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Penitentials and other medieval Irish sources suggest that women remained unconvinced, however, and, like the two nuns in Samthann’s Life who fled from Camalach’s community, continued to turn to other women for their most specifically female needs.

The overwhelming majority of extant information about medieval Irish women comes from the hands of churchmen, who more often ignored women than represented their perspective, accurately or otherwise. Because the texts were by and large written by men and because contradictions run rampant within them, they must be scrutinized all the more for the clues they offer about the experience of medieval Irishwomen. In the texts examined here, complicated and intriguing attitudes emerge toward women, virginity, and reproduction in medieval Ireland. The penitentials realized that women could control their own reproductive systems, but this ability was nowhere near as threatening to the Irish church of the “Dark Ages” as it is to the Irish state of today. Medieval hagiographers told of Irish Cathalics par excellence, the saints themselves, performing abortions as well as of “bastards” becoming bishops and saints. In hagiography and penitentials, virginial status depended more on a woman’s relationship with the church than with a man. To my knowledge, no other country in Christendom, medieval or modern, produced abortionist saints or restored virgins, apart from the nun of Watton. Why Ireland is among the few European countries to maintain severely restrictive policies on reproduction remains an unanswered question, but it clearly cannot be attributed to its medieval Catholicism.

Childbirth Miracles in Swedish Miracle Collections

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According to a report published by the Millennium Project of the United Nations, a woman living in sub-Saharan Africa has a one in sixteen chance of dying in pregnancy or childbirth. The result is an extremely high mortality of young female adults in those societies that severely affects the overall average life expectancy of women at birth. It would not be surprising if women’s views of marriage and sexuality were influenced by these grim perspectives—perhaps even the view that these women have of themselves and their place in society.

That pregnancy and childbirth were also risky in medieval and early modern Europe can be exemplified by the destinies of two of the wives of the English king Henry VIII, Jane Seymour and Catherine Parr. Although they would have had access to the best medical care available, the first died soon after having given birth to the future King Edward VI in 1537, while the second outlived her royal husband only to die after giving birth to a daughter in 1548 in her marriage with Thomas Seymour. A Scandinavian counterpart is Queen Dagmar of Denmark, who died in childbirth in 1212 and was commemorated in a well-known medieval ballad. Were the destinies of these three royal women typical for the situation in medieval and early modern Europe?

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Eighty-First Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, Boston, MA, April 1, 2006. I wish to thank Anna Herberth, Linnæus University, for inspiring conversations that have greatly influenced this present version of the article, and Margaret J. Comnick, College of Charleston, for valuable remarks and suggestions. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

1 Millennium Project, Task Force: Child and Maternal Health. Endgame: 17 January 2005, available online at www.unmillenniumproject.org. See also Who’s Got the Power? Transforming Health Systems for Women and Children: Summary Version (2005), available at the same website, where the figure of 530,000 annual deaths in pregnancy and childbirth is cited (5). The same source provides the World Health Organization’s definition of maternal death: “The death of a woman while pregnant or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy, irrespective of the duration and the site of the pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management, but not from accidental or incidental causes.”


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early modern Europe as a whole? Lack of relevant and unambiguous source material has led to very varied opinions among scholars of mortality rates in pregnancy and childbirth. Calvin Wells, often considered as the father of paleopathology, warned against overrating the deaths ascribable to parturition in premodern societies in an influential study from 1975. Still, Swedish scholar Ulf Högborg estimated the number of maternal deaths in Sweden over ten per one thousand live births in prehistoric Sweden in a study from 1983. A 1992 study by Elisabeth Iregren gives evidence of nine to ten maternal deaths per one thousand from Swedish medieval graveyards. It must be remembered that many such deaths are not visible in archaeological data and that the real mortality rate would have been higher. Studies of maternal mortality in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England by Audrey Eccles have resulted in estimations as high as twenty-five deaths per one thousand births.

