The Virgin in the Ghent Altarpiece and the Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden

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Abstract. This article demonstrates that the Revelations were essential for the creation of a new iconography of the Virgin for the Flemish art of the first decades of the 15th century. The aim is to analyze the wide-range of Brigittine texts that explain the symbolic elements of the painting which are related to the iconography of the Virgin, to her physical and symbolic features and attributes, and to Marian dogmas, especially those of the Perpetual Virginity, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. The depiction of the Virgin in the Ghent Altarpiece is, in many respects, brand new and reveals how the symbolism of the last medieval centuries had given way to the new demands of devotional and mystical literature. The interest in female mysticism within the territories of Flanders and Brabant dates back to the beginning of the 13th century, when the development of a new female religious movement took place. In this environment particularly sensitive to the feminine word, the works of Bridget could find the right reception and her Mariology could inspire the representation of the Virgin of the Ghent Altarpiece.

Keywords: Saint Bridget of Sweden; Revelationes Coelestes; Jan van Eyck; Hubert van Eyck; Ghent Altarpiece; Iconography of the Virgin Mary.

1. Introduction

The Revelations of Saint Bridget of Sweden are an important iconographic source of figurative art. Comparisons between some Brigittine texts and the early 15th century Flemish panel painting have revealed that there has been more than one circumstance in which the Revelations have...
been their source of inspiration. Among these, the most important example is certainly the Ghent Altarpiece which has only recently been put at the center of the debate. The connection between the Brigittine literature and the Van Eyck brothers, which has been proposed only in 2015 in an article by Grantley McDonald, was analyzed in detail in my Doctoral dissertation which was discussed the same year.

In the last several decades, there has been a rediscovery of female hagiographic and spiritual texts, especially in Flanders and Brabant, both of which were also decisive in the development of Swedish mysticism. The interest in female mysticism within those territories dates back to the beginning of the 13th century, when the development of a new female religious movement took place. Thus, there existed in the Low Countries an environment particularly sensitive to the feminine word where the works of Bridget could find the right reception. It is not by chance that the Order of the Holy Savior, which spread throughout Europe thanks to elite patrons, enjoyed a particularly fruitful season in Flanders. The order founded by Bridget was extraordinarily popular in the same regions where her writings had been so enthusiastically adopted. The presence in the Netherlands of many monasteries of the order, with a higher density than in any other European nation, shows that those territories were at the center of the spread of Bridget’s spirituality and writings (Fig. 1).3

The Ghent Altarpiece was initiated by Hubert van Eyck from an uncertain date, perhaps as early as 1424. His brother Jan succeeded him on his death on 18 September 1426. The altarpiece was completed and exhibited to the public on 6 May 1432. It was commissioned by the rich and powerful Jodocus Vijd and by his wife Elizabeth Borluit for their private chapel in Saint Bavo’s cathedral in Ghent. The literature is very vast and focuses on multiple aspects including the attribution of the panels and the adherence to an initial project. See Plicht, Otto (2002), Van Eyck: die Begründer der altniederländischen Malerei, München, Prestel; Baldass, Ludwig (1952), Jan van Eyck, London, Phaidon; Panofsky 1971; Châtelet, Albert (2011), Hubert et Jan van Eyck créateurs de l’Agneau mystique, Dijon, Faton; Herzner, Volker (1995), Jan van Eyck und der Genter Altar, Worms, Werner; Dhanens, Elizabeth (1973), Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece, New York, Lane; Brand Philip, Lotte (1980), The Ghent Altarpiece and the Art of Jan van Eyck, Princeton, Princeton University Press; Googdal, Dana Ruth (1980), The Iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece., University of Pennsylvania.

McDonald, Grantley (2015), “A Further Source for the Ghent Altarpiece? The Revelations of Bridget of Sweden”, Oud Holland 128.1, 1-16; La Delfa, Angela Maria (2015), Le Rivelazioni di santa Brigida di Svezia e l’iconografia: il caso dei Van Eyck, Diss. Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana.

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, Alessandra (2013), Santità e mistica femminile nel Medioevo, Spoleto, Centro italiano di studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 415-446.

As documented by recent studies, the rich production of Vite by holy women of the region, referring 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. See Bartolomei Romagnoli, Alessandra, Degl’Innocenti, Antonella, Santi, Francesco (2015-2018), eds., Scrittrici mistiche europee, 2 voll., Firenze, Edizioni del Galluzzo; Bartolomei Romagnoli 2013, pp. 415-446; Meersseman, Gilles Gérard (1948), “Les frères prêcheurs et le mouvement dévot en Flandre au XIIIe S.”, Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 18, 69-130; McGinn, Bernard (1994), ed., Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete, New York, Continuum.

The monastery of Mariatroon near Ghent was founded by Isabel of Portugal, Duchess of Burgundy and wife of Philip the Good, while that of Marienbaun near Cologne was founded by his sister, Mary of Burgundy, Duchess of Cleves. See Nyberg, Tore (1965), Birgittinische Klostergründungen des Mittelalters, Lund, CWK Gleerup, 145-222; Sander Olsen, Ulla (2005), “The Birgittine Order in the Netherlands through 600 Years: An Overview”, Birgittriana 19, 193-202.

The Duke paid Georges Taxilly, prior of the Dominican convent of Bruges, for the purchase of two parchment books containing the Revelations. The only surviving manuscript contains the books VI, VII, VIII, the Sermo Angelicus, a Pascha Domini attributed to Bridget, and the Regula probationum revelationis. It is therefore assumed that the first volume should contain the first five books. See Bousmanne, Bernard, Johan, Frédérique, Van Hoorebeke, Céline (2001), eds., La Librairie des ducs de Bourgogne. Textes liturgiques, ascétiques, théologiques, philosophiques et moraux: Revelationes sanctae Brigidae, Turnhout, Brepols.

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3 Panofsky, Erwin (1971), Early Netherlandish Painting, New York, Harper & Row, vol. 1, 21-50, esp. 46 and 158-159; Millard, Meiss (1945), “Light as Form and Symbol in Some Fifteenth-Century Paintings”, The Art Bulletin (27), 175-181; Westcott, Catherine Morris (1992), “Birgittine devotion and the Campinesque Virgin in the Apse”, Athanor 11, 32-41.

