

# JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

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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 Cainnech'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 penitentialists 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 Catholics par excellence, the saints themselves, performing abortions as well as of "bastards" becoming bishops and saints. In hagiography and the penitentials, virginal 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 childbed in 1212 and was commemorated in a well-known medieval ballad.<sup>2</sup> Were the destinies of these three royal women typical for the situation in medieval and

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 Herbert, Linnaeus University, for inspiring conversations that have greatly influenced the present version of the article, and Margaret J. Cormack, College of Charleston, for valuable remarks and suggestions. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>1</sup> Millennium Project, *Task Force: Child and Maternal Health: Embargo 17 January 2005*, available online at [www.unmillenniumproject.org](http://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."

<sup>2</sup> Grethe Jacobsen, "Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Medieval North: A Topology of Sources and a Preliminary Study," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 9, no. 2 (1984): 98.

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 Högberg estimated the number of maternal deaths to ten per one thousand live births in prehistoric Sweden in a study from 1983.<sup>3</sup> A 1992 study by Elisabeth Iregren gives evidence of eight to nine maternal deaths per one thousand from Swedish medieval graveyards. It must be remembered that many maternal deaths are not visible in archaeological data and that the real mortality rate would have been higher.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 interventions 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 intent 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 Krötzel, and other scholars, 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,

<sup>3</sup> Calvin Wells, "Ancient Obstetric Hazards and Female Mortality," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 51, no. 11 (1975): 1235–49; Ulf Högberg, "Mödradöd i förhistorisk tid" (with a summary in English), *Sydsvenska medicinhistoriska sällskapets årskrift* (1983): 103–14. Both studies are discussed in Berit Jansen Sellvold, "Födelse og død: Kvinners dødelighet i forbindelse med svangerskap og fødsel i forhistorisk tid og middelalder, belyst ut fra studier av skjelettmaterialer," in *Kvinnors rosengård: Medeltidskvinnors liv och hälsa, lust och barnafödande*, ed. Hedda Gunneng et al. (Stockholm: Centrum för kvinnoforskning vid Stockholms universitet, 1989), 79–96, with an English summary at 201.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Iregren, "Kvinnor och barn under medeltid: Ett antropologiskt perspektiv på några skelettmaterial" (with a summary in English), in *Kvinnospår i medeltiden*, ed. Inger Lövkrona (Lund, Swed.: Lund University Press, 1992), 55–92, 152–53 (especially 58–61); see also discussion by Högberg, "Mödradöd," 109–11; Ulf Högberg, Elisabeth Iregren, Claes-Henric Siven, and Lennart Diener, "Maternal Deaths in Medieval Sweden: An Osteological and Life Table Analysis," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 19, no. 4 (1987): 495–503; and Audrey Eccles, *Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Eccles, *Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 125.

second, there was an increased frequency of miracles occurring at a distance from the shrine.<sup>6</sup> 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 Krötzel in an article from 1989.<sup>7</sup> 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, Janken Myrdal, and others.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

This article examines childbirth miracles in the collections of posthumous miracles of Saint Eric of Sweden († 1160), Saint Birgitta of Vadstena († 1373), the Blessed Brynolph of Skara († 1317), the Blessed Nils of Linköping († 1391), and the Blessed Katherine of Vadstena († 1381).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> André Vauchez, *La sainteté en Occident aux derniers siècles du moyen âge d'après les procès de canonisation et les documents hagiographiques*, 2nd ed. (Rome: École française de Rome, 1988), 1–6, 541; Christian Krötzel, "Parent-Child Relations in Medieval Scandinavia According to Scandinavian Miracle Collections," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 14, no. 1 (1989): 21–37, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Krötzel, "Parent-Child Relations," 23–25.

<sup>8</sup> Beata Losman, "Barnafödelse och kvinnosexualitet i mirakelberättelser," in Gunneng et al., *Kvinnors rosengård*, 142–56, with an English summary at 205; Janken Myrdal and Göran Bäärnhielm, *Kvinnor, barn och fester i medeltida mirakelberättelser: Med en katalog över svenska mirakelberättelser och en nyöversättning av Brynolfsmirakelerna* (Skara, Swed.: Skaraborgs länsmuseum, 1994), esp. 16–28.

