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## **The Scriptorium of Vadstena Abbey, a study of book illumination, distribution of labor and of art influences in the late medieval monastery**

The project studies the illuminated manuscripts. The material includes some 150 manuscripts and fragments. The manuscripts of the sister convent displays the largest number of illuminations executed by their own hands. From the brothers' convent are far fewer domestic illuminated works, items that furthermore partially raises other questions. Therefore, the study has focused on the manuscripts once belonging to the sisters.

The distribution of labor was characterized by pragmatic solutions with many actors involved, and the artistic influences seem to have come from partially unexpected directions, but reflect a vital exchange with their contemporaries as well as an internal exchange in the order. As the number of sisters active in the scriptoria was large (over 60), the impression of the activities becomes complex. The number of scribal nuns is contrasted by a noticeable anonymity. Even if the nuns sign their work only occasionally it is possible to trace an organization where some were competent as scribes and illuminators, while others were active only as scribes. There is however no indication of specialized illuminators who were not active as scribes. Still, sometimes they exchanged tasks between themselves. Someone who wrote and illuminated a quire might continue to illuminate a quire copied by another sister in the same book, but mainly they illuminate their own sections. The most prolific scribes and illuminators were not always the most qualified. The quality of the script varies widely, and those who wrote most were not those who wrote most skilfully. The obituary notes on writing nuns in the Chronicle, do not provide any aesthetic judgments of their works, but quantitative. They are praised for their proficiency in their service of the monastery.

Some of the scribal sisters were active for several decades and developed identifiable palaeographic characters. Five sisters have been taken under special consideration. Together they were responsible for the majority of the surviving production of 1490-1520's. The entry in the Chronicle that one of them, Christina Hansdotter Brask, had "written many books", is a Litotes on her extensive production during her 60 years of profess. Her handwriting, sometimes signed, occurs in about 20 preserved manuscripts.

The survey also shows that the Vadstena sisters were quick to respond to trends of the con-temporary spirituality, in contrast to the prevalent view that they were old fashioned and ignorant. They employed up to date subjects and were capable to create illuminations in a fashionable style. The miniatures present for example the same type of nomina sacra-monogram, as popular in the late 1400s. Even the popular Veronica and Mass of S Gregory occur, both associated with important indulgences. Other motifs common in the passion piety of the late Middle Ages, and highly relevant in the

bridgettine context is the Agnus Dei, the instruments of the passion, and wounds of Christ etc.

The image of the side wound of Christ in the prayer book of Birgitta Andersdotter (KB A 80 f. 15v) shows four of the instruments of the passion and the wound, all life-size according to the adjacent text. The subject is not exceptional, but the composition is. It reveals a most conscious pictorial theology: the blood's colour, its droplet shape and abundant flow, the Fons Amoris-inscription inside the wound, etc. Another example is the large woodcut opening the Bible KB A 1, dated 1526 (f. 253r). Nicolas Stoer in Nuremberg cut this image of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin, in the 1520s. The Sorrows of the Virgin is a recurring theme in the bridgettine piety, a theme that also received a major increase from the 1490s and spread from Holland to Germany and surrounding countries. It was an up to date motif that soon reached Vadstena, probably via the daughter monastery Gnadenberg at Nuremberg.

The cited images in the Bible and the prayer book add to the understanding of the bridgettine piety and are discussed in an article in the conference anthology "Memento mori" (ed Liepe & Avitsland, Oslo) and hence will reach a wider audience.

When the Sorrows of the Virgin was inserted in the Bible received a frame. A magnificent frame also encloses the adjacent page of text and interconnects the opening pages. In the right marginal border a heart with the words Fons Amoris inside is painted, which tie together the pages. Mary's sorrows and the wounds of Christ are reciprocally united. The frame around the miniature is a wavy branch of oak leaves and acorns along a fish bone/spruce-patterned stem. Straight stalks with ornaments of knot work and corner discs frame the text page. The more than 100 years old Neapolitan Revelation manuscripts might seem related, but the English book illumination from the 1400s is in fact a more relevant comparison. There one finds knot work ornaments, page encompassing marginal staffs, spruce loops and oak leaves / acorns, etc. from this time. The oak décor can be seen as northern variation of the continental vine and acanthus ornaments.