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During the 15th century the *Revelations* were widely and quickly translated into various European vernaculars; in southern Germany and in Flanders, where their spread was extensive, they were even translated in their entirety by the end of the century.\(^{10}\) Moreover, in the years of the Western Schism, for countries like Flanders, Bridget was the emblem of traditional Roman Catholicism.\(^{11}\) Whereas elsewhere the *Revelations* were energetically fought and rejected, such as in France during the first years of the 15th century, they were defended and widely spread in the court of Burgundy.\(^{12}\) It is no coincidence that the task of defending them was assigned to Heymericus de Campo, the greatest Burgundian theologian of the 15th century and advocate of the mystical charisms.\(^{13}\) He is the author of the *Dyalogus Super Revelationibus Beate Birgitte*, the *defensorium* which dates back to the Council of Basel when Bridget’s sanctity and orthodoxy were questioned.\(^{14}\) He also founded the first Brigittine monastery in Brabant, at Mariënwaeter, in 1434.\(^{15}\) As a court painter to Duke Philip the Good, Jan van Eyck could have known Heymericus de Campo, the duke’s favorite theologian, to whom he tasked the founding of the University of Louvain in 1432. Heymericus de Campo’s influence on the pictorial conceptions of the van Eyck brothers was recently pointed out,\(^{16}\) while his role as one of the protagonists of the mediation between the *Revelations* and the work of the van Eyck brothers was mentioned for the first time in my Doctoral dissertation.

One of the most substantial aspects which testifies the centrality of Bridget’s *Revelations* for the Ghent Altarpiece iconography is seen in the depiction of the Virgin. The aim of this article is to analyze the wide range of Brigittine texts that explain the symbolic elements of the painting which are related to the iconography of the Virgin, to her physical and symbolic features and attributes, and to Marian dogmas, especially those of the Perpetual Virginity, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. The Marian themes are not the only ones inspired by the *Revelations* which were examined in my Doctoral dissertation. There are other texts that explain the fundamental themes of the altarpiece’s iconography, all related to Brigittine

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\(^{10}\) In the last several years, the interest has gradually increased and has led to the organization of two conferences whose proceedings have been published. The first conference focused on Bridget’s *Vita*, while the second was related to the dissemination of her works. See Morris, Bridget, O’Marra Veronica (1999), eds., *The Lives of Saint Birgitta of Sweden in the Vernacular, Proceedings of the International Conference of Beverley-Hull July 1997*, Turnhout, Brepols and by the same editors *The Translation of the Works of St. Birgitta of Sweden into the Medieval European Vernaculars, Proceedings of the International Conference of Beverly-Hull July 1997*, Turnhout, Brepols.

\(^{11}\) On the Roman obedience of the Belgian church, see De Moreau, Édouard (1949), *Histoire de l’Église en Belgique. L’Église aux Pays-Bas sous les ducs de Bourgogne et Charles-Quint (1378-1559)*, vol. 4, Bruxelles, L’Édition universelle, esp. 13-40.

\(^{12}\) Vauchez, André (1999), *Saints, prophètes et visionnaires: le pouvoir surnaturel au Moyen Âge*, Paris, Albin Michel, 162-174.

\(^{13}\) A pupil of Johannes de Nova Domo and master of Nicholas of Cusa, he was close to the realist movement. Heymeric was one of the most important Albertists of his time and an enthusiastic interpreter of the great Neoplatonic revival, a perspective that was also favored in Cologne, where the canonical academic path was accompanied by the studies of the mystics Eckhart, Suso and Tauler. See Black, Antony (1977), “The Realist Ecclesiology of Heymeric van de Velde”, in Van Eijl, Edmond J. M., ed., *Facultas S. Theologiae Lovanensis 1432-1797. Bijdragen tot haar geschiedenis*, Leuven, University Press, 273-291.

\(^{14}\) See Fredriksson Adman, Anna (2003), ed., *Heymericus de Campo. Dyalogus Super Revelationibus Beate Birgitte. A Critical Edition with an Introduction*, Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Already between the time of her death and the first years of the 15th century, Bridget was at the center of a dispute between supporters of the legality of her writings and those who criticized them. Everything is documented by a series of treaties written by accusers and apologists. 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, Claire L. (1996), *Birgitta of Sweden and the Voice of Prophecy. A Study of Gender and Religious Authority in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 136-220.

\(^{15}\) See Nyberg 1965, pp. 179-195.

\(^{16}\) See Schneider, Wolfgang Christian (2009), “Die Deesis des Genter Altars von Jan van Eyck und dieFarbensorukation des Heymericus des Campo”, in Reinhardt, Klaus, ed., *Heymericus de Campo. Philosophie und Theologie im 15. Jahrhundert*, Regensburg, Roderer, 205-223 and in the same volume Schwaezter, Harald, “Bunte Geometrie. Die Farben im Sigillum aeternitatis des Heymericus de Campo im Kontext von Malerei und Philosophie”, 183-204.
social, political and spiritual ideas. Among them we quote: the Church as the mystical body of Christ; the re-establishment of the orthodox Eucharistic doctrine against the Hussite heresy; the political and papal power within the historical context of the Councils of Constance and Basel related to Flander’s infallible obedience to the Roman pontiff; and Bridget’s social conception which matches with that of the donor, Jo-docus Vijd. What emerges is a very complex context which places the Revelations of Saint Bridget among the main sources of the altarpiece’s iconography not only with regard to the iconography of the Virgin.

2. The new iconography of the Virgin: the physical features according to the Revelations

The plethora of examples of Marian thematic connections between Brigittine literature and the Ghent Altarpiece starts with the interior panel depicting the enthroned Virgin Mary (Fig. 2), where we find the aspects related to her physical features and attributes such as the clothes, the crown, the precious stones and the book in her hands.

Until a few years ago, the only critical contribution examining Brigittine references in the Ghent Altarpiece was a note in Panofsky’s *Early Netherlandish Painting*. It is based on an assessment by William Hecksher that the Virgin’s crown is totally inspired by the text of *Revelations* I, 31. Panofsky merely thought the assertion of his colleague to be probable and did not continue exploring further potential Brigittine references in the altarpiece. Nevertheless, he agrees with Hecksher that at least two elements are derived from Saint Bridget’s *Revelations*: the choice of an unusual iconographic subject derived from a special source and the importance of the role played by Saint John the Baptist. However, *Rev* I, 31 also contains other important elements that help us to understand the altarpiece’s iconography.