<sup>9</sup> Nanna Damsholt, *Kvindebilledet i dansk højmiddelalder* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1985), 227–30, 330. See also Anders Fröjmark, *Mirakler och helgonkult: Linköpings biskopsdöme under senmedeltiden* (with a summary in French) (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1992), 83–84, 188, also available online at <http://lu.divaportal.org/smash/record.jsf?searchId=1&cpid=diva2:128211&rvn=3>; and Cordelia Heß, *Heilige machen im spätmittelalterlichen Ostseeraum: Die Kanonisationsprozesse von Birgitta von Schweden, Nikolaus von Linköping und Dorothea von Montau* (Berlin: Akademie, 2008), 278–79. Instructions for the questioning of witnesses to Birgitta miracles issued by Cardinal Nucerini and Bishop Nils Hermansson of Linköping in 1376 used the gender neutral nouns *persona* (person) and *testis* (witness); see *Acta et processus canonizationis beate Birgittae* (hereafter *Acta Birgittae*), ed. Isak Collijn (Uppsala: Svenska fornskriftsällskapet, 1924–31), 143–44, 611–12.

<sup>10</sup> In medieval learned discourse within the Catholic Church, "saint" is normally the title for canonized saints or saints who were considered saints before 1234, when papal canonization became mandatory in the Western Church, while other saints—including those on their way toward canonization—are usually referred to as "blessed." For data concerning

It also includes miracles related to a holy image in the church of the Dominican friary in Stockholm, the *Miracula defixionis Domini*.<sup>11</sup> 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 Katherine 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 I

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 piety, 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 who 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 Aros [modern Uppsala] at the Greyfriars' church, in the presence of the provincial minister and *custos* [superior official within the Franciscan order], the abbess of Sko Abbey, the archdeacon, the provost, Sir Jacob,<sup>12</sup> many other clerics and laypersons, and

these miracle collections, see Birte Carlé and Anders Fröjmark, "Danemark—Suède—Finlande," in *Hagiographies: Histoire internationale de la littérature hagiographique, latine et vernaculaire, en occident, des origines à 1550*, ed. Guy Philippart (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1996), 2:501–45. Apart from these six major Swedish miracle collections, fragments exist of other collections. However, no childbirth miracles can be found among these. The Italian miracles of Saint Birgitta are not included in this study.

<sup>11</sup> Gregorius Holmiensis, *Miracula defixionis Domini: En mirakelsamling från Stockholms dominikankloster efter Kb 27 i Linköpings stifts- och landsbibliotek utgiven med inledning, översättning och register*, ed. Tryggve Lundén (Göteborg, Swed.: Göteborgs högskola, 1950).

<sup>12</sup> Probably Jakob Israelsson, a canon at Uppsala cathedral from 1273 and the archbishop of Uppsala from 1278 until his death in 1281.

two trustworthy and honorable women gave witness to having seen this miracle and having been present through the whole series of events.<sup>13</sup>

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.)<sup>14</sup> Finally, it is worth noting the role of the women present, who even administered baptism when they feared that the child would die.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> "Matrona quedam dum in partu periclitaretur et de vita desperaretur eiusdem, matrone assistentes eidem votum fecerunt beato Erico vt Dominus per eius merita morienti conseruaret vitam ac laborantem liberaret a partu. Quo facto mulier peperit filiam mortuam. Que cum per quatuor horarum diei [spacium] omnino mortua sic iaceret, videntes que aderant mulieres matrem reuiuiscere ex virtute miraculi maiorem in Domino fiduciam assumentes, pietatis affectu commote [iterato] votum vouerunt Domino, vt qui matrem a mortis periculo liberauit, filie ad tantum vitam daret, vt baptismi gratiam consequeretur. Quo facto, continuo adest virtus Domini, et qui in facie prothoplasti inspiravit spiraculum vite, corpusculo puelle mortuo et recenter nato spiritum vivificantem misericorditer inspiravit. Videntes autem iam dicte matrone que aderant spiritum vitalem paulatim per membra puelle succrescere, ac ipsam que veraciter mortua erat veraciter iam viuentem periculum mortis timentes, iuxta formam ecclesie baptizauerunt eandem nomen Helene eidem imponentes, quam post tres menses sanam et incolumem vidimus omnes qui fuimus testes miraculi. Hoc autem miraculum probatum et examinatum est apud Arusiam in ecclesia fratrum minorum presentibus ministro et custode et abbatisa de Schogh, archidiacono et preposito et domino Iacobo et aliis quamplurimis clericis et laicis, attestantibus hec duabus matronas fidedignis et honestis qui hoc miraculum viderunt et huic per omnia affuerunt." *Miracula S. Erici regis et martyris*, ed. Erik Gustaf Geijer and Johan Henrik Schröder, in *Scriptores rerum Suevicarum mediæ ævi* (hereafter *SRSMA*), 3 vols. (Uppsala: Edvardus Berling reg. acad. typographus, 1818–76), 2:1:286–89; and Rome, Vatican Library, Cod. Vat. Reg. Lat. 525, [16] (facsimile edition by Axel Nelson, *Vita et miracula sancti Erici regis Suecice latine et suecice, Codex Vat. Reg. Lat. 525: Suecice et britannice præfatus* [Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1944]).

