynda L. Coon, established the very prototype of the saintly aristocratic woman, travelled to the *loca sancta* and there discovered a tangible truth beyond Scripture, namely, what would become the most famous relics of the Middle Ages, the wooden cross on which Christ had been crucified.⁵⁹

Appearing within a century after the death of Helena, other patrician women travelled from Rome to Jerusalem, where they experienced visions of Christ, and where they continued the philanthropic activities that she was celebrated for; they set up monasteries and spent their whole fortunes on supporting the Christian communities in the Holy Land and their building activities. These women, such as Jerome's friend Paula, her daughter Eustochium, and Melania the Younger, are also praised in the hagiography not only for their asceticism and philanthropy but also for their intellectual capacities, their language skills, and their exegetical abilities.⁶⁰ The *vita* of Paula, written by Jerome in the form of a letter addressed to Eustochium, was very popular in the later Middle Ages, not least because of its inclusion in the *Legenda aurea*.⁶¹ The text presents the patrician woman's noble lineage (she was from one of the greatest families of Rome) and how, as a widow, she adopted an ascetic life – first in her own Roman home, where she would be visited by Jerome, and later in the monastery she would found in Bethlehem. When she followed Jerome on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, she left behind her earthly family – with the exception of one daughter – and she distributed all of her wealth to charitable causes. In the Holy Land, Paula, who is also celebrated by Jerome for her exegesis and her knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, experienced vivid visions of Christ at all the shrines she visited.

The hagiographical portrayal of Birgitta's noble lineage, her ascetic lifestyle, her engagement in establishing a monastic order, the renunciation of her fortune and her

⁵⁸ There are many versions of Helena's *vita*. The first one is included in the second book of Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine*, with later versions appearing over the following centuries. For a summary of these, see Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997), 95–103. For Melania the Younger, see *Vie de Sainte Mélanie*, ed. and trans. Denys Gorce, Sources Chrétiennes 90, 1962. Paula's *vita*, composed by Jerome, will be discussed below.

⁵⁹ Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 99.

⁶⁰ On this particular model of sainthood, see Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 95–119.

⁶¹ See Jerome, *Epistola CVIII*, and Voragine, *Legenda aurea*: 1, 201–8.

earthly children – again, with the exception of one daughter – to facilitate travel throughout the Mediterranean, her studies of language and her reading of Scripture, and her pilgrimage from Rome to the Holy Land are all themes that not only allude to but often directly parallel Jerome's *vita* of St Paula. Moreover, there is also the direct comparison of Birgitta and Paula in Alfonso's deposition. Significantly, in Alfonso's edition of the *Revelaciones*, the order in which Birgitta visits the shrines follows Paula's itinerary, and, as noted above, Alfonso makes an explicit point of Birgitta's vision of the Nativity in Bethlehem being more miraculous than that of Paula's, since the Swedish pilgrim had seen everything more clearly and with more details. It is tempting to see the use of Paula as a model for Birgitta to emulate, and the many references to the pilgrimage of Jerome, Paula, and Eustochium to the Holy Land as attempts by Alfonso to allude to himself as a new Jerome who, similarly, is travelling to Jerusalem and Bethlehem with his own Paula and Eustochium, i.e. Birgitta and her daughter Katarina. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Alfonso was not only very concerned with the Church Father, but he, together with his brother, even sought – and succeeded – to have papal approval for a new Hieronymite Order.⁶² Without speculating further about Alfonso's possible reasons for fashioning his own role in Birgitta's hagiography on Jerome, it is clear that the trio of the saints – Jerome, Paula, and Eustochium – offered Alfonso and Birgitta's other hagiographers a particularly powerful example to evoke and imitate. This model allowed them to promote Birgitta's engagement with sacred language, scribal activities, and scriptural exegesis, which at the time were unconventional and potentially very problematic. And they also served to promote the claim that her presence and perception of the Holy Land had provided her with profound wisdom beyond Scripture, which she, possessing the knowledge and skills necessary, could now amend.

