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A forceful influence: Saint Bridget's Revelations, the Limbourg brothers and the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duke of Berry

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Abstract

The Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden († 1373) were widespread beginning in the first decade that followed the death of Bridget. In those years, the exchanges among Italy, France and Flanders favored the circulation of the writings and models of the first Brigittine iconography. A testimony of this is found in the miniatures with the *Nativity*, the *Coronation of the Virgin* and the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* in the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duke of Berry. The aim of the article is to prove that the Brigittine literature was well known by the Limbourg brothers but also that of explaining the reasons of this interest. Through the systematic study of the sources and the identification of the context that favored interest in Bridget's work, the article shows how the Limbours understood the potential of this new visionary material and paved the way for other representations by Flemish artists of the first generation inspired by the *Revelations* like those of Robert Campin.

Le *Rivelazioni* di Brigida di Svezia († 1373) furono diffuse a partire dal primo decennio che seguì la morte della santa. In quegli anni, gli scambi tra Italia, Francia e Fiandre favorirono la diffusione degli scritti e dei modelli della prima iconografia brigidina. Testimoniano ciò le miniature con la *Natività*, l'*Incoronazione della Vergine* e la *Caduta degli angeli ribelli* contenute nelle *Très Riches Heures* del duca di Berry. Lo scopo dell'articolo è quello di

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dimostrare che la letteratura brigidina era ben nota ai fratelli Limbourg, ma anche quello di spiegare le ragioni del loro interesse. Attraverso lo studio sistematico delle fonti e l'individuazione del contesto che ha favorito l'interesse per l'opera di Brigida, l'articolo mostra come i Limburg abbiano compreso il potenziale di questo nuovo materiale visionario e spianato la strada per altre rappresentazioni di artisti fiamminghi della prima generazione ispirate alle *Rivelazioni* come quelle di Robert Campin.

The decisive contribution made by the new mystic and visionary literature in deeply reshaping the Christian image has already been highlighted. The late medieval centuries were, in this respect, a time of exceptional creativity. If the *religiosae mulieres*, mainly lay, and therefore *illiciteratae*, were “nourished” with images, images which often represented the starting point of asceticism and contemplation, their visions and revelations offered artists an extraordinary repository of themes, episodes and iconographic solutions that integrated the biblical narrative, vivifying it¹. A particularly significant case of the influence of the new mystical literature in figurative art is represented by the *Revelations* of Saint Bridget of Sweden, whose cultural and spiritual importance has been recognized and valued by scholars as one of the most important sources of inspiration of late medieval art². Saint Bridget at that time was considered an authority and the *Revelations*, which met with particularly-felt spiritual and devotional expressions, experienced a remarkable diffusion and circulation. Furthermore Saint Bridget distinguished herself for her strong self-awareness: as a revelatory channel of the Holy Spirit, she felt herself invested not only as one with a special historical and ecclesial mission, but also as a revelatory instrument on the same level as the prophets, apostles and evangelists³. This claim justified in a certain way the amount of “unpublished” material that the *Revelations* contained both as regards data and episodes that filled gospels and Christian literature voids but also as regards important doctrinal questions on which Brigida expresses herself with unprecedented freedom. There are several reasons why artists were pushed towards the literature of visions, including the symbolic potential of the language, the richness of the descriptive

¹ See Vavra 1985; Frugoni 1992; Bartolomei Romagnoli 1997; Hamburger 1998.

² Saint Bridget was born in Finsta around 1303 into one of the noblest and most important families of 14th century Sweden. In 1349, she moved to Rome at the invitation of Christ (see *Reuelationes S. Brigittae*, Extr. 8) to fulfill her prophetic call. The saint proposed the resolution of the grave moral and institutional crisis of the Church in the years of the Avignon Papacy. A great pilgrim and promoter not only of the religious reform but also of a social and political one of 14th century Europe, she died in Rome in 1373. For the *corpus* of Bridget's *Vitae* see BHL, vol. I, pp. 199-202, nn. 1334-1359; AASS, Octobris, vol. IV, pp. 368-560 and the acts of the canonization process see Collijn 1924-1931. The Brigittine *corpus* includes about seven hundred revelations that her last confessor, Alfonso of Jaén († 1389), collected by themes and divided into twelve books. See *Reuelationes S. Brigittae*.

³ Børresen 1993, p. 59.

elements and a reflection that aimed at the fusion of realism and symbolism⁴. The Briggittine literature was used as a privileged reservoir of images by the Flemish school of the first generation, in particular by the Limbourg brothers. Indeed, there is a trend that links Flemish and German artists to the mystics' visions, rich in detailed descriptions – something that is not reflected in the figurative art of Mediterranean origin, except for very rare examples such as Niccolò di Tommaso representations of Bridget's Nativity vision⁵. The case of Bridget is among the best known and, so far, also among the most studied⁶. The visions of the Swedish saint gave rise to the Western reinvention of the Nativity and Passion scenes, which definitively break the ancient Byzantine conceptions⁷. However, we believe that the specificity of the reference to the Briggittine literature in figurative art has not been emphasized enough. This lack of scholarly attention can be explained with the understanding that the rediscovery of female hagiographic and spiritual texts, especially with regard to Flanders and Brabant – the territories whose cultural and religious feeling was that of the Limbourg brothers – has only happened recently.