<sup>14</sup> 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. 1167–95/96). A papal letter of October 23, 1256, granted indulgences to visitors of Eric's grave in Uppsala on his feast day. In this letter Eric was explicitly referred to as *sanctus*.

<sup>15</sup> 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 Fæhn, "Dâp," in *Kulturbistoriskt lexikon för nordiskt medeltid* (hereafter *KLNLM*), 22 vols. (Malmö, Swed.: Allhems, 1956–78), 3:413–18. 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 miracle 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 *Miracula defixionis Domini* (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 4.5 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 (3.6 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> I will return to this issue below.

häråd law (*Tjohärådslagen*, inappropriately referred to as *Smålandslagen*), 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 iuris sueo-gotorum antiqui: Samling af Sveriges gamla lagar* [hereafter *SSGL*], ed. Hans Samuel Collin and Carl Johan Schlyter, 13 vols. [Lund, Swed.: Berlingska boktryckeriet, 1827–77], 6:103 [chap. 9, sec. 1]).

<sup>16</sup> 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 helgonkult*, 93. The delimitation 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 affect these calculations.

<sup>17</sup> 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 *sanctuaires de répit* (see Jacques Gélis, “De la mort à la vie: Les ‘sanctuaires à répit,’” *Ethnologie française* 11,

Data collected from the miracula 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. Three were burghers, 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.<sup>18</sup>

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).<sup>19</sup> 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 *obstetrices* (midwives), a fact that was observed and discussed by Christian

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 (Sankt Olof) in Lunkende, Scania, in the hope of restoring them to life. A fetus was also revived long enough to receive baptism; see note 19.

<sup>18</sup> See Eljas Orrman, “The Condition of the Rural Population,” in *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia*, vol. 1, *Prehistory to 1520*, ed. Knut Helle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 581–610, esp. 600–610.

<sup>19</sup> *Vita S. Brynolphi, episcopi Scaevensis cum processu eius canonizationis*, ed. Claes Annerstedt, in *SRSMA* 3:2:145.

Krötzl, who regards this term as an indication of an earlier professionalization of midwifery than has hitherto been suggested.<sup>20</sup> However, it is not until the seventeenth century that we find serious attempts to regulate midwifery as a profession in the Scandinavian countries.<sup>21</sup> The Swedish equivalent of *obstetrix*, *jordegunna*, is absent from Swedish medieval legal codes (which were composed between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries) and first encountered in *Sjalinna thröst* (Consolation of the soul), a book of spiritual guidance from about 1430.<sup>22</sup> The synonym *barnmoderska* is first found in the Church Ordinance of 1571.<sup>23</sup> It seems best to regard Ingrid and Helena in the Birgitta miracle from 1375 cited below and the other obstetricians in our texts rather as good neighbors giving their friend a hand.<sup>24</sup> The 1375 miracle is the only Birgitta miracle where use is made of the term *obstetrices*. The term occurs more often in the miracula of the two blessed bishops, Brynolph and Nils, whose miracles were written down between about 1400 and 1417. Although there is only one occurrence of the term in the Brynolph miracula, there are only two childbirth miracles in his collection.<sup>25</sup> In the great collection of miracles of the Blessed Katherine there is a single mention of obstetricians in a tale from circa 1473.<sup>26</sup>

Further observations can be made concerning the women who were present at the childbirth miracles. Those who were not called obstetricians were referred to in a variety of ways. *Matrone* (matrons, that is, respectable, usually married women) is common throughout the entire period; sometimes the matrone were qualified as *matrone multum honeste* (most respected matrons) or *bone et honeste fame matrone* (matrons of good and honorable reputation). Sometimes the women were only referred to as *femine circumstantes* (surrounding women) or *mulieres presentes* (women who were present). These assisting women might or might not be related to the woman giving birth. A mother, an aunt, and a sister were mentioned in various of the stories, but so were *convicine* (neighbors), as, for example, in a Birgitta miracle where the

<sup>20</sup> Krötzl, "Parent-Child Relations," 29.