During the Middle Ages, the risks involved at childbirth and the absence of medically schooled persons who could give effective help at complicated deliveries led many women to turn to the saints for assistance. The practices of recording witnesses' perceptions of saintly intercessions in miracle collections (often referred to as miracula) and of collecting testimony during the canonization processes of the Catholic Church have left ample evidence that allows historians to reconstruct the childbirth experience of women who are otherwise silent in the historical record. Miracle collections were assembled with the intention of increasing the reputation of a particular shrine and often with the direct purpose of initiating a process of canonization for a deceased person considered to be a saint. As has been noted by André Vauchez, Christian Krödel, and others, the miracula genre underwent important changes during the Middle Ages. These changes were due to two factors: first, the miracle collections had to meet very high standards for a canonization process to be successful in the later Middle Ages, and second, there was an increased frequency of miracles occurring at a distance from the shrine. The first of these changes resulted in richer descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the miracles and the persons involved, while the second made possible many new categories of miracles, some of which occurred—or, strictly speaking, were reported to have occurred—in the homes of the persons concerned. As a result of these changes, late medieval miracle accounts are typically not literary and edifying stories but reflections of events that actually took place. They are thus better suited for sociohistorical analysis than those of an earlier period, something that has been emphasized by Christian Krödel in an article from 1989. The Swedish miracle collections belong mainly to the late medieval period, and they have been used for investigations related to social history by Beata Losman, Janki Myrdal, and others. The gendered aspects of the miracula genre are particularly interesting. Unlike most judicial processes of the same period, there was no formal discrimination against women as witnesses to miracle tales and in canonization proceedings. The proportion of men to women in the miracle collections may vary but is often more or less even.

This article discusses childbirth miracles in the collections of posthumous miracles of Saint Eric of Sweden († 1160), Saint Birgitta of Vadstena († 1373), the Blessed Brynhild of Skara († 1317), the Blessed Nils of Linköping († 1391), and the Blessed Katherine of Vadstena († 1381).

7 Eccles, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, 125.
It also includes miracles related to a holy image in the church of the Dominican friary in Stockholm, the *Miracula defunctiorum Domini.* The earliest tale in the study, a miracle attributed to Saint Eric, was recorded in around 1277, while the latest tales were recorded in 1475 during the canonization proceedings of the Blessed Catherine of Vadstena. The majority of the tales belong to the fifteenth century. All of them describe miracles that took place at a distance from the shrines and include a vow and an ensuing pilgrimage. The places where the miracles were written down were the principal shrines of the respective cults. Only Saint Birgitta was a saint of international renown; the other cults were regional, with only occasional pilgrims coming from areas farther removed and neighboring countries.

**Exemplum 1**

I begin in good medieval manner by providing an *exemplum,* an exemplary tale from the miracles of Saint Eric:

A woman suffered in labor and people feared for her life. The women who gave her help made a vow to the Blessed Eric. The woman then gave birth to a stillborn girl, who gave no sign of life for four hours. Seeing the mother coming to life thanks to a miracle, putting greater faith in the Lord and moved by pity, the women made a new vow to the Lord, praying that he who had saved the mother from death would grant life to the daughter long enough for her to receive baptism. This done, the Lord blew the vital spirit into the face of the first creature, mercifully blew life-giving spirit into the stillborn body of the girl. The women saw the vital spirit little by little animating her limbs so that she truly revived. Fearing that she would die again, they baptized her and gave her the name of Helena. We who are witnesses to the miracle have all seen her three months later, healthy and sound. This miracle has been tested and examined in Östra Åros [modern Uppsala] at the Greyfriars' church, in the presence of the provincial minister and *custos* [superior official within the Franciscan order], the abbes of Skö Abbey, the archdeacon, the provost, Sir Jacob, many other clerics and laypersons, and two trustworthy and honorable women gave witness to having seen this miracle and having been present through the whole series of events.

This tale, probably written down around 1277, belongs to the oldest layer in the miracula of Saint Eric. The recording of miracles attributed to Saint Eric was the first great enterprise of its kind in Sweden. The tale is in effect anonymous. No names of the persons present at the birth were given, and the story is not dated. On the other hand, witnesses were mentioned, a fact that indicates that the persons responsible for the recording of this story—members of the cathedral clergy of Uppsala—were conscious of the increased demand for exactness in miracle accounts in the late thirteenth century, especially if they were to be included in a canonization process. (It is not known if a papal canonization process was ever planned for Eric, and, strictly speaking, such a process was not necessary, since Eric—a Swedish king who was killed in about 1160 and considered a martyr—had first been declared a saint before the papacy had claimed exclusive authority to perform canonizations in 1234.) Finally, it is worth noting the role of the women present, who even administered baptism when they feared that the child would die.