A brief preliminary iconographic analysis will be necessary before we take into deeper consideration the importance of the Brigittine texts in this representation of the Virgin. First of all, the Virgin in the Ghent Altarpiece does not match the iconography of the *Maria mediatrix* of the Last Judgement but rather, as has been observed, that of the *Regina coeli*. In the iconographic tradition of the Last Judgment, Christ is typically flanked by the Virgin and Saint John the Baptist, like it is depicted in the Ghent Altarpiece (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 3. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, c. 1424-1432, the five upper panels of the interior, Sint-Baafskathedraal, Ghent. Image: Wikimedia Commons](image-url)

17 “The crown itself consists of a diadem adorned with naturalistically enameled flowers, all traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary: roses, lilies of the valley, columbines, and ‘annunciation lilies’. Of these three are visible in their entirety and one in part, so that their total number may be assumed to be seven. Professor William S. Heckscher therefore believes, and I incline to agree, that the unusual image was suggested by a passage in St. Bridget’s Revelations. I, 31 […] The passage is all the more relevant as the visionary also sees St. John the Baptist who explains to her the symbolical significance of the above-mentioned details.”, Panofsky 1971, “Note 220²”, 448. The observation of Professor Heckscher is not accompanied by any bibliographic citation in the study of Panofsky. The comment comes in all probability from the exchanges between the two scholars since Heckscher was a student of Panofsky at the University of Hamburg.

18 See Goodgal 1980, 299; Brand Philip 1980, 76.
But just as Panofsky points out, the one represented here is not a deesis, strictly speaking, for several reasons; Christ is not represented as the Son of Man but as the triune God, the Virgin Mary is not the mediatrix but the Regina coeli and John the Baptist is the totius medius Trinitatis as indicated in the complex inscription with the panel with his depiction.\(^{19}\) Second, Mary is typically not depicted with the crown in any representation of the Last Judgment – she is usually represented with a crown in the iconography of the Coronation where the object is almost never placed on her head, and it is Christ or the entire Trinity who confer her the regal attribute.\(^{20}\) The rare iconography of the “already crowned” Virgin was spread in Rome in the second half of the 12th century.\(^{21}\) In a much more common tradition, that of the Sedes sapientiae, the Virgin often appears crowned but always with the Christ child on her lap.\(^{22}\) In the altarpiece the Virgin holds a codex, the image which references the incarnate Word and which is certainly related to the Christ child, although it also suggests other meanings. Third, in the altarpiece, some physical features and gestures are brand new. In fact, what prevails here is the realism of the objects and the naturalism of movements, a clear rebuke to the rigidity of traditional iconographic models. Another element indicates a break with the past: her hair flowing to her shoulders, loose, blond-red and emanating a certain brightness, a feature which never appears until the later ones, her hair pulled back and fastened by the crown or in some later ones, her hair pulled back and fastened by the crown just visible under her mantle.

By comparing these different examples, some fundamental aspects emerge that signal the advancement of a new and original type of iconography. The representation of the Ghent Altarpiece is the first where the royal dignity of the Virgin is independent from the action of the Son. She appears already crowned and without the baby Jesus, and sits gloriously at the right hand of Christ, according to the iconography of the Coronation, and on the same level as John the Baptist, just as in the iconography of the Last Judgment. Carol Purtle’s analysis of the works of the van Eyck brothers in relation to many aspects of Marian devotion found in the liturgical and literary sources of the time, is certainly a starting point. The Virgin, who symbolizes the Church, is a bride in a twofold sense, either at the moment of the Annunciation and of the Coronation, both episodes represented in the altarpiece.\(^{24}\) But the aforementioned physical features, the realism of the objects and the naturalism of gestures suggest inspiration from some other source. The depiction of the Virgin is, in many respects, brand new and reveals how the symbolism of the 12th century has given way to the new demands of late medieval devotional and mystical literature.\(^{25}\)

From the very first chapters of the Book I of the Revelations, the dominant theme, the coming of Christ foretold by the prophets for the salvation of mankind, is accompanied by a rich Marian reflection. In fact, the Virgin plays a decisive role throughout the Brigittine corpus. Always present in the visions relating to the judgements of souls, Mary is among the interlocutors of Bridget, together with Christ, God the Father and the saints. Long passages and many pages are devoted to describing her characteristics and privileges in which it is often Christ himself directly extolling the many high virtues of Mary to Bridget.

In addition to the richness of doctrinal themes and the most popular aspects of late medieval piety, there is one aspect of Bridget’s visionary language particularly worthy of attention: the detailed description of the appearance, clothes and accessories of the Virgin, that are matched with specific spiritual qualities. This feature is difficult to find in the literature of the time and is certainly an innovation. Rev I, 31 is only the first of a series of visions which deal with Marian symbolism. The rich allegorical meanings are explained by John the Baptist to Bridget: 26

Videbat sponsa reginam celi, matrem Dei, ha-bentem preciosam coronam inestimabilis in capite suo et capillos extensos super spatulas admirabilis pulchritudinis, tunicam auream splendore indicibillus coruscantem et mante-lulum de azuro seu sereni celi coloris. Cumque de tam speciosa visione vehementer adirmaret sponsa et in tali admiracione tota staret quodam interno stupore suspensa, illico apparuit ei beatus Iohannes Baptista, qui ait illi: Audi diligentere, quid hic notat! 27

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\(^{19}\) See Panofsky 1971, p. 220. For the inscriptions in the Ghent Altarpiece see Baets O. P., Jacques de (1961), De gewijde teksten van het ‘Lam Gods’ Kritisch onderzocht, Gent, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde.

\(^{20}\) See Therel, Marie Louise (1984), Le triomphe de la Vierge-Eglise. Sources historiques, littéraires et iconographiques, Paris, Ed. du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

\(^{21}\) There is at least one representation where the Virgin appears already crowned with a gem-studded tiara. This is the mosaic in the apse of the church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, a work of art of particular ecclesial value. In this regard see Toubert, Hélène (1990), Un art dirigé. Réforme grégorienne et Iconographie, Paris, Ed. du Cerf, esp. 37-56.

\(^{22}\) Réau, Louis (1957), Iconographie de l’Art Chrétien, vol. 2/2, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 70-128, esp. 93-94; Lechner, Martin (1971), “Das Marienbild in der Kunst des Westens bis zum Konzil von Trient”, in Kirschbaum, Engelbert (1971), ed., Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie, Allgemeine Ikongraphie, vol. 3, Freiburg, Herder, coll. 182-184.

\(^{23}\) Mary is represented for the first time without the veil and with the long blond hair in representations of the Nativity by Niccolò di Tommaso in Italy, based on the vision of the birth of Christ Bridget received in Bethlehem during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1372. See Réuelationes S. Brigittae VII, 21 in Bergh, Birger (1967), ed., Réuelationes. Book 7, Uppsala, Almqvist & Wiksell. On Niccolò di Tommaso see Skaug, Erling S. (2001), “St Bridget’s vision of the Nativity and Niccolò di Tommaso’s late period”, Arte Cristiana 89, 195-209.