Since the beginning of the 13th century, the region had been the primitive incubation place of the new mystical and prophetic literature whose flowering must be placed in relation to the development of female religious movements with complex and articulated characters⁸. Surely these women were very

⁴ See Meiss 1945; Panofsky 1971, pp. 149-177; Benjamin 1976; Harbison 1984; Bedaux 1986; Marrow 1986.

⁵ For example, it has recently been demonstrated that in northern Europe, the representations of the devil correspond exactly to the descriptions found in the lives of some mystics. See Bartolomei Romagnoli 2013, pp. 265-305. Bridget's case is one of the very few of the most studied ones which testifies to this circumstance. There is the proven influence of the *Revelations* in the work of Matthias Grünewald, specifically in the Stuppach Madonna, which is clearly inspired by the text of *Rev IV*, 86 and in the panels with the *Crucifixion* and the *Mystic Nativity* of the *Isernheim Altarpiece*, which depend, respectively, on the visions on the Passion, the first, and on the *Sermo Angelicus*, the second. See Behling 1968; Scheja 1969; Gross, Urban 1999; Ritchie 2000. The topic relating to the inspiration to the Briggittine *Revelations* by figurative art also embraced the art of Robert Campin, see Westcott 1992 and more recently that of the Van Eyck brothers, see: La Delfa 2015 and McDonald 2015.

⁶ Although Bridget's iconography and that of the miniatures of the *Liber Celestis Revelationum* has been extensively studied, there is a great gap regarding the iconographic themes inspired by the numerous episodes and visions narrated in the *Revelations*. Indeed much of this still remains to be explored. Regarding Bridget's iconography and that of the miniatures of the *Liber Celestis Revelationum* see Nordenfalk 1961; Aili-Svanberg 2003; Creutzburg 2011 and the recent studies by Oen 2019 and Debby 2019.

⁷ Cornell 1924; Réau 1957, vol. 2.2, pp. 213-255; Wilhelm 1970, esp. coll. 103-120; Panofsky 1971, pp. 21-50, esp. p. 46 and pp. 149-177, esp. pp. 158-159; Schiller 1971, pp. 76-84; Richterová 2009, pp. 199-216; Puma 2012, esp. pp. 243-259.

⁸ As documented by recent studies, the rich production of *Vitae* by holy women of the region, referable to hagiographers from the canonical milieu and of the Order of Preacher Friars, was testimony of a new spiritual sensitivity centered on some fundamental themes such as: the rich Marian devotion, the attention to the humanity of Christ and the participation in his sufferings, the centrality assigned to the eucharistic sacrament and the anti-heretic commitment. As for

influential to the society of the time, especially as regards artistic production. Thus, there existed in the Low Countries an environment particularly sensitive to the feminine word where the works of Bridget could find the right reception⁹. Some iconographic elements therefore suggest the presence of a direct line of influence from the spread of Bridget's popularity, which was almost complete immediately after her canonization in 1391, and, in part, thanks to the rapid diffusion of the *Revelations*, to the artistic production of the Limbourg brothers and of the *Hours of Jean de Boucicaut*¹⁰. Created for Jean le Meingre II, Marshal of France, the *Hours* contain a miniature depicting Bridget and an angel receiving the saint's hands in prayer (fig. 1)¹¹. The miniature is a testimony of the period that Marshal Boucicaut spent in Genoa, the city where the Brigittine monastery, Ara Coeli, was located¹². In the Ligurian city, the devotion to Bridget was promoted by Alfonso of Jaén, confessor and great promoter of the canonization of the Swedish prophetess¹³. This miniature is also a testimony of how Bridget was known in the circle of Belgian area artists active in Paris. Another testimony is the presence of Brigittine iconographic elements in northern art representations of the Nativity of which Millard Meiss was already well aware.¹⁴ The first examples of this new iconography, based on the vision of the birth of Christ Bridget received in Bethlehem during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1372, were created by Niccolò di Tommaso (fig. 2)¹⁵. It is believed that the artist himself attended the public report of

female mystical experiences in the Netherlands, see: Meersseman 1948; McGinn 1994; Bartolomei Romagnoli 2010, pp. 207-252; Bartolomei Romagnoli 2013b, pp. 415-446; Bartolomei Romagnoli, Degl'Innocenti, Santi 2015-2018.

⁹ Both regions were also decisive in the development of Swedish mysticism. The Swedish Dominican friar, Peter of Dacia († 1289), author of the life of Christine of Stommeln († 1312), attended the *Studium* of Cologne founded by Albert the Great. On his return to Sweden, he brought with him a wealth of experience on mysticism which, in all likelihood, also had an influence on the Swedish mysticism of Bridget's time. See Bartolomei Romagnoli 2013b.

¹⁰ See Meiss 1974; Husband 2008, esp. pp. 10-45.

¹¹ See Nordenfalk 1990 and De Floriani 2007. For the Master of the Boucicaut Hours, see Meiss 1968, esp. pp. 131-132; Sterling 1987, pp. 340-412; Châtelet 2000. The iconography is not new and recalls that of Saint Anastasia represented in the act of receiving new hands because she, who was born without, believed in the miraculous birth of Christ. It is interesting to note how this iconography was adapted to Saint Bridget who had the vision of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. Regarding the iconography of Saint Anastasia in the 15th century see Booton 2004, p. 52.

¹² The monastery of Ara Coeli, also known as Scala Coeli, was founded in 1400. It was a copying center for manuscripts together with the monastery of Santa Maria del Paradiso near Florence, the only other late medieval Brigittine Italian monastery. For a short introduction on its history see Nyberg 2007.