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12 "Materia quaedam dum in parte periclitaretur et vitae desperaretur cisuom, matronae assiduas eidem vocum facient Erisco et Dominus per eius meritis munificentissimae et laborantiae libenter a partu. Quo facto mater peperit filiam mortalem. Quem cum per quamquam horum diet [spacium] omnino mortuo sic iaceret, videntes que aderent matronae in materia restituere e circinato miraculo materiam Dominum diocescionis assumptionem, pieceles afferunt consensum [Bramo] semper viventem Dominum, ut qui mortuo resurrectionem libenter addere semper faciat, ad sanctum vitam direxit, et baptismi gravior consequeretur. Quo facto, continuo adhibuit Dominum, et qui in habitu prothalamii insinuavit spiculum vitae, corporeque suae mortuo et restitutus noster spiritum vivificatum miseriscescitur insipiens. Vincit amente humanae materiam et aderent spiritum vitae patientem quae per membra sua suscere, ac ipsumque veratis mortus esse velatorem ipsam vitam periculum mortis timentem, utque formam ecclesiæ baptisatam autem nomen Helene implevit imponentes, quorum post tres menses sanae et incolam velut olim annuatius qui minus testes miraculi. Hoc autem miraculum probatum et examinatum est apud Arusium in ecclesia totius minorum presbiterii ministerio et custode et abbatissa de Schlogh, archipresbytero et proposito et domino loco montis et alius quosdam ecclesiam clericos et laicos, sanctissimam hoc dubium materiam et sucumbit erroribus qui hanc miraculae conspexerunt et ut hoc per omnem sacerdotium."

13 *Miracula S. Eriici regis et waerstyr, ed.* Erik Gustaf Geijer and Johan Henrik Schöder, in *Scripturae sanctae Sueciae sancti sancti.*

14 The origins of the cult of Saint Eric are currently being researched by art historian Christian Lovén. The beginning of the cult can be traced back to the reign of Saint Eric's son, King Knut Eriksson of Sweden (ruled ca. 1167–95). A papal letter of October 23, 1250, granted indulgences to visitors of Eric's grave in Uppsala on his feast day. In this letter Eric was explicitly referred to as sanctus.

15 The high rate of infant mortality made necessary detailed directions as to the administration of baptism if no priest was present. Such provisions were included also in secular laws. See Helge Fehr, *"Dag,"* in *Kulturhistorisk lexicon för nordisk middelalder* (hereafter *KHLMA*), 22 vols. (Malmö, Sweden: Almquist & Wiksell, 1956–78), 8:413–18. The thirteenth-century Swedish Ten
Statistics and General Observations

This tale is one in a total of thirty Swedish miracle tales that are related to difficult deliveries, stillborn children, or other aspects of childbirth. There are a total of approximately six hundred Swedish miracle tales (the exact number depends on how the individual tales are defined). The percentage of miracle tales related to childbirth is thus around 5 percent. The miracles of Saint Eric, the oldest of the six larger Swedish miracle collections, has the highest percentage, around 7 percent (four tales out of fifty-four or sixty-three). In the youngest collections, the Miracles de Saint Domin (miracles associated with an image of the deposition of Christ from the cross) and the miracles of the Blessed Katherine, the frequency is much lower, between 4.1 and 4.3 percent.

Elsewhere I have calculated the frequency of difficult deliveries and the resurrection of stillborn children compared to the total number of miraculous acts (of which there can be more than one in a miracle tale) in the miracle collections of Saint Birgitta, the Blessed Nils, and the Blessed Katherine. I found the frequency to be higher in the miracles of Saint Birgitta (5.6 percent involved the resurrections of stillborn infants, and 2.2 percent described difficult deliveries) and Bishop Nils (2.5 percent for each of these two types of stories) than in the miracles of the Blessed Katherine, where especially difficult deliveries are few in number. In the total corpus, the resurrection of stillborn children is mentioned in sixteen tales, and miraculous help is given to women suffering pain and the danger of death in difficult deliveries in fifteen tales.

There are also tales where the delivery is said to have been difficult but where it is not the issue of the tale, that is, it was not the subject of the vow to the saint. Eight tales combine the two predominant motives, so that both mother and child were saved. It should be added that the resurrection of the child in some cases meant only that his or her life was restored for a period of time, permitting baptism to be administered. I will return to this issue below.

hitnd law (Tidherradikagen, inappropriately referred to as Sutlirandrakagen), for example, decrees that if the child is ill and cannot be taken to church, baptism shall be administered, preferably by a man. If no man is at hand, the child shall be baptized by a virgin, and if there is no virgin present, by a married woman. If witnesses can testify that the child was baptized before its death, it is entitled to Christian burial and to inheritance. (Corpus invi atque apliantum antiquum: Sveaie of Sveriges guida legar [hereafter SGX], ed. Hans Samuel Collin and Carl Johan Schöler, 15 vols. [Lund: Sveriges boktryckeri, 1827–77], 6:102 [chap. 9, sec. 1].)