<sup>21</sup> Inger Dübeck, "Jordemödrer i rätshistorisk belysning," *Historie: Jyske samlinger* 10, no. 3 (1973): 337–90, esp. 339–42; Christina Romlid, *Makt, motstånd och förändring: Vårdens historia speglad genom det svenska barnmorskeväsendet 1663–1908* (with a summary in English) (Stockholm: Vårdförbundet, 1998). Note, in contrast, that the sixteenth-century Danish Protestant clergyman Peder Palladius spoke of paying a good *iordemoder* (midwife), something that might indicate some kind of professional or semiprofessional status (Jacobsen, "Pregnancy and Childbirth," 104).

<sup>22</sup> Knut Fredrik Söderwall, *Ordbok öfver svenska medeltids-språket*, 4 vols. (Lund, Swed.: Berlingska boktryckeriet, 1884–1973), 1:609 ("iordhguma"), 3:367 ("iordha guma").

<sup>23</sup> *Den svenska kyrkoordningen 1571 jämte studier kring tillkonst, innehåll och användning*, ed. Sven Kjällström (Lund, Swed.: Håkan Ohlssons förlag, 1971), 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Acta Birgittae*, 116 (and exemplum 2).

<sup>25</sup> *Vita S. Brynolphi*, 145, 175. In the second Brynolph miracle, the only woman mentioned in the text is the one who gave birth (153).

<sup>26</sup> Swedish National Archives, Stockholm, Skokloster manuscript no. 15 in quarto, fols. 117v–118r.

obstetricians were also *vicine* and followed the woman to Vadstena, where they acted as witnesses (*testes*) to the miracle.<sup>27</sup> The women assisting the woman giving birth were often the ones who initiated the vow to the saint. In the first exemplum, 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.<sup>28</sup>

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 prepare 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 given 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

<sup>27</sup> *Acta Birgittae*, 116 (and exemplum 2).

<sup>28</sup> That only married women or widows were allowed to assist at childbirth has been asserted—unfortunately without citing evidence to support the assertion—in a study of the history of obstetrics in Sweden by Otto Gröné: "Något om barnmorskorna och barnbördshusen: Bidrag till förlösningskonstens historia under 1900-talets fyra första decennier," *Svenska läkartidningen* 46, no. 47 (1949): 1–16, at 1; and also by Pia Højbejerg, *Jordemor: Barnmorskor och barnsängskvinnor i Sverige*, 3rd ed. (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1991), 34. Troels Frederik Troels-Lund's influential ethnological study *Dagligt Liv i Norden i det sekstende Aarhundrede*, 14 vols., 4th ed. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1914–15), 8:18, 22–23 (also available online at <http://runeberg.org/dagligt/>), asserts that—with some local exceptions—only women were normally allowed in the presence of women giving birth and that these women should ideally be *Dannekvinder*, that is, married women. Grethe Jacobsen ("Pregnancy and Childbirth," 106, 110) points out that exceptions to the rule would likely have been more frequent in sparsely populated areas. She also denies that the women present were necessarily married and/or mothers. The role of women at childbirth and the exclusion of men is to my knowledge not the subject of any legal regulations from medieval Sweden or Denmark, except—indirectly—in the City Law of Visby, in which there is a limit placed on the number of married women (*women*) allowed at childbirth (Troels-Lund, *Dagligt Liv*, 8:20; *Codices iuris Visbyensis iurisci et maritimi*, in *SSGL*, 8:154). It is also a presupposition of the laws that only women could function as witnesses to the birth of a child that was stillborn or died soon after its birth; for example, Guta (or Gotland) Law, chap. 2, in *SSGL*, 7:8, and Dala Law, Kristnu Balcker (presumably composed in the thirteenth century and used in parts of Västerås bishopric), chap. 12, *SSGL*, 5:10; see also Jacobsen, "Pregnancy and Childbirth," 107n66; and Edvard Gotfredsen, "Barsel," in *KLNAM*, 1:354–65, esp. 355, 357. As late as 1748, a male obstetrician had to dress as a woman in order to gain access to the Swedish crown princess and assist her at a complicated childbirth (Elis Essen-Möller, *Bidrag till förlösningskonstens och den obstetriska undervisningens historia i Skåne: Ett bidrag till Lunds universitets historia* [Lund, Swed.: Lunds universitet, 1943], 8).