¹³ Alfonso Pecha of Valdaterra (Segovia 1329/1330 – Genoa 1389) was Bridget's confessor beginning in 1368. With the saint, he undertook the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and he was the emissary of her messages to Pope Gregory XI. A key character in the spread of the *Revelations* and in her canonization process, he spread the cult of the saint in Europe. See Colledge 1956; Jönsson 1989; Sensi 1993.

¹⁴ Meiss 1974, p. 244.

¹⁵ *Reuelationes S. Brigittae*, VII, 21: «Visio, quam habuit domina Birgitta in Bethleem, ubi

her visionary experience when she visited the city of Naples upon her return from the pilgrimage in February 1373¹⁶. In Naples the cult of the saint spread soon after her death, so much so that the first illuminated manuscripts of the *Revelations* were produced there, as well as the first images depicting the saint and the scenes inspired by her visions¹⁷. The narrative of the birth of Christ in the *Revelations* contains elements already widespread at the time of which we have testimony in other sources, however, there are some details that are absolutely new and that are never found before the *Revelations*. These include the Virgin's long blond hair loose on the shoulders, the naked baby Jesus levitating just as if he had miraculously come out of Mary's womb, the Virgin's mantle and shoes on the floor, the newborn's swaddling clothes and the candle of Saint Joseph. Many other elements, such as the adoration of the child and his supernatural brightness are derived from the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* and from the *Golden Legend*, two works certainly known by Bridget, although the brightness is also a feature which is easier to find a consequence of the spread of Bridget's vision¹⁸.

The iconographic model of the Nativity, which in the tables of Niccolò di Tommaso and in other works of the same subject produced in Italy is particularly faithful to Bridget's vision, was taken up with some variations in the figurative art of northern Europe. Meiss is sure that one of the earlier representations of the Nativity which includes Brigittine details is the one in the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duke of Berry (fig. 3)¹⁹. It is not possible to establish if and how the model of the Nativity of Niccolò di Tommaso crossed the Italian borders, although the kingdom of Naples did not lack opportunities for exchanges with France.

virgo Maria ostendit ei totum modum sui partus, qualiter ipsa peperit gloriosum filium suum, sicut ipsa virgo promiserat eidem domine Birgitte in Roma, antequam iret ad Bethleem per XV annos, ut patet in primo capitulo istius libri ultimi». See the modern edition: Bergh 1967.

¹⁶ Niccolò di Tommaso, *Saint Bridget and the Vision of the Birth of Christ*, last quarter of the 14th century, Vatican City, Pinacoteca Vaticana; the same author also created not only the portable triptych with the *Vision of the Nativity of Saint Bridget*, created in the last quarter of the 14th century, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Johnson Collection, but also another version of the Nativity, a damaged painting currently housed at the Yale University Art Gallery. Regarding the vision of Saint Bridget, in addition to the constant presence of the saint, the works of Niccolò di Tommaso are particularly faithful to nearly all the details of the vision of Bethlehem described in the *Revelations*. See Nordenfalk 1961; Skaug 2001, 2004.

¹⁷ The Master of the *Liber Celestium Revelationum* began to operate even before the canonization. Of the series of Neapolitan manuscripts of the *Liber Celestium Revelationum*, made between 1374 and 1379 and accompanied by precious and finely finished miniatures, parts are preserved at the Pierpont Morgan Library of New York (Ms 498), the Central Library of the Sicilian Region of Palermo (Ms IV. G. 2), and the Biblioteka Narodowa of Warsaw (Ms 3310). See Aili, Svanberg 2003; Putaturo Murano 2009 and Svanberg 2009.

¹⁸ See De Caulibus 1997; Da Varazze 1998. Of these, the 14th century Latin Gospel of Christ's childhood, contained in the Arundel Code (Ms 404) held at the British Library, is very close to the vision of Bridget. See Schiller 1971, p. 79.

¹⁹ See Meiss 1974, pp. 195-201. On the *Très Riches Heures*, see Longnon, Cazelles 1969; Cazelles, Rathofer 1984; Stirnemann 2004.

Nonetheless it is clear that starting from the representation of the Limbourg brothers, Briggittine literature begins to be decisive for the representation of the birth of Christ in northern European art²⁰. This representation includes the motif of the child surrounded by luminous rays, already painted by Niccolò di Tommaso, which enjoyed great popularity in Flemish iconography of the 15th century and some new details that suggest a certain three-dimensionality, such as the suspension in the air of the naked Christ child surrounded by luminous rays as if he had just come out of Mary's womb as described in the *Revelations* of Saint Bridget. In northern Europe, the reception of this motif was mediated by the miniature of the Limbourg brothers, where the most miraculous aspects of the birth prevails, namely that of the levitation and of the emanation of light rays. To represent this aspect of the Nativity according to the *Revelations*, the Limbourgs use an ingenious expedient, as happens often in their artistic production; they insert cherubs that float in an elegant movement of bodies and wings around the child. In this way, the levitation is made credible because it is perfectly inserted in the painted space.