A table of statistics, albeit in a more generalized form with rounded-off percentages, and where resurrections of stillborns are not shown separately, can be found in Fröjmark, Mirakler och belgikakult, 93. The delineation of a miracle collection is not always obvious. At canonization proceedings, new miracles were often added to those previously recorded. This practice and the fact that miracle collections typically exist in different manuscript versions affects these calculations.

There is no evidence in the Swedish miracle collections of the custom of bringing a stillborn to a sanctuary in hope of its revival and baptism, as in the French sanctuaries de répit (see Jacques Gélie, "De la mort à la vie: Les sanctuaires à répit," Ethnologie française 11, no. 3 [1981]: 211–24). There are, nonetheless, examples of children who were thought to have died as a consequence of accidents having been brought to holy places, for example, the monastery chapel in Vadstena or the church of Saint Olaf (Sants Olof) in Lunkart, Scavia, in the hope of restoring them to life. A fetus was also revived long enough to receive baptism; see note 19.

Data collected from the miracles reveal useful statistics for considering the lives of newborns and the social status of the families and communities into which they were born. Of particular interest are the roles of friends and midwives who attended childbirth and the attitudes expressed toward the newborn children. The gender of the child is generally not specified in the tales, but in six out of the thirty accounts it is said that the child or children was a girl or were girls. In five cases the child is said to have been a boy, and in three more cases the male sex of the child is probable from the wording or context of the story. Births of twins occur in two tales, in one of them, Siamese twins. The social status of the people involved varies. Two cases concerned members of the top level of society—wives and children of counselors of the realm. There is also one wife of a knight (dominus), probably one belonging to the provincial aristocracy of Östergötland. In two other cases, the people concerned belonged to the lower aristocracy or were civil servants. There were burgesses, and one was the wife of an innkeeper.

No mention was made of the social status of the people involved in the majority of the tales (that is, in twenty-one of the tales). Most of the people in those tales were peasants, which is not to say that they were necessarily poor. The members of the Swedish peasantry were in general less oppressed and probably better off than their peers in many other countries. The desire for baptism is a common motive in the miracle stories. In the majority of cases involving a newborn considered to be dead or dying, the vow to the saint contains a wish that he or she live long enough to be baptized. Even a fetus born five months prematurely was baptized (though it died immediately afterward). In some tales, the name given to the child in baptism is noted, as in our previous exemplum. One of these infants was called Nils in commemoration of his resurrection thanks to the merits of the Blessed Nils.

The presence of women surrounding, helping, and encouraging the woman who is giving birth is mentioned in the majority of the tales where childbirth is the issue. In some cases we know only that the woman was not alone, but we have no particular information concerning the sex and function of the persons present. The women present are often referred to as obstricter (midwives), a fact that was observed and discussed by Christian


19 Vite S. Brynulf, episcopii Sarsavallensis causae processi clausuromiatis, ed. Claus Ammer, in SRASA 82:145.
obstetrics were also viænum and followed the woman to Vålstens, where they acted as witnesses (testes) to the miracle. The women assisting the woman giving birth were often the ones who initiated the vow to the saint. In the first example, they baptized a child. Where we have information concerning the age of the women who were present at childbirth, they were always older than the women giving birth. They were also invariably married women, and this finding is consistent with observations made by other scholars that before the introduction of modern obstetrics, ideally only married women were allowed in the presence of women giving birth.

The fact that we can know something about the age of persons in these stories can be ascribed to the inquiries that were sometimes made into individual miracle stories by the clerics commissioned to perform canonization processes for the saints in question. Persons who had given accounts of miracles were summoned, if possible, to hearings in order to confirm the stories told by them some years earlier to the registrars of the miracles. It was then customary to ask the persons who gave testimony about their age. The numbers must be used with caution, since it is clear that people were not always aware of their exact age. Nonetheless, some useful information may be gathered, and not only about the age of the assistants at childbirth but also sometimes about the age of the mothers themselves.

