Media and Monarchy in Sweden

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NORDICOM
Queen Philippa and Vadstena Abbey

Royal Communication on
a Medieval Media Platform

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In the year 1406, Princess Philippa was married to Eric of Pomerania, king of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The ceremony took place in Lund Cathedral in Denmark, in what is today the southern part of Sweden. It constituted a prominent public event for the archbishopry and the wedded couple, and it attracted international interest both on a symbolic and a political level. Philippa was the daughter of the English King Henry IV of the Lancastrian house, and her brother was none other than the future King Henry V, one of the most famous medieval English kings. In 1415, King Henry V was to win one of the most illustrious victories in English history when he beat the French at the battle of Agincourt, but he naturally also played a crucial role in the life and actions of his sister. The marriage between Eric and Philippa united two dynasties with great ambitions and precarious holds on power, and it served to strengthen them both. Strengthening and legitimizing positions of power had always been of vital importance to medieval monarchs, especially to someone like Henry IV, who was rumoured to have had his predecessor murdered. But Eric of Pomerania had also come to power in a rather precarious fashion. In 1397, the councils of the three Scandinavian kingdoms had agreed to accept him as their joint king, in order to put an end to the wars and strife that had raged for decades between different candidates for the thrones. The real power figure was not Eric but Queen Margareta, who had adopted him when her own son died. Eric was the son of Margareta’s niece.

There were many ways to strengthen and legitimize power. Strategic marriage was one very important instrument, as bids for power were most effective when based on claims of hereditary rights. Another instrument was the major symbolic resource of the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church, with its prelates, monasteries and saints. The states of the Middle Ages were essentially theocracies, in which the limits between secular and religious power were blurred. Kings, queens and other power figures needed the Church, and the Church, in its turn, needed the secular powers. In the medieval political imagination, both institutions wielded different but mutually dependent swords: the worldly sword of kings and aristocrats and the spiritual sword of the men and women of the Church.
As a woman, Philippa was not immediately responsible for either sword. Her marriage to the Scandinavian King Eric had not been arranged by herself but by her father, and was thus not really in her hands. She was eight years old when the marriage was first discussed and twelve when it was formalized. In this strongly patriarchal society, even queens had limited access to instruments of power. Yet one instrument was particularly well suited to them, and that was the one offered by the realm of religion. This was an area in which women as well as men could act openly on the political stage. And for Philippa, it became the media platform par preference.

The most prestigious religious institution in fifteenth century Scandinavia was the Birgittine abbey in Vadstena (in Östergötland). Its founder, Saint Birgitta of Sweden, was an internationally recognized, albeit contested, authority on religious and political matters, and the abbey had quickly become the main focus of spiritual life in Scandinavia. It had also emerged as a driving force in the field of political ideology. Birgitta had lived shortly before the events that are to be analysed here, from 1303 to 1373, and had been canonized in 1391. Saint Birgitta and her monastery were the pride of Scandinavia, and the latter thus constituted an important centre for all aspects of cultural, religious and political life until the Reformation. The relationship between Queen Philippa and Vadstena Abbey is the subject of the present discussion. I will argue that during about a decade, in the 1420s, Vadstena Abbey functioned as a media platform for the queen, and in the process I will also discuss the various forms of media available to a public and privileged person of the Middle Ages, a person such as Philippa.

Media in the Middle Ages

Using the concept of media is not self-evident when referring to communication in pre-modern society. In their analysis of media history from the Renaissance to the present, Peter Burke and Asa Briggs note that the term “the media” in its modern sense first appeared in the 1920s. In conjunction with its modern usage, Briggs and Burke employ the term to denote “the communication of information and ideas in words and images”. Different forms of communication suit different societies, and usages vary on the basis of many factors. The emergence of the newspaper in the eighteenth century, for instance, was linked to an increase in literacy, socioeconomic changes and technological development. The Middle Ages, on the other hand, was characterized by very low levels of literacy, even among the elite. Other forms of visual communication were therefore imperative to getting the message across, which is part of the reason why it was expressed in many different fashions. One form was art and architecture, another relied on expensive objects such as crowns and jewels, and yet another involved ritualistic performances, especially because “ritual, with its strong visual component, was a major form of publicity, as it would be once more in the age of televised events such as the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II”.