Except for cherubs, this iconography was inherited by Robert Campin and by his followers. The *Nativity* of the Musée des beaux-arts of Dijon (c. 1420/1425) contains elements of the *Revelations* of Saint Bridget, such as Saint Joseph with the candle, the Virgin dressed in white in prayer and the naked child whose body emanates light rays (fig. 4)²¹. Here, the suspension of the child in the air is suggested by a sort of contraction of his small body, as well as by the crossed and bent legs. A votive image, that of the *Virgin in the Apse* that was widely used in the 15th century (fig. 5), is also attributed to Robert Campin. It is a completely new representation depicting the nursing Virgin, surrounded by musician angels. The group, thus represented, is placed in an apse without windows. In a later version found in the John and Mable Ringling Museum, we find some motifs related to the representation of the Virgin that enjoyed a great popularity in Flanders, like the long blond/red hair with particular reflections of light that fall loose on the shoulders, the white robe and the inclined face²². According to Catherine Morris Westcott, the iconography of these small paintings was conceived on the basis of the *Sermo Angelicus* and of the *Quattuor Orationes*, the first books of the *Revelations* to be widely diffused, that mainly centered on the praise of the Virgin's and Christ's bodies. An important testimony of Marian devotion in the late Middle Ages nourished by popular devotions and doctrinal notions, the *Sermo Angelicus de Virginis*

²⁰ According to Meiss, Paul Limbourg made a journey in Italy around 1405. However, strong doubts have been raised about this eventuality in favor of the possibility that the artist's knowledge of Italian art was based on works created in Italy and owned by his French clients. See Meiss 1974, pp. 240-251; Schmidt 1999.

²¹ Meiss 1945, p. 176.

²² The original by Robert Campin, which is supposed to date back to 1425, has not yet been found. See Westcott 1992, pp. 32-41.

excellencia contains the readings of the day for the Brigittine order. Drafted in Rome between 1350 and 1354, the eleventh book of the *Revelations* is a collection of Marian texts to be read in the morning, together with the so-called *Cantus Sororum*. It was, in all probability, the most famous book of Bridget and the first to be translated into European vernacular languages already from the end of the 14th century. It deviated from the Liturgy of the Hours, then used to form an unprecedented *corpus* of liturgical readings entirely centered on the figure of the Virgin, and, for the first time, replaced the passages of Sacred Scripture. The *Quattuor Oraciones*, the twelfth and last book of the Brigittine *corpus*, consists of prayers that focus on the life and praise of Christ and the Virgin. Both works were already included in the second edition of the Brigittine *corpus* of 1380 by Alfonso of Jaén²³. In a similar way, several Brigittine texts were probably accompanied by images, especially those of the Passion, such as the *Fifteen Oes*²⁴. In the works of Campin, the Virgin is systematically represented without a veil and with her long blond hair like gold falling over her shoulders *alla maniera* of Bridget²⁵. In traditional iconography, the Virgin is always depicted with a veil. In depictions of the Nativity, beginning with Niccolò di Tommaso, and therefore inspired by the *Revelations*, this particular detail of the vision of Saint Bridget is reproduced quite faithfully. The *Revelations* is the only text among previous and contemporary sources to emphasize it. This passage is not the only one in which Bridget speaks of the hair of the Virgin, we find the same detail in a passage from Book V of the *Revelations* which is the most important one for the iconography of the Virgin in Flanders²⁶. This means that before Bridget, the Virgin's hair is not depicted in any work of art.

The long blond hair already appears before Campin in a miniature of the Limbourg brothers where other elements could also confirm their interest in

²³ See Eklund 1972, 1991; Montag 2000, 2005.

²⁴ In addition to being disseminated in its entirety, the *Revelations* were assembled into collections of episodes from the life of Christ and the Virgin particularly widespread in northern Europe, in England and in Flanders. Early examples are the *Celeste Viridarium*, composed by Alfonso of Jaén shortly after 1380 or the *Vita Beate Marie Virginis*, written in English in the 15th century and inspired by Alfonso's work. Bridget became one of the most beloved saints in Europe in part due to the number of apocrypha that circulated and were attributed to her such as *Fifteen Oes*. Based on the model of the seven words, these prayers extended the biblical material and stimulated the imagination. See Montag 1968, pp. 25-34; Duffy 1992, pp. 249-256; Gejrot 2000.

²⁵ *Reuelationes S. Brigittae*, VII, 21: «Virgo igitur illa tunc discalciavit calciamenta pedum suorum et discooperuit mantellum album, quo cooperiebatur, amouitque velum de capite suo et iuxta se reposuit ea, remanens in sola tunica, capillis pulcherrimis quasi de auro extentis super spatulas» (Bergh 1967).

²⁶ *Reuelationes S. Brigittae*, V, 4: «Reuelacio quarta in libro questionum, in qua Christus pulcherrime laudat omnia membra virginis Marie matris sue, moralizans dicta membra spiritualiter, comparando ea virtutibus, et pronunciat eandem virginem dignissimam esse reginali corona. Caput quippe tuum fuit quasi aurum fulgens et capilli quasi radii solis, quia tua mundissima virginitas, que est in te quasi caput omnium virtutum, et continencia omnium illicitorum motuum placuerunt et fulserunt in conspectu meo cum omni humilitate». See the modern edition: Bergh 1971.