37 Acta Bigirite, 116 (and exemplum 2).

21 Inger Dibecq, "Jordbrukets i renhistorisk belysning," Historisk årsbok 10, no. 3 (1973): 337-90, esp. 388-92; Christian Bonnild, Møns, mate, mistænks og formåelse: Videnen historie skøptet gennem det enkele barskonskladakades 1663-1908 (with a summary in English) (Stockholm: Værdeforbrander, 1998). Note, in contrast, that the sixteenth-century Danish Protestant clergyman Peter Paludan spoke of paying a good "fræactret" (maidwife), something that might indicate some kind of professional or semiprofessional status (Jacobson, "Pregnancy and Childbirth," 194).
22 K. Kron, "Fruot" (Svenska obyggarningslærare, 4 vol. (Stockholm: Sveriges boktryckeriet, 1894-1973), 1.609 ("frödialog"), 3-676 ("jordgumma").
24 Acta Bigirites, 116 (and exemplum 2).
25 Vit S. Brynhild, 145, 175. In the second Brynhild miracle, the only woman mentioned in the text is the one who gave birth (153).
26 Swedish National Archives, Stockholm, Skokloster manuscript no. 15 in quartos, folios 117v-118r.
when they gave birth. This is true in five cases. In 1408 a thirty-one-year-old woman gave birth. In 1410 a fifteen-year-old mother and wife gave birth to Siamese twins. We might also note that in this instance her father, who also gave testimony, was fifty years older than her. Finally, the miracle of the Blessed Katherine document that a woman age twenty-four gave birth in 1471, and two women age about twenty-six and thirty-eight, respectively, gave birth in 1473.

This is, of course, not a large amount of material on which to base statistics, but at least we can see that a fifteen-year-old was considered old enough not only to be married but also for the marriage to be consummated. The age of her husband is unfortunately not known. We also see that at least some women continued giving birth beyond the age of thirty. Of course, limited access to contraceptives may have played a role, but without information concerning the family's circumstances in general it is impossible to make any judgment on whether the children born to older mothers were planned or not. We should not be surprised if mothers over thirty were especially frequent in the miracle collections, since they were more liable to complications at childbirth. The thirty-eight-year-old mother in our tale did not seek out the help of the saint because of a difficult delivery, however, but because the twins to whom she gave birth died at or soon after their birth. A vow to the Blessed Katherine was believed to have enabled them to live long enough to receive baptism. In tales where no age is mentioned, other indications point to the relatively high age of some of the mothers concerned. A remarried widow in an Eric miracle had already experienced two miscarriages. A woman in a Birgitta miracle had previously given birth to eight children. A couple in a Nilse miracle had been married for at least thirteen years when the mother gave birth to a child. It is not known whether this was their first child or not, but the husband was fifty-six.

It is also worth noting what we do not find in these stories. There are no mentions of unwed mothers (or, if they were unwed, it is not explicitly said). Accordingly, there is no moralizing over unwed mothers, as would otherwise have been expected. Infertility is also, surprisingly enough, not an issue in any of these stories. The closest to it were the worries of the abovementioned noblewoman who had had two miscarriages. In addition, there are no direct interventions of the saints in any of the tales, in visions or the like. The saint remained a distant if effective intercessor before God. In only one of these miracles was a closer relationship between the person concerned and the saint suggested. A woman of Mortala parish who feared for her ten-week-old fetus after having been subject to violence recalled that the Blessed Bishop Nilse was her compter, that is, either her godfather or the person by whom she had been baptized.

Three more exempla provide glimpses of the richness—and colorfulness—of these miracle stories. Moreover, they illustrate the administrative procedures of the church and the active role women played in those processes.

**Exemplum 2: A Miracle of Saint Birgitta from 1375**

Margareta of Ekshult village in Björskog parish, Västmanland, gave birth to an infant who was dead and all black, the tongue of whom extended long beneath its lips. Everyone thought that it had a black coal in its mouth, and it looked like a ghost rather than a human being. The woman made a vow to Västern and the infant regained life and decent color in all its members. Witnesses are Ingrid and Helena, obstats and neighbors.

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30 De miracula S. Nicolai, 356–56; Processus canonizatio nos Nicolai Lapponiae (1965), 78, 318–20; Fragmenta enjungit lilibii de S. Nicolai, 457. See also exemplum 4.
31 Swedish National Archives, Stockholm manuscript no. 15 in quarto, fol. 110v, Västern, 1487 (facsimile edition by Tryggve Lundén (Uppsala: Pro veternae, 1981), fol. fij v; Processus un canonization canonizationis b. Katarina de Vadstenæ, ed. Erik Collin (Uppsala: Per Voluntatem, 1942–46), 80–819, 109–110, 118–20. It is supposed here that the statement made by a witness in the list of these accounts, that the mother was age twenty-eight, was valid for 1475, when the tale was written down, and not for 1473, when the child was born.
32 I refer here to data presented by Monica H. Green of Arizona State University at the Eighty-First Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America, Boston, MA, 2006. See also Göran Bäthelm and Jenssen Myrå, “Miracles and Medieval Life: Canonization Proceedings as a Source for Medieval Social History,” in Proofs de canonizationem unum signum dvnas: Aspects juridiques et religieux, ed. Gábor Kánczky (Lyon: École française de Rome, 2004), 101–16, who present calculations of age at childbirth based on age differences between adults and children as stated at canonization proceedings (108–9). Their findings indicate that the so-called western European marriage pattern, characterized by a relatively high age of marriage for women, was introduced in Sweden during the fifteenth century.
Exemplum 3: A Miracle of the Blessed Nils from 1407