\(^{24}\) Purtle, Carol Jean (1982), The Marian paintings of Jan van Eyck, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 37-38 and 152.

\(^{25}\) For an introduction on the impact of Mariology on late medieval literary aspects and fine arts see Ellington, Donna Spivey (2001), From Sacred Body to Angelic Soul, Understanding Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Washington, Catholic University of America Press.

\(^{26}\) Grantley McDonald has also identified this Brigitine passage as the source of the iconography of the Virgin, see McDonald 2015, 8-9.

\(^{27}\) Réuelationes S. Brigittae I, 31: “Qualiter sponsa videbat dulcisissimam virginem Mariam corona et alis ornamentis inestimabiliter decoratam et quomodo sponse sanctiss Iohannes Baptista, quid per coronam etcetera designetur, declarant”. See Undhagen, Carl-Gustaf (1977), ed., Revela-
The crown, the cloak and the tunic indicate her titles of excellence:

Corona igitur notat, quod regina et domina est et mater regis angelorum. Capilli proterensi, quod virgo est purissima et immaculata. Mantellum celi coloris, quod omnia temporaelia erant ei quasi mortua. Tunica aurea notat, quod diuina caritate ardens et feruid fuit interiorius et exteriorius. In corona autem eius posuit filius eius septem lilia et inter hec lilia posuit septem lapides.\(^\text{28}\)

To each lily corresponds a virtue:

Primum lapis est virtus in aliquote spiritui siue in corpore aliquo, quia ipsa hanc eandem virtutem non habebat excellencius. Secundus lapis est perfectissima mundicia, quia ista regina celi sic pura fuit, quod una macula peccati inueniri numquam potuit in ea a principio ingressus eius in mundum usque ad ultimam diem mortis ipsius. […] Tercius lapis fuit pulchritudo eius, quia Deus de pulchritudine eiusdem matris sue in corona alius diebus ille suscepit, ut iustitiam postea in pulchritudinem eiusdem matris quisquis posuit.

Quartus lapis preciosus corone est sapiencia eiusdem virginis matris, quia ipsa impielet est omni diuina sapiencia cum Deo et ex ea omnis inclusus est in pulchritudine eius. Quintus lapis est fortitudo, quia ipsa sic est fortis cum Deo, quod omnia, quecumque creat et facta sunt, potest deprimere. Sextus lapis precius corone est iaspis, quae sic clara est, quod angelii, qui habitant osculo clariores luce, illuminantur ex ea et demones non audent respiceri in claritate eius. Septimus lapis est carbunculus. […]

The details of the altarpiece consistently match Bridget’s descriptions: there are seven lilies and seven precious stones, although these are placed under the lilies and not in between as indicated in the text of the vision; the shiny long hairs flow to her shoulders; and the blue tunic is the color of the sky. Other symbolic flowers traditionally associated with the Virgin were also added to the depiction.\(^\text{31}\) The crown is two tired, thus allowing the artist to resolve the ambiguity in Bridget’s description, who does not fully explain how the flowers and the stones may be depicted in a single tier. To facilitate this effect, he created a solid gold structure on which he set the fresh flowers, which is the distinguishing feature of the revelation, and he embellished the crown with pearls which give greater prominence to precious stones. The uniqueness of this representation has not been stressed enough (Fig. 4). Fresh flowers and precious stones do not appear in fact in any other example in figurative art. Each of the seven stones has a specific meaning and it would be interesting to investigate if, in order to identify them, the van Eycks were inspired by the text of Rev IV, 124 in which Saint Agnes places a crown with seven gemstones on Bridget’s head:

Fig. 4. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, The crown of the Virgin in the inner panel of the Ghent Altarpiece, c. 1424-1432, Sint-Baafs kathedraal, Ghent. Image: Wikimedia Commons

Agnes loquitur ad sponsam Christi dicens: Veni, filia, et impone tibi coronam factam ex septem lapidibus preciosis, quae in corona suae est sapientia eiusdem virginis matris. […] Primus lapis corone est iaspis […] Secundus lapis est saphirus […] Tercius lapis est smaragdus […] Quartus lapis est margarita […] Quintus lapis est carbunculus. […]\(^\text{32}\)

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\(^{28}\) Reuelationes S. Brigittae I, 31.

\(^{29}\) Reuelationes S. Brigittae I, 31.

\(^{30}\) Reuelationes S. Brigittae I, 31.

\(^{31}\) Concerning the symbolism of plants and flowers in the works of the van Eyck, Lottlisa Behling has devoted to it a large space in her study. See Behling, Lottlisa (1957), Die Pflanzen in der mittelalterlichen Tafelmalerei, Weimar, Böhlau, 44-52.

\(^{32}\) Reuelationes S. Brigittae IV, 124: “Quomodo beata Agnes imponebat sponse Christi coronam de septem lapidibus preciosis, silicet paciencia in tribulacionibus”. See Aili, Hans (1992), ed., Revelaciones. Book 4, Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell.
The stones depicted correspond to the types listed above. The recognizable stones are the jasper on the proper right, followed by the emerald, the sapphire, the diamond, the topaz, the ruby, and another sapphire. If the order of the emerald and sapphire were reversed, the representation would follow strictly the description in the *Revelations*. Therefore, the repetition of the pearl in the crown and the inclusion of the seven stones mentioned in the text of *Rev IV, 124* strengthens our hypothesis of a direct derivation from the Brigittine text. The twelve stars of the Apocalypse (Ap 12, 1) revolving around the crown are also depicted, eight of which are clearly visible while three can be glimpsed only behind the rays and the fresh flowers, and the twelfth is supposed behind the crown where a group of two lilies and a rose are placed close together. The stars are not present in Bridget’s description but the bond between the *Revelations* and the Apocalypse is very close, especially if we consider that the same gemstones mentioned by Bridget also appear in the last book of the Sacred Scripture (Ap 21, 9 and 21, 19-21). Here, among other things, the type of jasper is described as crystalline and is compared to the splendor of the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem where the doors are surrounded by pearls, just like in the Virgin’s crown in the Ghent Altarpiece.