the Brigittine literature. In the folio 60v of the *Très Riches Heures* representing the *Coronation of the Virgin*, Mary is depicted with beautiful long blond hair (fig. 6)²⁷. This is not the only detail that attracts our attention. If we look at the almond made up of angels surrounding the figure of Christ, we can see the same attempt to show a certain three-dimensionality, similar to that already used in the *Nativity* folio in which the angels surround the child and accompany him spilling to earth from the womb of Mary²⁸. Another detail evokes instead the concept of infinity: the crowns that descend from above held up by angels. There are three crowns in all, four if we consider the one already placed on the head of Christ in majesty. However, the representation seems to suggest that, beyond the frame, the crowns could continue to infinity²⁹. This iconography of the crowns of Christ, which plays with the numbers three/four and the idea of infinity, is somewhat unusual, especially in the context of such a representation. In fact, the crowns are not found either in previous iconographic examples. It is possible that in this miniature the Brigittine literature was used for the first time to inspire a new iconography different from that of the Nativity which until that time was the only one to be determined by Bridget's visions. In a passage of the *Sermo Angelicus*, these details take on a specific meaning. The text is taken from the third reading of Monday and speaks of God as the principle of everything, as virtue par excellence, and how he made the gift of free will to angels and men. The number of crowns/virtues of God is invaluable, and he himself is the crown and prize of angels and men: «Vnde inestimabilis vere credendus est coronarum numerus, quibus ipse Deus sublimissime fulget»³⁰. But there are three crowns/virtues that give God an incomparable glory:

Quem tamen specialiter tres virtutes veluti fulgidissime tres corone gloriosius exornant. Virtus namque illa, qua creauit angelos, erat ipsius corona prima [...] Illa quoque virtus, qua creauit hominem, erat ei corona secunda, qua et ipse homo, ex insipientia sua hostili suggestori consensiciens, subito priuatus est. [...] Virtus vero illa, qua te, o virgo desiderabilis, ad suam eternam gloriam creauit, ipsum glorificauit quasi corona tertia, per quam angeli

²⁷ See Cazelles, Rathofer 1984, vol. 2, pp. 155-156.

²⁸ The editors of the facsimile edition of the *Très Riches Heures* have also noticed the similarity of the two representations. See *ivi*, p. 155.

²⁹ It has already been proposed that the three crowns symbolize the Trinity. See Longnon, Cazelles 1969, Pl. 59. However, it is clear that there are at least four crowns and the wings of angels were cut from the frame, seemingly suggesting that there may be other angels beyond the painting that support other crowns: «Funktion und Bedeutung der drei Kronen über dem Thronsitze Christi sind nicht sicher. Gewöhnlich sieht man in der Dreizahl einen Hinweis auf die Dreifaltigkeit und dementsprechend auf Maria als Braut der Trinität. Doch darf nicht übersehen werden, daß der Gottessohn ja bereits eine Krone trägt, der Maler also vier Kronen unmittelbar übereinandergesetzt hat», *ivi*, p. 156.

³⁰ *Reuelationes S. Brigittae, Sermo Angelicus*: «*Feria Secunda, lectio tertia: In istis tribus leccionibus subsequenter ostendit angelus, qualiter angeli post lapsum Luciferi beatam Virginem debere creari nouerunt et quantum de ipsius futura creacione gaudebant et qualiter post mundi creacionem coram Deo et angelis ipsa Virgo assistere videbatur. Ad societatem ciuium supernorum perducatur nos regina angelorum. Amen*». See the modern edition: Eklund 1972.

rupturas priorum coronarum reintegrari debere cognoscebant. Vnde, o domina, spes nostre salutis, honoris Dei corona iuste appellari poteris³¹.

The depiction of the crowns in the f. 60v of the *Très Riches Heures* could be explained in light of this passage; however, what we say could be confirmed by the miniature that follows that of the *Coronation of the Virgin* in f. 64v, where the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* is depicted (fig. 7). The iconography is not new and comes from a tradition that had already begun in the 11th and 12th centuries together with the theory known as that of the “thrones of paradise”³². As Louis Réau pointed out, the theme was not widely used: «Difficile à traiter sans la connaissance de la perspective et des raccourcis, ce sujet semble avoir intimidé les artistes du Moyen-âge»³³. As a great innovator of three-dimensional representations, Paul Limbourg once again stands out for the addition of some elements that make his representation even more brilliant and dynamic³⁴. Instead of differentiating the rows of thrones left empty and those occupied by the angels, he multiplies the seats and, making the angels fall on both sides, represents some of them precisely in the act of leaving the thrones empty and falling into the abyss below, also expressed spatially by the movements and contorted positions assumed by the bodies. However, the fact that the artist represented this iconographic subject in a miniature in folio which follows that of the *Coronation of the Virgin*, must have a very precise theological meaning that cannot be explained only by reason of new spatial experimentation. In fact, the miniature with the *Coronation* concludes the cycle of Marian representations of the manuscript, while the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* that follows seems to have no theological connection with the following miniatures. It has been proposed that the image had not been designed for this book of hours and that its subsequent location at the beginning of the penitential psalms would justify its presence:

Not originally planned for the *Très Riches Heures*, it is an inset page executed separately either at the suggestion of the Duc de Berry or upon a sudden inspiration of one or more of the brothers. It was placed at the beginning of David's Penitential Psalms, probably because the angels' revolt was the first sin from which stemmed all other sins because of Lucifer's wish for revenge³⁵.

However, the surprising coincidence between the number of crowns and the description of the passage from the *Sermo Angelicus* cannot be ignored. In the same passage, it is said that God showed his virtue to the fullest when he

³¹ *Reuelationes S. Brigittae, Sermo Angelicus*, VI, 10-16 (Eklund 1972).

³² In this regard, see Réau 1957, vol. 2.1, pp. 56-64.

³³ Ivi, p. 56.

³⁴ Paul is distinguished by its great familiarity in the representation of populated outdoor spaces and for the attention to three-dimensionality through the shadows, perspective, light and color. See Meiss 1974, p. 243; Bellosi 1975; Husband 2008, pp. 264-277.