A Woman who was Gravey Maltraitred while Pregnant was Cured. On May 18, 1407, Ingrid, wife of Holger, who lived beneath the bridge in Motala parish, Linköping diocese, and who had been pregnant for ten weeks, was hit by a soldier with an axe, because she did not give him free and abundant beer to drink. As a result, she could not leave her bed for a month, and the women who saw her said that her fetus was already lost and that it was impossible for a woman to give birth with good result after such a wound. The soldier was accused before his master, Esbjörn, military commander of Östergötland. The latter having said that the soldier deserved to be burned, he fled, after having nevertheless made a vow to Lord Nils, Bishop of Linköping, to take the child to Linköping and make an offering if the woman was saved and the fetus born alive into the world. When the woman heard of this vow, she said to herself: ‘I will gladly fulfill this vow even if he does not, since [the bishop] is my protector, and it is good to confide in his grace.’ From that very hour she got better, and she gave birth to a living child who received baptism and still lives, namely, at the time when the vow was fulfilled the following year on the day of Apostles Peter and Paul, when the aforementioned Ingrid asserted that all this had happened in this way. John, steward at the episcopal mansion in Vadstena, gave testimony and said that this was known by almost all of Motala parish. The deposition was made in the presence of Annund Markusson, vicar at Saint Lawrence in Linköping.

Exemplum 4: A Miracle of the Blessed Bishop Nils from 1410

Between the feast of the Assumption and the Nativity of the Holy Virgin in 1410, Botild, wife of Peter in Söderal, Örmtom parish, Linköping diocese, was dying in labor, so that the persons assisting at childbirth (obstetricians), who were her mother Cristina, Cecilia, wife of Häkan of Vissvik in Björåer parish, and Margareta of Lackvälla, had lost all hope of her survival. One of the women, namely Margareta, cast lots, as it is customary among the common people, and the lots indicated the grave of the blessed bishop Nils of Linköping, so that if she could give birth and escape from death, she would visit the grave of this saint and make an offering of a wax image of a child. After the vow was made, she gave birth to a monstrous and very big, namely two twins who came out simultaneously. They were of female sex, joined to each other in their navel and stomach, and they embraced each other with their arms. As a result, the aforementioned woman escaped from death and soon regained her health and fulfilled her vow together with Peter, her husband, on the day before the feast of the Conception of the Holy Virgin (December 7) and gave praise to God in his saint and swore with her hands on the Gospels that without help from God and his saint she could never have evaded death. This was in fact an amazing miracle, that such a delicate woman could bring forward such a big and amalgamated fetus and survive.

Testimonies at the Canonization Proceedings in Linköping on May 14, 1417. Botild, widow of Peter in Söderal, age twenty-two, said that she knew the contents to be true, since she had been near death and had no other hope of escape, since she could not give birth to the abortive fetus and did not believe that she would be able to get free from it. Therefore she had made a vow and so on, and as soon de hoc constare quasi toti parochie Motala. In presencia autem domini Anundii Marci visar fluent ad Sanctum Laurentium Limpnic hic deposita auce.