It should be noted that the Dominican Alain de la Roché, who was responsible for the popularization of the Rosary, was particularly attached to the figurative tradition of Ghent, a city where he resided for about two years, from 1468 to 1470. Johan Huizinga has already written about how a certain aesthetic attitude prevails in the Dominican visionary.53 In the *Tractatus de Psalterio seu Rosario Christi et Mariae*, we find the same gemstones portrayed in the Ghent Altarpiece, however, there are more stones, 15, and their symbolism is even more complex.54 Despite this, the vividness of the colors and the descriptions echo the painting and witness to a common sensitivity.

There are still some aspects of the representation of the Virgin that match the Brigittine text but which are not found in *Rev I, 31*. Rather, they are inspired by a revelation of the Book V, known as the *Liber questionum*.55 The book itself is a long vision received by Bridget in Sweden which consists of sixteen interrogaciones divided into questiones and responsiones and interspersed with thirteen revelations. The protagonist is a learned monk who “skillfully exposes the most inexplicable aspects of Christian theodicy”56. In Book V, Bridget attacks the arrogance of the intellectuals and the use of knowledge as an end in itself. The monk’s scholastic knowledge is juxtaposed with the true wisdom of Bridget, who is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, and who opposes the monk’s skepticism towards the Incarnation with praise of the Virgin body. *Rev V, 4* speaks of some physical and spiritual characteristics of the Virgin Mary that correspond exactly to the representation in the altarpiece. The elements of *Rev V, 4* that inspired the representation of Mary are: the shining hair, the white forehead and its light tint, the pinkish cheeks, the inclination of the neck and the designation of the chest and belly as “full of virtue”. Each of these physical features corresponds to one of the spiritual qualities of the Virgin. This time, the whole head emanates a shining light that is depicted in the painting with light beams:

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. Ideo merito vocaris coronata regina super omnia, que creata sunt; regina propter mundiciam, coronata propter excellentem dignitatem.57

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33 Huizinga, Johan (1922), *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, London, Penguin Books, 209.
34 See Paola, Roberto (2006), *Il salterio di Gesù e di Maria: genesi, storia e rivelazioni del santissimo rosario*, Conegliano, Ancilla.
35 See Bergh, Birger (1971), *Revelaciones. Book 5: Liber questionum*, Uppsala, Almqvist & Wiksell.
36 Borresen, Kari Elisabeth (1993), *Le Madri della Chiesa. Il Medioevo*, Napoli, M. D’Auria Editore, 59 (mytranslation).
37 *Revelationes 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 pronuntiat eandem virginem dignissimas esse reginali corona”. 

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Fig. 5. Jan van Eyck, *Annunciation*, c. 1433-1435, National Gallery, Washington. Image: Wikimedia Commons

The lightly-tinted forehead is a symbol of the delicacy of conscience: “Frons tua fuit incomparabilis albedinis, significans verecundiam conscientiae tuae, in qua plenitudis est humane scienciae et dulcedo divinae sapientiae lucet in ea super omnes”. Her cheeks symbolize the meritorious deeds and the nature of the Virgin:

Gene tua fuerunt de optimo colore, scilicet albo et rubicundo, quia fama operum tuorum laudabilium et pulchritudo morum tuorum
The inclined neck and the head symbolize the attitude to accomplish God’s will:

Collum tuum est nobiliter erectum et pulcherrime eleuatum, quia iusticia anime tue plene est erecta ad me et secundum velle meum mobilis, quia numquam inclinata fuit ad aliquod malum superbe. Sicut enim collum curuatur cum capite, sic omnis intencio et operacio tua flectitur ad voluntatem meam. 39

The praise of the bodily limbs of the Virgin has its roots in the practice known as the salutatio membrorum, which dates back to Saint Bridget and spread in Flanders especially with the modern devotion. As Giovanni Pozzi has suggested:

the prayer represents […] a well-known devotional practice, the “salutatio membrorum”, which passed in review, from head to foot, the members of Mary giving each its praise. A long draft is traced back to Saint Bridget; it was widely practiced in the circles of modern devotion and is still found in the manuals of piety of the seventeenth century.40

Just as in the crown the virtues of the Virgin were expressed through the symbolism of precious stones, the same principle is applied to those depicted in the chest and womb. The beautiful blue dress is thus characterized by a border rich in pearls and gems, while a bunch of precious stones hang from a cord near the womb:

Pectus tuum plenum fuit omni virtutum suiavitate in tantum, quod non est bonum in me, quod non sit in te, quia traxisti omne bonum in te ex morum tuorum dulcedine, quando deitati mee placuit intrare ad te et humanitati mee habitare tecum et bibere lac mamillarum tuarum. […] Venter tuus fuit mundissimus siicut ebur et sicut locus ex virtuosis lapidibus splendidissimus, quia constancia consciencie tue et fidei numquam tepuit sed nec in tribulatione potuit viciari. 41

Another element should be read as a reference to the Incarnation: the “corporal” hands of the Virgin touching the green cloth with which she holds the book symbolizing the Word: “Ideo corporales manus tue tractauerunt humanitatem meam et quietus fui inter brachia tua cum deitate mea”42. The book’s square shape and color allude to the Earth and the green cloth recalls the Incarnation.

38 Revelatones S. Brigittae V, 4.
39 Revelatones S. Brigittae V, 4.
40 Pozzi, Giovanni (1993), Sull’orlo del visibile parlare, Milano, Adelphi, 26 (my translation).
41 Revelatones S. Brigittae V, 4.
42 Revelatones S. Brigittae V, 4.
43 On the Washington Annunciation, Ward focuses on the stool which recalls Isaiah 66, 1 (‘Caeli thronos meus, terra autem scabellum pedum meorum’), see Ward, John L. (1975), “Hidden Symbolism in Jan van Eyck’s Announcements”, The Art Bulletin 57, 197-220 while Zuzana Šebková-Thaller recognizes the red squared pillow as a symbol of the Incarnation: Šebková-Thaller, Zuzana (1992), Sünde und Versöhnung in Jan van Eycks Hochzeitsbild. Die allegorische und anagogische Ebene des vierfachen Bildsinns, Markt Berolzheimer, Hernoul-le-Fin, 5.
Word became flesh, giving birth to the new and everlasting covenant.\textsuperscript{44}

The theme of Mary’s motherhood brings us back to that of her sacred womb. In female mystical literature, an extraordinary importance is attributed to Mary’s womb which is conceived as a vase. The image used in the literature of the 12\textsuperscript{th} and 13\textsuperscript{th} centuries is also found in the \textit{Revelations}: “Tu me, que eram vas terrenum, dignacon tua sanctificasti.”\textsuperscript{45} It soon gained Eucharistic meanings that attached a sacramental value to the body of the Virgin.\textsuperscript{46} The idea of Mary as the ‘perfect body’ is not new, but rather is found in other mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen and Gertrude of Helfta:

...in the mental and symbolic universe of medieval female mystics, Mary is not a woman identified concretely and psychologically. She is, first of all, “the most lovable dwelling” where, as Gertrude the Great says, the body of God can inhabit. The Mother is the land, the plowed field, the womb, the breast. […] Mary is the instrument symphonizatus by the Holy Spirit: the visionary can only hear the sound or catch a glimpse of her auroral brightness […] The idea of an absolute beauty dominates, as a sign of human perfection realized in foeminea forma, that nothing can corrupt or alter.\textsuperscript{47}

It is glaringly obvious that the vagueness of previous texts differs significantly from the Brigittine literature. For example, in the vision of Gertrude of Helfta, the excessive brightness does not distinguish any identifying color or even the shape of the mother’s womb. Instead, in Bridget’s description the situation is completely different: the gemstones, centrally located on the body of the Virgin, are described to the smallest detail; the type of flower which appears in the vision can be easily and exactly located; the colors are vibrant and defined. Bridget’s vision describes a precise figure and concrete objects that, thanks to their descriptive evidence, lend themselves to representation. The resulting mental image is clear and can be easily painted. The Brigittine visionary language stands for a descriptive accuracy of detail which is not found in earlier mystics. It is no longer enough to only imagine an “auroral brightness”. In Bridget’s visions, Mary is not defined by abstract concepts, but she appears in the concreteness of her physical features, in her human reality, as well as in a spiritual reality. This visual strength finds its transcription in the Ghent Altarpiece, which would be inconceivable without this literature. Where the text doesn’t translate well to physical depictions of the Virgin, such as the descriptions of her virtues, these are replaced by symbolic objects like precious stones, flowers, and specific colors, now described in Bridget’s writings with a realism that is not found in earlier texts.

Much of this attitude of the need to visualize started with the meditation on the evangelical episodes. Bridget was a sort of champion for the devotees and, above all, for the artists who were eager for detailed descriptions that could inspire them in the representation of the characters of sacred history.\textsuperscript{48} This is further confirmed by Bridget’s attitude towards her writings, which contributes to their attractiveness over those of other medieval mystics. As pointed out by Kari Børresen, Bridget was a sort of champion for the devotees and, above all, for the artists who were eager for detailed descriptions that could inspire them in the representation of the characters of sacred history.\textsuperscript{48} This is further confirmed by Bridget’s attitude towards her writings, which contributes to their attractiveness over those of other medieval mystics. As pointed out by Kari Børresen, Bridget was distinguished by a strong awareness, as a revelatory instrument of the Holy Spirit, she felt invested not only with a special historical and ecclesial mission as prophetess and reformer of her time, but also at the same level

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Jean Fouquet, Annunciation, Heures d’Étienne Chevalier, c. 1450, Musée Condé, Chantilly. Image: Wikimedia Commons}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{44} The Annunciation is located inside the holy chapel of Bourges. The angel Gabriel is kneeling in front of the Virgin who listens while the dove of the Holy Spirit hovers over her. Mary sits on the floor on a carpet between two books, one closed, the other open, symbols, respectively, of the Old and New Testaments. Fouquet inscribed them in the vanishing lines which all converge towards the statue of Moses holding the Tablets of the Law, behind the altar, surmounted by an enormous shrine that we assume to be the ark of the Covenant. See Reynaud, Nicole (2006), \textit{Jean Fouquet. Les Heures d’Étienne Chevalier}, Dijon, Faton, 54-59.

\textsuperscript{45} See \textit{Revelationes S. Brigittae}, I, 5.

\textsuperscript{46} Bartolomei Romagnoli, 423-424. For Mary as ‘tabernacle’ see the study of Giovanni Pozzi: Pozzi 1993, 17-88. Additional reflections can be found in other studies related to the sacramental value of the representations of Marian subject in which the Virgin is considered as the tabernacle or the container of the Eucharist, especially in the depictions of the Enthroned Madonna, in the Annunciations and the Nativities of Flemish masters of the first and second generation. See Lane, Barbara G. (1984) \textit{The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting}, New York, Harper & Row, esp. 1-77.

\textsuperscript{47} Bartolomei Romagnoli 2013, 421-423 (my translation).

\textsuperscript{48} See Fulton, Rachel (1996), “Mimetic Devotion, Marian Exegesis, and the Historical Sense of the Song of Songs”, \textit{Viator} 27, 85-116.
of the evangelists in telling the episodes and truths that are revealed to her in her visions:

Outstanding is the view that Bridget has of herself as God’s instrument, inspired by Him, with the purpose of a divine revelation that unfolds continuously [...] Unlike Bridget, Hildegard and Julian do not consider themselves as instruments on the same level of the prophets, the apostles and evangelists; their mission is not to reveal new knowledge.  

This freedom of expression can also be found in the way in which Bridget takes a position on some vital doctrinal questions concerning the Virgin on which medieval theologians had long disputed.

3. Marian dogmas according to Saint Bridget reflected in the Ghent Altarpiece

Some of the Marian symbols used by Bridget are present not only in the internal panel of the altarpiece depicting the Virgin, but also in the external ones of the Annunciation where her primary role is evident (Fig. 8). The iconographic details of the half-full jug of water and the light reflecting the shapes of two windows on the wall are related to the Virgin (Fig. 9). The symbolic interpretation of the jug and the light has been linked more than once to the hymn of Bernard of Clairvaux which equates the virginity of Mary, which was kept intact, to an image of a ray of light that passes through glass without damaging it.  

As Meiss observed, the image is also found in the Revelations of Saint Bridget. This is taken from chapter 1 of Book I:

Ego sum creator celi et terre, unus in deitate cum Patre et Spiritu sancto, ego, qui prophetis et patriarchis loquebar et quem ipsi expectabant. Ob quorum desiderium et iuxta promissionem meam assumpsi carmen sine peccato et concupiscencia ingrediens viscera virginæ tamquam sol splendens per lapidem mundis simum. Quia sicut sol vitrum ingrediendo non ledit, sic nec virginitas Virginis in asumptione in humanitatis mee corrupta est.