Conclusion

Birgitta left Sweden – the fringes of the world, according to the canonisation bull – as a widowed aristocrat in 1349, and in 1374, the year after she died, she was returned as *if* she were already a saint. Birgitta's relics were “translated” from Rome and enshrined in the church of the first Birgittine monastery, in the old royal palace at Vadstena. The little Swedish town was thereby put in direct contact with the Christian centres of the world, as the woman, whose bones they received, was already celebrated for her holiness in Rome as well as in other states on the peninsula such as Naples and Florence. Eighteen years later, in 1391, Birgitta was formally canonised by Boniface IX, thereby proving the campaign for her sanctity and the authority of the *Revelaciones* successful. The image of Birgitta as a pilgrim, which implied her

62 On Alfonso of Jaén and the Hieronymite Order, see Jönsson, *Alfonso of Jaén*, 31–82.

Fig. 13.2: St Birgitta of Sweden with pilgrim attributes. Fresco, early sixteenth century. Harg Church, Uppland, Sweden.

recognition of the importance of physical shrines, relics, and notably the pilgrimage to the *loca sancta* of the Holy Land, became an essential element of her saintly portrait. Numerous artworks that present Birgitta with a pilgrim's hat and staff (Fig. 13.2), made in various media and found all over Europe from the late fourteenth century

onwards, bear visual testimony to this.⁶³ Interestingly, there is also evidence that other laywomen seeking holiness went to Rome and to the Holy Land to venerate, and also imitate, Birgitta. A famous example is Margery Kempe (d. after 1438), who travelled from Norfolk, England, to Rome and thence to Jerusalem between 1413 and 1415, where she too experienced numerous visions in accordance with Birgitta, Margery's model and authority.⁶⁴

While the process of Birgitta's canonisation was a success, claims regarding the *Revelaciones* being equal to, or, in fact, *truer than* Scripture were contested for centuries. Birgitta's title, but most importantly her heavenly revelations, were challenged at the Councils of Constance (1414–1418) and Basel (1431–1449), resulting at the latter meeting in 1436 in a prohibition against the promulgation of the text as “heavenly.”⁶⁵ Nonetheless, excerpts from the *Revelaciones*, notably the chapters describing the visions from Jerusalem and Bethlehem, continued to appear in various contexts, where they held the status claimed by Birgitta and her supporters. In the sermons preached by the male members of the Birgittine Order, the *Revelaciones* were quoted on a par with Scripture.⁶⁶ Another significant example is an English devotional book of the *meditaciones* genre, *Speculum devotorum*, from the first half of the fifteenth century, where Birgitta's versions of the Nativity of Christ and the Crucifixion, as narrated in the *Revelaciones*, appear alongside those from the Gospels.⁶⁷ As in the *Meditaciones vite Christi* of Pseudo-Bonaventure, the compiler of *Speculum devotorum* invites his reader to choose herself which version of sacred history to employ in her meditations. Yet he leaves the reader in no doubt regarding his own preference. When describing the Crucifixion of Christ he states explicitly that he prefers Birgitta's version, which is not only more detailed, but also “more secure.”⁶⁸

⁶³ See Mereth Lindgren, *Bilden av Birgitta* (Höganäs: Wiken, 1991), 34–43.

⁶⁴ Einat Klafter, “The Feminine Mystic: Margery Kempe's Pilgrimage to Rome as an *imitatio Birgittae*,” in *Gender in Medieval Places, Spaces and Thresholds*, ed. Victoria Blud et al. (London: University of London, School of Advanced Study, Institute of Historical Research, 2019). See also *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley, Kalamazoo MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996.

⁶⁵ See Heymericus de Campo, *Heymericus de Campo: Dyalogus super Reuelacionibus beate Birgitte. A Critical Edition with and Introduction*, ed. Anna Fredriksson Adman, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2003, and Anna Fredriksson, “The Council of Constance, Jean Gerson, and St. Birgitta's ‘Reuelaciones’,” *Mediaeval Studies* 76 (2014).

⁶⁶ See Roger Andersson, “Birgitta and Her Revelations in the Sermons of the Vadstena Brothers,” in *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden and Her Legacy in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Maria H. Oen (Leiden: & Boston Brill, 2019).

⁶⁷ For a critical edition of the text, see *The Speculum devotorum of an Anonymous Carthusian of Sheen*, ed. James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana 12–13, Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1973–1974. For a discussion of the text and the use of Birgitta's *Revelaciones* as an *autoritas* in this work, see Ian Johnson, “Auctricitas? Holy Women and their Middle English Texts,” in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996).

⁶⁸ *Speculum devotorum*, 2, 267.

Fig. 14.0: Procession of women accompanying the Virgin Mary to the Temple, echoing the common ritual of post-partum churching. Norra Strö Church, Scania, c.1450–1475.