41 Probably Skärdale in Östraal parish, thirty kilometers east of Linköping.
42 "Anno Domini M° CD X" iter factis ascensionis et nativatis beate Marie Virginis Botildis vno Petro de Söderal parochiae Oratompia diaconice lyncnopias laborans in parte unique ad mortem, ita quod nulla spé eis videat obstetricianus eum multitudinis satis videntem mater suae Cristina et Cecilia vixer haec initia Wisseu et Margareta de Lakhellum, quamvis vix sive multam mortem, ut moris est vulgi, deprehendet, ut uxor pro e fereant ad superstitionem beati Nicholai episcopi lincnopis, ut eum fundere possit et mortem evadere, viserat super hoc dicte sancti offerenter ibidem imaginem infantis eum, quod uto ensimum partum edicit monstruosam et grossum niam videntem duo genetios simul vno cultu sexus multarum in vicinico et stomacho coherentes brachii se amplates, vide diuic mulier mortem eundem consiluit in brevi complectunt uxoram cum marito suo dicto Petro in profecto concepcionis beate Marie Virginis laudans Deum in sancto suo communique sancti sanctus exanigilis, quod, nisi fuisse admittente Dei et habere sancta suffulta, manum mortem
as the vow was made she had given birth and was suddenly free, as if she had given birth to a living child without peril, around the day of the Blessed Giles [September 1], in the presence of the assisting women [obstetricus] Cistina, mother of the one who gave birth and now is giving testimony, Cecilia, wife of Hakun of Vasevik in Björåker parish, and Margareta, wife of Anund of Lackhälla, Örtofta parish, Linköping diocese, both of whom made the vow to the Blessed Nils together with Botild. Also Margareta, wife of Anund of Lackhälla, age thirty-nine, testified, and added that if the woman who gave birth had had twenty lives, she would nevertheless have had no hope of her survival, since the danger of life had not been small. Testimony was also given by Botvid of Söderås, father of Botild, age seventy-two, who had heard everything from these same assisting women and who had seen the monstrous fetus and held it in his hands. He knew that a vow had been made to the Blessed Nils and firmly believed that his daughter had been saved thanks to his merits, wherefore he humbly gave thanks to God and his merits.42

The role of women in all these examples merits some attention. Even if the registrars for the miracles were all men, they were dependent on the testimony of women for the details of the stories. Medieval miracle tales consist. Feit enim hoc miraculum studebamus earum, quod tam grossum et consuetudinum futum tam toto saepe visibilibus vitae comite fundere potes.43 De miraculis S. Nicolai, 855-86.

42 Iam super viiæ articuló, qui incepit: Anno domini MCCCC Bolestis vixi Petri de Söderås parrochoe Orompatæe earis, Bolestis rectica Perri in Söderås principalis in ipsœ articulo principaliter nominat, estas viiiæ annorum ut dicit, testis istius et interrogerat suis medio turrimento diæcis contenta in dictœ articulo futuro, causam remisiöe sue soliciçis, quia se morti prodigabat mælo modo sefacere sperabat, quia futem abortionem quem parere non potuit a se altera separari pessi non credidit. Iam in futuro lectorum beati Nicolai Lécoræ, ut statam voto facto parturit edidit et subito liberatur et, ac si visum partum sine partu edidit, circa diem beati Egidii confessoris, presentibus ibidem obstetriciae Crisina mare eodem patientis et tæte loquentis, Cecilia vixi Hageni de Wesevik parrochoe Björnæriæ et Margareta vixi Anundi de Lækiiæ parrochoe Orompatæe Lécoræ diœcis, que vixi eadem tæte loquentem vrum dicto beati Nicolai fecerunt. Super eodem articulo Margareta vixi Anundi de Lækiiæ parrochoe Orompatæe Lécoræ diœcis estas viiiæ annorum ut dicit, testis producit, illerat et interrogat diæcis contenta in dictœ articulo futuro, quia ac ea fiius vidit et audiret et parentem interiisset, addens quod si eae vitæ ipsae parenti habuerit, ipsa nilolimines de eam retinebatur sempervis, sem modis fuit morte suae cuendam, si per diei beati Nicolai mortal non fuisse saltaret. Eadem autem testis loquentem cum ipsi principaliter testa super ipsœ contentas in articulo per annos concordabat: Super eodem articulo Bolestis de Söderås parrochoe Orompatæe pater eadem Botildis principalis in dictœ articulo principaliter nominate, estas viiiæ annorum ut dicit, testis productus, illerat et interrogat diæcis contenta in dictœ articulo futuro, quia ac ea pro veriti et ut vero aut ipsœ obstetriciae diæcis et audiret, ipsum futem abortionem, tam monstruosæ dispositionem prostrat in articulo dictum, vidit et suæ mortalitatem tuit, vuvamque factum beati Nicolai scitio et illum suum et eam gloriosæ salutem firmiter credidit, graeci deo et eius meritis humiliter reddens. Pro cœlæ commenœratœ brevi Nicolai, ed. Lundæa, 318-20.

and canonization processes thus provide an unusual opportunity to listen to the voices of medieval women.44

These examples also demonstrate the greater care taken to record the precise details of miracles. In the earliest stage of the miracle recording for Saint Birgitta in the monastery of Vadstena from July 1374 until the beginning of 1375, the records made were often very poor in detail. After having been criticized by the Roman curia, though, the registrars became more scrupulous with details such as the names of the people concerned, the circumstances that had led to a vow to the saint, and the citing of witnesses.45 Exemplum 2 is among the first miracles that were taken down in accordance with the stricter standards. Its date is deduced from its place in the collection and refers to the date of its recording. While in Vadstena, the woman Margareta also gave testimony in another childbirth miracle from the same parish.46 The two miracles led those concerned with the events to join together in a pilgrimage to Vadstena, probably in March 1375, on which occasion their accounts were taken down.