when they gave birth. This is true in five cases. In 1408 a thirty-one-year-old woman gave birth.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the miracula 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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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 miscar-

<sup>29</sup> *De miraculis S. Nicolai*, ed. Henrik Schück (1895), in "Två svenska biografier från medeltiden," in *Antiquarisk tidskrift för Sverige*, pt. 5, 295–475 (also available online at <http://runeberg.org/antiquid/5/0307.html>), 333–475, at 383; *Processus canonizationis beati Nicolai Lincopensis*, ed. Trygve Lundén (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1963), 84, 338–40; *Fragmentum cuiusdam libelli de S. Nicolai*, ed. Henrik Schück (1895), in "Två svenska biografier," pt. 5, 444–62, at 462.

<sup>30</sup> *De miraculis S. Nicolai*, 355–56; *Processus canonizationis beati Nicolai Lincopensis*, 78, 318–20; *Fragmentum cuiusdam libelli de S. Nicolai*, 457. See also exemplum 4.

<sup>31</sup> Swedish National Archives, Skokloster manuscript no. 15 in quarto, fol. 110r; *Vita Katherine*, 1487 (facsimile edition by Trygve Lundén [Uppsala: Pro veritate, 1981]), fol. f ij v; *Processus seu negocium canonizationis b. Katherine de Vadstenis*, ed. Isak Collijn (Uppsala: Fornskriftsällskapet, 1942–46), 80–81, 109–10, 118–20. It is supposed here that the statement made by a witness in the last 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.

<sup>32</sup> 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 Bäärnhielm and Janken Myrdal, "Miracles and Medieval Life: Canonization Proceedings as a Source for Medieval Social History," in *Procès de canonisation au moyen âge: Aspects juridiques et religieux*, ed. Gábor Klaniczay (Rome: 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.

riages. A woman in a Birgitta miracle had previously given birth to eight children. A couple in a Nils 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 Motala parish who feared for her ten-week-old fetus after having been subject to violence recalled that the Blessed Bishop Nils was her *compater*, that is, either her godfather or the person by whom she had been baptized.<sup>34</sup>

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 Eknö village in Björskog parish, Västerås diocese, 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 Vadstena, and the infant regained life and decent color in all its members. Witnesses are Ingrid and Helena, obstetricians and neighbors.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Eric miracle: *Miracula S. Erici regis et martyris*, ed. Erik Gustaf Geijer and Johan Henrik Schröder (1828), in *SRSMA*, 2:1:296–99; *Vita et miracula sancti Erici regis Sueciae*, 26. Birgitta miracle: Uppsala University Library, Cod. Ups. C 15, fol. 94r; *Acta Birgittae*, 160, 561. Nils miracle: *De miraculis S. Nicolai*, 351–52; *Processus canonizationis beati Nicolai*, 312–14.

<sup>34</sup> *De miraculis S. Nicolai*, 367–68 (see exemplum 3); Ulla Westerberg and Eva Odelman, *Glossarium till medeltidslatinet i Sverige (Glossarium mediae latinitatis Sueciae)*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1968–2002), 1:195 ("compater").

<sup>35</sup> "Margareta de opido Ekne parrochia Biornaskogh Arosiensis diocesis peperit infantem mortuum et totaliter denigratum, cuius lingua longe extralabia extendebatur. Cunctis credentibus, quod in ore eius niger carbo teneretur, qui et magis fantasma quam homo putabatur, hec votum vouit ad Wastenam, et infans reuixit et colorem et formam decentem in omnibus membris recuperavit. Testes sunt Ingridis et Helena obstetrices et vicine sue." *Acta Birgittae*, 116. A different meaning is given to the second sentence by Trygve Lundén, who writes: "Everyone thought that she had a black coal in her womb" (my rendering of Lundén's Swedish translation in Birgitta, *Himmelska uppenbarelser*, 4 vols. [Malmö, Swed.: Allhem, 1957–59], 4:243).



## EXEMPLUM 3: A MIRACLE OF THE BLESSED NILS FROM 1407

*A Woman who was Gravely Maltreated while Pregnant was Cured.*<sup>36</sup> On May 18, 1407, Ingrid, wife of Holmger, 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.<sup>37</sup> 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 *compater*, 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,<sup>38</sup> 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 Anund Markusson, vicar at Saint Lawrence in Linköping.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Headings like this one are often found in the margins of the manuscripts.