Oak leaves and acorns also appear in some prayer books. Sometimes they accompany larger initials, but together with small hearts they are also placed as hangers in the lower margins. Furthermore, these prayer books make use of a peculiar marginal decoration made up of large Minuscule m, placed on top of each other in a line. This m-decoration occurs just in a small group of Vadstena Manuscripts, some of which are associated with the Norwegian Munkaliv. Presumably they transmitted concepts from their former Benedictine tradition in to the bridgettine time, ideas later on replicated in Vadstena.

The design of larger pen-flourished initials also reveals instances of extern contacts. Intarsiated or puzzle initials are common in the book illumination at large but in Vadstena a recurrent kind of them has its closest parallels in the Dutch late 15th Century. These relations are also obvious in the inserted woodcuts in some of the nuns' prayer books.

The paucity of influences from the leading countries of book illumination, France and Italy, is striking. The Bridgettine order never prospered in France, but the brothers'

library kept many French manuscripts. An Italian stylistic influence would also have been feasible on basis of ideological and historical grounds of the order, but of neither the French nor the Italian book illumination significant traces can be found.

The project shows that many question marks remains when it comes to the literary culture of Vadstena monastery. An issue briefly touched concerns the exchange of objects and services between the two Convents; a cooperation that left traces in both the brothers and the sister books. Despite the wide scholarly interest for the brothers' books no one has yet treated the ornaments or images in them, neither in the handwritten nor in the printed books. Printed books from the brothers' library, decorated by the sisters, urge to be examined in relation to current German research on incunabula and old prints.

The initials that appear in the sisters' manuscripts, and sometimes on the textiles pose a still unsolved problem. The interpretations are numerous and vary widely. An international comparison might shed light on the puzzling question.

In addition to the article in "Memento mori" an anthology in collaboration with other Vadstena scholars is under work. My project is presented under the headings: "The Illuminated Manuscripts" and "Illuminations for Devotion" (Manuscripts from Vadstena Abbey: Studies in Late-Medieval Book Culture, ed. R Andersson, K-G Johansson, E Sandgren, A Wolodarski, issued 2010). The first text is a broad presentation of the illuminated Vadstena manuscripts, imports, influences, etc. and touches briefly the brothers' manuscripts. The second article examine the nuns scriptorium, certain of the scribal nuns, the pictorial programs that can be traced in the manuscripts, as well as what they convey of the nuns pictorial habits. These texts summarize the project and are an easier, cheaper and quicker way to publish the results than to issue a separate monograph. Hopefully a monograph will be issued later on.

The study was presented in both scholarly and popular contexts. In 2009, two public lectures were given in Vadstena. A public lecture at Uppsala University is held in January 2010. The undergraduates in Art history at Uppsala get acquaintance of the research each semester, which is appreciated by students. In addition, the project has been presented to both experienced research-ers (SMR) and graduate seminars. Parts of the results will also be available via the manuscript database that will be published on the Web in 2010, by Uppsala University Library.

The project has been a one-man job, but the number of scholars who are interested in Vadstena and Saint Birgitta are numerous. The Vadstena project led by Edlund and Johansson has been a most valuable partner, especially the PhD student who studied the scribal sisters and their prayer books. Together with prof. em. Monica Hedlund, we have had an invaluable continuous exchange and comparing of notes.

A problem for the study of illuminated manuscripts might be the availability of materials and opportunities for reproduction. For the most part, you will be presented the originals, but when it comes to photos from the National Library's collections you can be denied. If we as researchers cannot get reproductions of the material studied, it

is not possible to publish results of research. Then it becomes impossible to do research on the material. It seems as if the National Library has not thought out its strategy enough.