³⁵ Longnon, Cazelles 1969, Pl. 59. See also Cazelles, Rathofer 1984, vol. 2, pp. 158-159.

created man so that he could occupy the places of the fallen angels in Paradise because of his own pride:

Magnam vtique virtutem Deus ostendit, quando hominem ad hoc de terra plasmavit, quod per caritatem et humilitatem caelestium mansionum inhabitator mereretur effici, a quibus angeli diuine voluntati contrarii pro superbia et inuidia infeliciter sunt eieci. Erant enim ipsis virtutes odibiles, pro quibus potuissent sublimiter coronari³⁶.

The creation of the Virgin Mary, which according to the *Sermo Angelicus* is the third crown of God, remedies both the fall of the angels represented in f. 64v and the sin of man. The *Sermo Angelicus* seems to be the source that links the two representations. This could offer further confirmation of the fact that it was the most widespread book of the *Revelations*. Moreover, Bridget is particularly fond of the symbolism of the crown, so much so that it appears more than once in the *Revelations* with the triple purpose of symbolizing the divine majesty, the Trinity and eternity. On more than one occasion in the *Revelations*, it is God who equates himself to a crown explaining its meaning; this is the case of *Rev* V, 4 and *Rev* VIII, *Incipit*³⁷. Therefore, it is not surprising that we find the same text of the *Sermo Angelicus* that we have quoted above in an article by Grantley McDonald where the author suggests that this Brigittine passage explains the meaning of the tripartite tiara on the head of Deity in the Ghent Altarpiece³⁸.

The years in which the Limbourg brothers worked on the miniatures of the *Très Riches Heures* were those in which the troubled ecclesiastical schism was finding a solution and when the debate about the *Revelations* in Paris intensified. The Duke, as the great collector of books that he was, could have known the manuscript of the *Revelations* made for his brother, Charles V. According to Torquemada, already in 1379 there were many Brigittine codes circulating in Europe, and most of them were commissioned by powerful lords³⁹. The bishop of Worms ordered a copy which was given to the emperor, while Peter of Aragon had another one made at the request of the king of France at around

³⁶ *Reuelationes S. Brigittae, Sermo Angelicus*, VI, 6-7 (Eklund 1972).

³⁷ *Reuelationes S. Brigittae*, V, 4: «Filius loquitur: “Ego sum coronatus rex in deitate mea sine principio et sine fine. Nec initium habet corona nec finem, significans potestatem meam, que non habuit principium nec habebit finem. Verum ego aliam coronam habui custoditam in me, que quidem corona sum ego ipse Deus» (Bergh 1971) and *Sanctae Birgittae, Reuelationes* VIII, *Incipit*: «Certe deitas mea sine principio erat et sine fine erit et est. Hec igitur deitas merito corone assimilatur, quia corona sine principio et sine fine est. Sicut autem in regno corona seruatur regi futuro, nunc deitas mea seruabatur humanitati mee, qua ipsa coronaretur». See the modern edition: Aili 2002.

³⁸ McDonald 2015, p. 8.

³⁹ Cardinal Juan de Torquemada (Valladolid 1388 – Rome 1468) is the author of the *Defensorium super Reuelationes coelestes Sanctae Birgittae*, written on the occasion of the Council of Basel when the orthodoxy of the writings of Bridget was further questioned. See *Prologus domini Ioannis Cardinalis de Turrecremata in defensorium eiusdem super reuelationes caelestes Sanctae Birgittae de Vuatzsteno*, in *Reuelationes S. Brigittae*.

1380⁴⁰. Svanberg identifies Peter of Aragon with a Dominican relative of the King of France, however, we wonder if he should not be identified rather with Peter IV of Ribagorza (1305 ca. – 1380 ca.) son of King James II of Aragon⁴¹. If this were the case, the link with the king of France would lead us back to King Charles V, brother of the Duke of Berry, who reigned from 1364 to 1380. On the other hand, the source handed down by Torquemada makes clear mention of a Franciscan friar, a relative of the King of France: «Frater Petrus de Arragonia, ordinis fratrum minorum, consanguineus regis Francie»⁴². During the schism, he sided with Urban VI, just like Bridget's confessor Alfonso Pecha, and shared Bridget's proposals of reform⁴³. Therefore, he could have pleaded the cause of Roman obedience to the king of France through the *Revelations* of Saint Bridget, simultaneously promoting peace and reunification. But, there are also other ways in which the Duke of Berry and the talented Limbourg brothers could have known the *Revelations*. One of these is the art market and the circulation of Italian models and manuscripts⁴⁴.

If we consider the theologians who were part of the circle of the Duke of Berry, the problem of the transmission of Brigittine literature to the artists is further complicated. Meiss mentions the greatest theologians of the time when describing the court of the Duke of Berry. Among them was Jean Gerson⁴⁵. He was Pierre of Ailly's († 1420) favorite disciple and, in 1395, succeeded him as chancellor of the University of Paris. He was the most ardent supporter of the movement that contested the sanctity of Bridget and the canonicity of her writings at the Council of Constance⁴⁶. The reference to the *Revelations* in the Limbourgs' artistic production is therefore surprising if related to the theologians of the University of Paris who were certainly hostile to Brigittine literature. This leads to the hypothesis of a more nuanced context than that which emerges from historiography and the possibility that the *Revelations* were widely diffused and not necessarily opposed or considered untruthful in the France of the first years of the 15th century. We believe that Vauchez's reconstruction of the scarce spread of the *Revelations* in France should be revised; rather, they were in frequent circulation because of the controversy and

⁴⁰ Undhagen 1960, pp. 214-226.