<sup>37</sup> On Esbjörn, see Birgitta Fritz, *Hus, land och län: Den militära förvaltningen i Sverige 1250–1434*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972–73), 2:84 ("capitaneus"), 87 (Esbjörn Kristiernsson Djäken).

<sup>38</sup> June 29, 1408. It should be noted that June 29 was the day of the yearly synod of the diocese of Linköping, so any miracles made public on that day were heard by a large audience.

<sup>39</sup> "*Mulier verberata graviter pregnans sanatur.* Anno domini Millesimo CD VII xviii die mensis Maij Ingridhis vxor Holmgeri prope pontem habitans in parrochia Motalon diocesis lincopensis cum decem septimanas haberet, postquam in vtero concepisset, percussa est a clientulis cum quadam securi, eo quod non daret eis cereuisiam gratis et abundanter ad bibendum, in tantum quod per mensem se a lecto mouere non posset, et mulieres intuentes eam dicebant eam partu iam priuatam et impossibile alicui mulieri taliter lese posse partum ad effectum producere. Clientuli autem accusati coram domino suo Esberno capitaneo Ostgocie et illo dicente, quod comburi merito deberent, fugam ceperunt voto tamen prius emisso ad dominum Nicholaum episcopum lincopensem pro salute mulieris et pro partus productione viui in mundum, vt infans ibi portaretur et oblatio pro eo ibi offerretur. Voto sic emisso mulier hec audiens dixit intra se: 'hoc votum libenter complebo, eciam si ipsi nolunt, quia compater meus est et bene de gracia eius confido.' Ab illa ergo hora ipsa conualuit et partum produxit viuum, qui et baptisma recepit et adhuc viuut scilicet hoc tempore complecionis uoti videlicet anno immediate sequenti die apostolorum Petri et Pauli, vbi Ingridhis predicta hec ita esse in veritate asseruit teste Johanne procuratore in curia episcopi in Watzstenom et dixit

## 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 Sjeladal,<sup>40</sup> Örtomta parish, Linköping diocese, was dying in labor, so that the persons assisting at childbirth [*obstetricantibus*], who were her mother Cristina, Cecilia, wife of Håkan of Vissevik in Björsäter parish, and Margareta of Lackhälla, 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 something 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.<sup>41</sup>

*Testimonies at the Canonization Proceedings in Linköping on May 14, 1417.* Botild, widow of Peter in Syæladal, 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 parrochie Motala. In presencia autem domini Anundi Marci vicarii ad Sanctum Laurentium Lincopie hec deposita sunt." *De miraculis S. Nicholai*, 367–68.

<sup>40</sup> Probably Skärdala in Örtomta parish, thirty kilometers east of Linköping.

<sup>41</sup> "Anno Domini M° CD X° inter festa assumptionis et natiuitatis beate Marie Virginis Botildis vxor Petri de Sjeladal parrochie Oratompta diocesis lincopensis laborans in partu usque ad mortem, ita quod nulla spes erat vite de eadem obstetricantibus eam mulieribus istis videlicet matre sua Cristina et Cecilia vxore Haquini de Weseuik et Margareta de Lakhellom, quarum vna videlicet Margareta sorte, ut moris est vulgi, deprehendit, vt uotum pro ea facerent ad sepulchrum beati Nicholai episcopi lincopensis, ut si partum fundere posset et mortem euadere, visitaret sepulchrum dicti sancti offerendo ibidem imaginem infantis de cera, quo uoto emisso partum edidit monstruosum et grossum nimis videlicet duos gemellos simul vno exitu sexus mulieris in vmbilico et stomacho coherentes brachijs se amplexantes, vnde dicta mulier mortem euadens conualuit in breui compleuitque uotum suum cum marito suo dicto Petro in profesto conceptionis beate Marie Virginis laudans Deum in sancto suo iuravitque tactis sanctis euangelijs, quod, nisi fuisset adiutorio Dei et huius sancti suffulta, nunquam 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 [*obstetricibus*] Cristina, mother of she who gave birth and now is giving testimony, Cecilia, wife of Håkan of Vissevik in Björsäter parish, and Margareta, wife of Anund of Lackhälla, Örtomt 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 Sjaladal, 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.<sup>42</sup>

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

cuasisset. Fuit enim hoc miraculum stupendum satis, quod tam grossum et conuolutum fetum tam tenera mulier vita comite fundere potuit." *De miraculis S. Nicolai*, 355–56.