The text that inspires this iconographic subject is not only Rev I, 1, but also Rev V, 4 which was quoted in the above description of the physical qualities of the Virgin. The Liber questionum is even more important for our theme because the Brigittine idea of the Incarnation as a response to Mary’s ardent love for God is formulated for the first time. The concept, additionally reaffirmed and developed in the Sermo Angelicus, one of Bridget’s most popular writings, most likely inspired the representation of the Virgin in the temple of the Mystical Nativity in the Isenheim Altarpiece by Alfonso of Jaén. His Life and Works with Critical Editions of the Epistola Solitarii, the Informaciones and the Epistola Servi Christi, Lund, Lund University Press, 177-178.

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Matthias Grünewald. In the fourth revelation of the Liber questionum, the Virgin’s ears are compared to two splendid windows open to listening: “Aures tue fuerunt mundissime et aperte tamquam fenestrae pulcherrime, quando protulit tibi Gabriel velle meum et quando ego Deus factus sum in te caro.”

According to Purtle, the room behind the Virgin where the reflection of the two windows is represented symbolizes the thalamus and the jug is the image for Mary’s womb. But in the altarpiece, there is also the reflection of a third window that projects onto the wall, near the bifora of the room behind Mary. In it there are sculptural elements that repeat the number three and that should be read in reference to the Trinitarian mystery, to which, according to Bridget, the Virgin participates in an exceptional way. From the first chapter of Book I, it is emphasized that when Christ assumed the human nature, he was in no way separated from his divinity:

Ego autem sic assumpsi carnem, ut non dere linquerem deitatem. Et non minor eram in dei tate cum Patre et Spiritu sancto omnia regens et implens, licet in utero virginis essem cum humanitate. Quia sicut splendor numquam separatur ab igne, sic deitas mea numquam ab humanitate separata est nec in morte.

The detail of the carafe can be explained instead through Rev V, 13. Despite Meiss’ identification of the pitcher as a reference to Mary’s virginity ante and post partum, he didn’t explain the reason why it is only half full. While transparency and material (i.e. glass) are easily traceable to the dogma of Mary’s virginal conception, other aspects of the representation are not immediately clear. It hasn’t yet been satisfactorily explained why there is water in it, why the carafe features a tapered neck yet remains open, and what the play of light and

Fig. 9. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, The room in the external panel of the Ghent Altarpiece, c. 1424-1432, Sint-Baafs Kathedraal, Ghent. Image: Purtle Carol, The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck, fig. 22

Fig. 10. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, The carafe in the external panel of the Ghent Altarpiece, c. 1424-1432, Sint-Baafs Kathedraal, Ghent. Image: Purtle Carol, The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck, fig. 22
shadow represents (Fig. 10).\(^58\) Carla Gottlieb believes that the jug is a symbol of the Immaculate Conception\(^59\), but we believe that Rev V, 13 is the text that explains the reason to this statement since here the reference to the Marian dogmas is explicit:

In primo loco fuit vas clausum et non clausum, vas parum et non parum, vas luminosum et non luminosum, vas vacuum et non vacuum, vasmundum et non mundum [...] Pater loquitur: “Vas illud, de quo dixit tibi, Maria filia Ioachim, mater humanitatis Christi fuit. Ipsa enim fuit vas clausum et non clausum: clau-

The half-filled carafe, both light and dark at the same time, is an element of Rev V, 13 playing on the opposites of full/empty, bright/overshadowed, pure/impure. As usual in the Revelations, the text is full of Marian themes, but one in particular is worthy of attention, namely the question of the Immaculate Conception. While, as we have seen elsewhere, and in particular in Book I and VI of the Revelations, Bridget unwaveringly describes the spotless conception of Mary, there simultaneously exists a certain ambiguity. Bridget states that the Virgin Mary was conceived without sin, but, coming from the seed of Adam, she retained an aspect of impurity.

The meaning of the representation lies in the ongoing debate about the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages which was started by Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramn in the 9th century. As stated by Kari Børresen, there are two reasons for the special conception of Mary: the lack of libido by her parents and the exemption from original sin at the time of the infusion of the soul. However, Bridget’s position on the theme is contradictory as on one hand she follows the Franciscan tradition that was based on the theories of Galen, but on the other she also follows the Thomist one that was based on Aristotel. For this reason, in the Revelations, the lack of libido in the parents of the Virgin is indicated as the solution to the problem of the transmission of original sin that, according to the Thomist embryogenesis, was passed both by the paternal and maternal seed. Thus, there is a difference between Bridget and the Franciscan position: “Bridget does not teach a prior sanctification of Mary at the moment of her conception in the sense that does Duns Scotus.”\(^60\) The carafe, signifying the Immaculate Conception, is also found in other paintings by Jan van Eyck, in the Lucca Madonna and in the Ince Hall Madonna \(^61\) and also in the Werl Altarpiece by Robert Campin, a painting that was a source of inspiration for van Eyck. That representation is further evidence that Robert Campin also drew upon the Revelations.\(^62\)

Carol Purtle, who linked the Office of Assumption of the Virgin to the altarpiece’s iconography, underlined

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\(^{58}\) For another interpretation see Madigan, Brian Christopher (1984), “Van Eyck’s Illuminated Carafe”, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 49, 227-230.

\(^{59}\) Gottlieb, Carla (1970), “En ipsa sita post patriem nostrum”. The Symbolism of the Ghent Annunciation, Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 19, 92-94.

\(^{60}\) Revelaciones S. Brigittae V, int. 13.

\(^{61}\) See Revelaciones S. Brigittae I, 9: “Verba regine celi ad dilectum de amore dulcissimo, quem Filius habuit ad matrem virginem, et qualiter ex con-

\(^{62}\) See Berresen 1993, 173-176. For a general introduction see Cecchin, Stefano M. (2005), ed., La scuola francescana e l’Immacolata Concezione, Atti del congresso mariologo francese (S. Maria degli Angeli, Assisi, 4-8 dicembre 2003), Città del Vaticano, Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis; Horst, Ulrich (1987), Die Diskussion um die Immaculata Concezione im Dominikanerorden: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der theologischen Methode, Paderborn, F. Schöningh; Gay-Canton, Réjane (2011), Entre dévotion et Théologie scolastique. Réceptions de la controverse médiévale autour de L’Immaculée Conception en pays germaniques, Tournon, Brepols.

\(^{63}\) See Purtle 1982, 154.