⁴¹ D'Alòs Moner 1935, p. 238; Aili, Svanberg 2003, vol. 1, p. 41.

⁴² Undhagen 1960, p. 225.

⁴³ On female prophecy in connection with the proposals for political and ecclesial reform in the late Middle Ages, and on the globality of Bridget's project, see Manselli 1980; Vauchez 1983; Dinzlacher 1988; Leonardi 2011, pp. 37-54.

⁴⁴ Hans Aili and Jan Svanberg focused much on the circulation of the first Brigittine manuscripts and panel paintings. See Aili-Svanberg 2003.

⁴⁵ Meiss 1974, p. 249.

⁴⁶ The question of Bridget's orthodoxy was severely questioned by Gerson. The work in which he directly refers to the Brigittine *Revelations* is the *De probatione Spirituum*: Gerson 1973, pp. 177-185. For more, see the study by Claire Sahlin who systematically analyzed the oppositions to Bridget that occurred when the saint was still alive, during the canonization process and those that followed in the 15th century: Sahlin 1996, esp. pp. 136-220.

backlash surrounding their publication⁴⁷. Certainly the question of visionary knowledge and discernment, which placed Bridget at the center of the debate, shows that her work was well-known in Paris, being the attempt of the Parisian masters, seriously worried about re-establishing an order contrasting a sound discernment of spirits and a more balanced view of charisms, a proof of the fact that this kind of literature had a vast public and aroused great interest. Most probably, not everyone recognized themselves in the official positions expressed by the University. Among these there must have been the artists, among whom Bridget enjoyed a great reputation beginning in the years immediately following her canonization.

Flemish artists immediately had a special predilection for the *Revelations*. Unlike the literature that “prepared” their way, they made an impression on the European literary scene because of the strength and the richness of their message and detailed reports of visions and stories which could not be found in the Bible or in other apocryphal sources. Bridget claimed the authority of divine inspiration and the value of a teaching comparable to that of the Gospels, with the understanding that, although revelation ended with the Bible, there continues to be space and encouragement for a maturation in understanding of it. The Swedish saint contributed an uninterrupted meditation on sacred history. Her vision is the means to integrating new episodes in the narrative with respect to the biblical canon⁴⁸. At the Council of Basel, the second council in which the saint’s orthodoxy was strongly contested, the conciliarist party was averse to the *Revelations* because of the claim of the Brigittine order equating its foundress’s message with that of the Gospels. Around this question develops every reference to Brigittine literature as a source for figurative art; in fact, only those who shared the idea according to which the *Revelations* were an authoritative source as much as the Scripture could be inspired by them in the realization of a new iconography.

In summary, the *Revelations* were widespread beginning in the first decade that followed the death of Bridget, even before the official recognition of her holiness. In those years, the exchanges among Italy, France and Flanders were dense and favored the circulation of the writings and models of the first Brigittine

⁴⁷ Vauchez 1999.

⁴⁸ The idea that the *Revelations* are on the same level as the biblical passages was formulated by Alfonso of Jaén and is found in the proceedings of the canonization process: «vt preter illa, que in evangelio de supradictis materiis per evangelistas scripta sunt, habeat sanctum collegium vestrum novum tractatum scriptum digito Dei vivi et ab ipso Christo et matre sua mundo noviter revelatum, quo divinis potestis vacare leccionibus ad eorum laudem et quandam novam spiritualem letizia in vestris mentibus generandam. Et quia dictum sapientis est quod omnia nova placent multum, puto quod iste novus tractatus vobis placebit et omnibus devotis fidelibus, ex eo vide licet quod de dicta materia gestorum Christie et matris eius multa secreta divina que in evangelio scripta non sunt nec ab aliquo doctore inventa, in hoc tamen opusculo non sine causa ab eis divinitus mundo norite revelata ad nostre sancte christiane fidei confirmacionem et animarum fideliumchristianorum in fide catholica fortissimam roboracionem», see Jönsson 1989, pp. 177-178.

iconography. The Limbourg brothers expanded their interest for the first time from the Nativity vision to explore other passages of the *Revelations*, especially those of the *Sermo Angelicus*, the most widespread of Bridget's writings. The Limbourgs understood the potential of this new visionary material and paved the way for other representations openly inspired by the *Revelations* like those of Robert Campin in Flanders. From that moment on, the new iconography of the Nativity and of the Virgin with long, loose blond hair and without veil spread throughout Europe. The Limbourg brothers worked for the Duke of Berry in the early 15th century, when the debate about the *Revelations* carried out by Gerson probably did not prevent those who favored the Brigittine literature from spreading it. However, the claim of this great apocryphal source to be as veritable as the Gospels was even more crucial for, as it seems, it was shared by many.