<sup>42</sup> "Item super xvij articulo, qui incipit: Anno domini M<sup>o</sup>cdx<sup>o</sup> Botildis vxor Petri de Sjaladal parrochie Øratompta etc, Botildis relicta Petri in Sjaladal principalis in ipso articulo principaliter nominata, etatis xxij annorum vt dixit, testis iurata et interrogata suo medio iuramento dixit contenta in dicto articulo fore vera, causam reddens sue sciencie, quia se morti proximam nullo alio medio euadere sperabat, quia fetum abortiuum quem parere non potuit a se aliter seperari posse non credidit. Ideo votum fecit beato Nicolao Lincopensi, et statim voto facto partum edidit et subito liberata est, ac si viuum partum sine periculo edidisset, circa diem beati Egidii confessoris, presentibus ibidem obstetricibus Cristina matre eiusdem parientis et teste loquentis, Cecilia vxore Haquini de Wesewiik parrochie Biornasætir et Margareta vxore Anundi de Lakhelda parrochie Øratompta Lincopensis dyocesis, que vna cum eadem teste loquente votum dicto beato Nicolao fecerunt. Super eodem articulo Margareta vxor Anundi de Lakhelda parrochie Øratompta Lincopensis dyocesis etatis xxxix annorum vt dixit, testis producta, iurata et interrogata dixit contenta in dicto articulo fore vera, quia sic ea fieri vidit et audiuit et presens interfuit, addens quod si xx vitas ipsa pariens habuisset, ipsa nichilominus de earum retencione desperasset, nec modus fuit mortis pericula euadendi, si per dicti beati Nicolai merita non fuisset saluata. Eadem autem testis loquens cum ipsa principali teste super ipsis contentis in articulo per omnia concordabat. Super eodem articulo Botuidis de Sjaladal parrochie Øratompta pater eiusdem Botildis principalis in dicto articulo principaliter nominata, etatis lxxij annorum vt dixit, testis productus, iuratus et interrogatus dixit contenta in dicto articulo fore vera, quia sic ea pro veris et vt vera ab ipsis obstetricibus didicit et audiuit, ipsum fetum abortiuum, tam monstruose dispositum prout in articulo dicitur, vidit et suis manibus tenuit, votumque factum beato Nicolao sciuit et filiam suam eius meritis gloriosis saluatam firmiter credit, gracias deo et eius meritis humiliter reddens." *Processus canonizationis beati Nicolai*, ed. Lundén, 318–20.

and canonization processes thus provide an unusual opportunity to listen to the voices of medieval women.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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. Instead, 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 innkeeping. 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 partibus*, 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 remembered and retold some years afterward, sometimes by different persons than in the first version. It should also be noted that in this exemplum the term *obstetrices* was used for apparently nonprofessional assistants at childbirth, that is, the mother of the woman giving birth.

<sup>43</sup> In her typology of sources relevant for the study of pregnancy and childbirth in the Middle Ages, Grethe Jacobsen makes a distinction between women's, men's, and common sources and mentions sources emanating from popular religious culture as examples of the third category ("Pregnancy and Childbirth," 109). Anders Fröjmark, "The 'Voice of the People' in Some Late-Medieval Miracle-Collections," in *Saints and Sagas: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Birte Carlé (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1994), 99–108, discusses the extent to which the miracle collections reflect the stories told by ordinary women and men.

<sup>44</sup> *Acta Birgittæ*, 393–94, 611–12; see also Vauchez, *La sainteté*, 60–64.

<sup>45</sup> *Acta Birgittæ*, 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 bed-chambers 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Many of the members of the Populares (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.

<sup>1</sup> Two standard works for the political background of Italy at this time are Daniel Waley, *The Italian City Republics* (London: Longman, 1988); and Giovanni Tabacco, *The Struggle for Power in Medieval Italy: Structures of Political Rule*, trans. Rosalind Brown Jensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The common name for the imperial sympathizers was Ghibelline and that for church supporters was Guelph; 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 Raveggi, Massimo Tarassi, and Patrizia Parenti, *Ghibellini, guelfi, e popolo grasso: I detentori del potere politico a Firenze nella seconda metà del Duecento* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> *Annales Placentini Gibellini* (ca. 1285), Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, vol. 18 (Hanover: Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani, 1905), for the year 1250 (499–502).