Exemplum 3, recorded in 1408, does not belong to the category of resurrection of stillborns, nor is it about a difficult delivery. Indeed, it concerns the saving of an unborn fetus thought to have been injured. It is the only one in which a closer relationship between the person concerned and the saint is mentioned. It is also interesting as a tale of a professional woman and as an illustration of the risks involved in midwifery. The richness of relevant data is typical of the miracles recorded by the clerics at Linköping cathedral.

Exemplum 4, recorded in 1410 with an addendum in 1417, shows how an original account might be followed up by inquiries at the so-called processus in paribus, the part of a canonization process that was held in the country where the saint had lived. The records of these hearings often allow us to have more exact data concerning the people involved, for example, their age. The events themselves were rendered in new versions, as they were to be retold and retold some years afterward, sometimes by different persons than in the first version. It should also be noted that in this example the term obstetricus was used for apparently nonprofessional assistants at childbirth, that is, the mother of the woman giving birth.


44 Acta Birgittae, 393-94, 611-12; see also Vauchez, La médécine, 66-69.

45 Acta Birgittae, 116.
CONCLUSION

The chance of dying in pregnancy or childbirth was very real for medieval women and still is in many Third World countries. In medieval Catholic western Europe, including Scandinavia, these risks, and the absence of medically schooled persons who could give efficient help, led many women to turn to the saints for intercession. The evidence produced by miracle accounts that this practice has generated allows us to look into the bedchambers of otherwise unknown medieval women, suffering the pains of extended labor or giving birth to seemingly lifeless children. From their stories we may learn much about the circumstances of childbirth, and not least about the circle of women that normally surrounded the woman giving birth. The stories supplement information that may be gathered from other sources and shed light on questions that have been debated in earlier research, such as the professionalization of midwifery and the presence or nonpresence of men and/or unwed women at childbirth. As a whole, miracle tales provide an interesting source material for many aspects of medieval everyday life, not least because they are—compared to other sources—more balanced in terms of gender.

Mothers and the Martyr: The Unlikely Patronage of a Medieval Dominican Preacher

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EARLY IN THE YEAR 1250, THE HOLY ROMAN emperor, Frederick II, seemed poised for victory over both the cities of Lombardy and the papacy. Frederick was attempting to assert the shadowy claims of his German Empire over Italy while at the same time bringing his rival, Pope Innocent IV, to heel. Many of the northern Italian city-states came under the control of imperial sympathizers at this time, though there was still a strong undercurrent of opposition.

Men like Peter of Verona, a charismatic Dominican preacher, were heavily committed to the anti-imperial cause. The Catholic religious order known as the Dominicans (or Friars Preachers) had been founded in 1216 as an elite clerical order intended to oppose heresy. Freed from stable monastic observance and emphasizing intellectual virtuosity, however, they were also one of the chief weapons of the papacy against the German emperor. The year 1250 found Peter in charge of the Dominican priory in Piacenza. Many of the members of the Populare (the party of the middle class) in that town had been exiled. However, the imperially sympathetic nobles who controlled Piacenza were unable to remove the outspoken friar. He remained, likely stirring up opposition to the emperor and supporting the exiled Populares.

1 Two standard works for the political background of Italy at this time are Daniel Waley, The Italian City Republics (London: Longman, 1985); and Giovanni Tabacco, The Struggle for Power in Medieval Italy: Structures of Political Rule, trans. Roslind Brown Jensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The common name for the imperial sympathizers was Ghibelline and that for church supporters was Guelfi; however, these terms carry with them a multiplicity of political colorings, and their usage is made more difficult by the fact that being a Ghibelline did not necessarily make one a bad Christian. For a sophisticated breakdown of these terms, see Daniela Medici, Sergio Ravaggi, Massimo Turati, and Patrizia Parenti, Ghibellini, guelfi, e popolo grano: I decretari del potere politico a Firenze nella seconda metà del Duecento (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1978).