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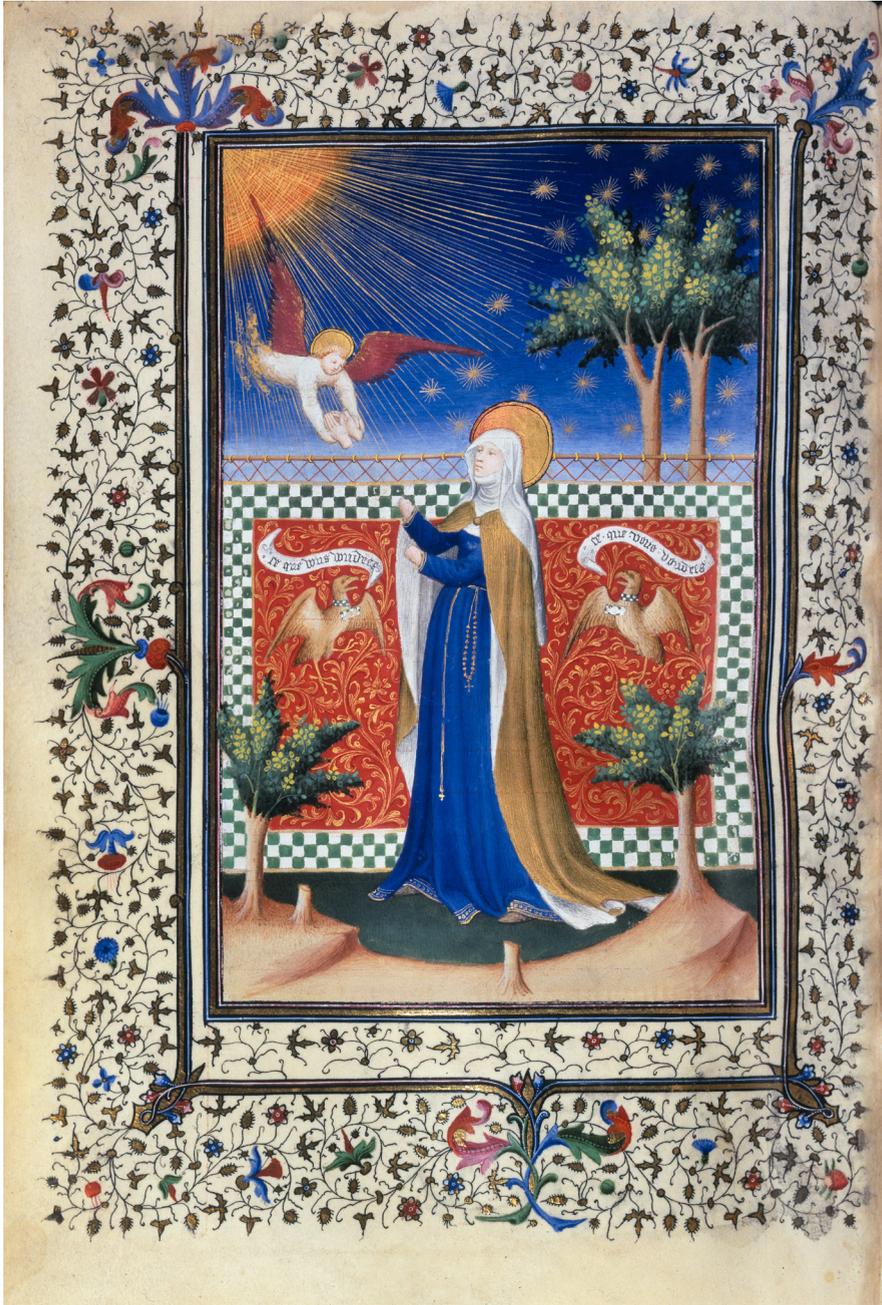


Fig. 1. Heures de Meréchal de Boucicaut, *Saint Bridget of Sweden*, 1410-1415, tempera on parchment, 18x11.8, Ms 1311, fol. 42v., Paris, Musée Jacquemart André, (from De Florian 2007, fig. VII)



Fig. 2. Niccolò di Tommaso, *Saint Bridget and the Vision of the Nativity*, after 1372, tempera on panel, 44x54, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome (Photo <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Niccol%C3%B2_di_Tommaso_-_St_Bridget_and_the_Vision_of_the_Nativity_-_WGA16558.jpg>)



Fig. 3. Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, *Nativity*, 1411-1416, tempera on parchment, 29x21, Ms 65, fol. 44v, Chantilly, Musée Condé (Photo <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Folio_44v_-_The_Nativity.jpg?uselang=it>)



Fig. 4. Robert Campin, *Nativity*, ca. 1420, oil on panel, 87x70, Dijon, Musée des beaux-arts, (Photo <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nativity_\(Campin\)#/media/File:The_Nativity_Robert_Campin.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nativity_(Campin)#/media/File:The_Nativity_Robert_Campin.jpg)>)



Fig. 5. Follower of Robert Campin, *Virgin in the apse*, ca. 1530, oil and tempera on panel, 46x35,2, Sarasota, John and Mable Ringling Museum (Photo <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Virgin_and_Child_in_an_Apse,_c._1530,_copy_of_original_by_Robert_Campin,_Early_Netherlandish,_c._1425,_oil_and_tempera_on_panel_-_John_and_Mable_Ringling_Museum_of_Art_-_Sarasota,_FL_-_DSC00514.jpg>)



Fig. 6. Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, 1411-1416, tempera on parchment, 29x21, Ms 65, fol. 60v, Chantilly, Musée Condé (Photo <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Folio_60v_-_The_Coronation_of_the_Virgin.jpg>)



Fig. 7. Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, *The Fall of the rebel angels*, 1411-1416, tempera on parchment, 29x21, Ms 65, fol. 64v, Chantilly, Musée Condé (Photo <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fr%C3%A8res_Limbourg_-_Tr%C3%A8s_Riches_Heures_du_duc_de_Berry_-_chute_des_anges_rebelles_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg>)

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