\(^{64}\) Robert Campin’s acquaintance with the Revelations is not new since it has been proposed that he was inspired by them in the realization of more than one work of art such as the Dijon Nativity and the small votive images representing the Virgin in the Apse. See Meiss 1945, 175-181; Westcott 1992, 32-41.
that the verses from the book of Wisdom (Wis 7, 26-29), which are in the offices, were used more than once by Jan van Eyck in his paintings.\textsuperscript{65} We find these verses in the inner panel depicting the Virgin Mary, in the inscription crowning her beautiful figure (Fig. 11). In this regard, Meiss focused again more on the \textit{ante} and \textit{post partum} virginity of Mary, while no one seems to have noticed the fact that the quotation of verses from the book of Wisdom must be connected directly to the Immaculist doctrine. The reference to the Immaculate Conception of Mary is evident: \textit{speculum sine macula Dei}. The verse is repeated in full in other works of Jan van Eyck and represents a \textit{manifesto} of the Flemish Mariology. In fact, it is found on the right side of the frame of the central panel of the triptych representing the \textit{Madonna with Child, Saint Catherine, Saint Michael and a donor}, and in the edge of the robe of the Virgin in the painting \textit{The Virgin in the Cathedral}. Through a more careful analysis, we find that the verse is perfectly in line with the text of Rev I, 42 in which the Virgin is referred to as the ‘mirror of Trinity’:

\begin{quote}
Mater loquebatur: “Ego habui tria, quibus placui filio meo: humilitatem, ut nulla creatura, nec angelus nec homo, esset me humilior; secundo habui obedientiam, qua studui obedire filio meo in omnibus; tercio habui precipuam caritatem. […] Tercio pro caritate sicut approquinat Deus michi, quod, qui videt Deum, videt me, et qui videt me, deitatem et humanitatem videbit in me quasi in speculo et me in Deo. Quicumque enim videt Deum, videt in eo tres personas, et quicumque videt me, videt quasi tres personas. […] Anima et corpus meum puriora sunt sole et mundiora speculo. Unde, sicut in speculo viderentur tres personae, sic in puritate mea videret potest Pater et Filius et Spiritus sanctus. Ego enim habui filium in utero meo cum deitate.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

But, the highest point of Flemish Mariology inspired by the \textit{Revelations} of Saint Bridget, is achieved in the representation of the assumption of Mary. The representation of the Virgin derives from the \textit{Revelations}, where it is said that she is raised body and soul next to the throne of God: “Tu autem, carissima mater mea, anima tua assumpta fuit super omnes choros angelorum ad thronum Dei et cum ea est mundissimum corpus tuum.”\textsuperscript{67} The concept is further developed in the \textit{Revelations}:

\begin{quote}
Deinde completo cursu vite mee, primo animam meam, quia ipsa domina erat corporis, ad deitatem excellencius ceteris eleuauit, inde corpus meum, ut nullius creature corpus sit tam propinquum Deo sicut meum. Ecce quantum fuit dixit animam meam et corpus! Sed aliqui sunt, qui maligno spiritui negant me assumptam corpore et anima, aliqui eciam, qui nesciunt melius. Sed ista est pro certissimo rei veritas, quod cum corpore et anima ad deitatem assumpta sum.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

In the medieval Mariological tradition, the doctrine of the assumption of the Virgin into heaven, first in the soul and then in the body, had many supporters. Bridget also shared this position, stating that the body of the Virgin was assumed into heaven fifteen days after her death.\textsuperscript{69} But in the dispute over her position in heaven, she also supported the thesis, sustained by St. Bonaventure, that the Virgin, once assumed body and soul in heaven, had been raised to the level of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{70} Although this Marian privilege, which had its foundation in the narration of numerous Greek-Byz-

\textsuperscript{65} Purtle 1982,
\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Revelationes S. Brigittae} I, 42.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Revelationes S. Brigittae} I, 51.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Revelationes S. Brigittae} I, 9
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Revelationes S. Brigittae} VI, 62: Quindecim vero diebus corpus meum iacuit sepultum in terra. Deinde cum multitudine angelorum fuit assumptum in celum.
\textsuperscript{70} For a further analysis see Gastaldelli, Ferruccio (2004), “Una mariologia d’avanguardia nel secolo XII. Immacolata Concezione e assunzione corporea di Maria secondo Goffredo d’Auxerre”, in Piastra Clelia Maria and Santi, Francesco (2004), eds., \textit{Figures poétiques et figures théologiques nella mariologia dei secoli XI e XII}, Atti del II Convegno mariologo della Fondazione Ezio Franceschini con la collaborazione della Biblioteca Palatina di Parma (Parma, 19-20 maggio 2000), Firenze, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 61-107.
the works of the founding masters of Flemish art demonstrate these changes – the very bright long blond/red hair that falls on her shoulders, the inclined face and neck, the clear skin and the pink cheeks – and are indicative of a wide-spread adaptation of new iconographic elements, linked to the positive cultural reception of Bridget’s mystical works. From that moment on, the new Marian iconography definitively imposed itself in the figurative scene of Northern Europe and later became the norm in Western art.

All this would have been unimaginable without the sensitivity of Flanders to female mysticism. Siding with Bridget at that time served not only to reinforce obedience to the Roman papacy, but to endorse the great tradition of mysticism and female prophecy, a type of language through which the intellectual and spiritual self-awareness of the country had expressed itself in the final medieval centuries.

The books in which Marian revelations are mainly located are Book I, the Liber Questionum and the Sermo Angelicus. These are texts in which there is a rich doctrinal reflection, presented in a narrative that provides a variety of useful materials from an iconographic point of view. The two representations of the Virgin in the Ghent Altarpiece communicate in this respect with one another not only in the physical depiction of the Virgin, represented with the long blond hair in both panels, but also in the objects that symbolize her spiritual qualities and privileges as Mother of God. A certain correspondence between the inscriptions in the altarpiece and the Revelations was also noted.

All four Marian dogmas are strongly supported in the Revelations but not without some theological reflections which testify to the debates of Bridget’s time and which found a solution only recently with the official proclamation by the Catholic Church of the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption. In works of art created in those territories where the loyalty to the Roman papacy was more solid, such as in the Belgian church, it is also easier to find a greater diffusion and acceptance of the Marian doctrines. Mysticism, especially women’s mystique, has certainly influenced the nourishment and creation of those Marian devotions which are testified to both by literature and works of art. The Ghent Altarpiece is marked by a profound unity between literary text and image and thus requires an integrated examination of both work of art and iconographic sourcing.

For several reasons it is therefore possible to say that the Mariology of Bridget is closely connected to the creation of the figures of the Virgin of the Ghent Altarpiece.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this article suggests that the Revelations were essential for the creation of a new iconography of the Virgin for the Flemish art of the first decades of the 15th century, since it drastically changed. Significantly,
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