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This is not to say that the written word was not without importance. Books and letters were essential, as they recorded memories and transmitted information. Sermons were an important medium for the transmission of tradition, knowledge, instruction and religious culture, and a vast treasure of written sermons survives from the Middle Ages. In their overview, Briggs and Burke argue that the written word was only gradually accepted as authoritative during the Middle Ages and that people trusted the spoken word above a written document, even if the document had been issued by the Pope. They claim that the rise of written culture occurred as late as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There is, however, considerable evidence of the high value placed on writing and books ever since Antiquity, both for practical and for cultural reasons. The Christian religion in itself relies to a great extent on the existence of a sacred Book, and the Church produced a host of other highly valued volumes over the years, containing prayers, hagiographies and other such texts. (This is a tradition that stems from the Jewish roots of Christianity, with the high value placed on the Torah and the works devoted to the Torah and related scriptures.)

In a more prosaic vein, documents were produced to prove that financial and legal arrangements had taken place, and these documents were also very valuable because, hundreds of years afterwards, they could verify ownership and similar matters. In the Middle Ages, however, there was no firm line separating written from visual communication. Holy books were visual objects that were revered by the congregations, and official documents were visual proof of an agreement that had taken place. In medieval Swedish letters, the opening phrase was often something like: “All who hear or see this letter, I greet with God...”. In sum, the Middle Ages presented a variety of media, visual and written, that were enduring in the form of objects or texts or more fleeting in the form of rituals or the spoken word. Accordingly, a religious institution such as Vadstena Abbey provided both the means and the setting for employing such discursive practices, not least for a prominent queen such as Philippa.

The Final Resting Place as Media

The most tangible evidence of Philippa’s connection with Vadstena Abbey still remains in the Abbey Church. Near the middle of the church, there is a gravestone marking the place where the queen was buried in 1430. Today, the site is simple and unadorned, but this was not the case in the fifteenth century. The grave was placed before an altar, which was subsequently lost during the period after the Reformation. The altar was dedicated to Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, and Queen Philippa had financed it. In this way, she had not only chosen the place where she would eventually be buried, but also adorned it in such a way that her generosity and ties to the monastery were visible to all who visited Vadstena Abbey Church — and in the fifteenth century, large numbers of people, living in Sweden and its neighbouring kingdoms or travelling in the
area, did. Research into archaeological remains and collections of miracles, for example, show that Vadstena Abbey came to be the most frequently visited holy place in the Nordic countries during the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{12}

The altar was inaugurated in December 1425. The event is recorded in the memorial book of Vadstena Abbey, \textit{Diarium Vadstenense}.\textsuperscript{13} According to the entry, the archbishop of Uppsala conducted the ceremony in the presence of the queen, who had specifically requested this. The entry is short and does not provide any further information. The significance of the altar has to be appreciated by combining several other pieces of information. In a later entry, written when the queen was dead, the link between the altar and the grave was made clear in more explicit terms:

\begin{quote}
In the Year of our Lord 1430. During the night before twelfth night our beloved queen mistress Philippa died, the queen of Sweden, Denmark and Norway. She was buried here in Vadstena in the choir of Saint Anne, which she herself had founded and had built. She was the very faithful patroness of this monastery and of the whole order.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The foundation is called a choir or a chapel in the many entries, but it seems that it was in fact an altar.\textsuperscript{15} Its importance as a medium for the queen can be deduced from a third entry, made in 1459, where it was called “The Queen's Chapel”.\textsuperscript{16} In fact, it has been remembered as and is still called the Queen's Chapel.

This altar immediately became associated with high symbolic status. A few years after its foundation, it was chosen as the site of the installation of the bishop of Stavanger in Norway by three Swedish bishops.\textsuperscript{17} The day of the installation, 18 May, is further significant as it was the feast day of Saint Erik, a twelfth century Swedish king who was hailed as a saint and who, during the course of the late Middle Ages, gradually became one of the most important saints in Sweden, symbolizing good governance and good kingship. In fact, this was why Philippa's husband had been given that name. He was born Count Bogislav in Pomerania, but received the name Eric when Queen Margareta adopted him. The ritual of installing the new bishop of Stavanger might therefore also be seen as a conscious act of highlighting the importance of the king and queen of the three Scandinavian kingdoms.

We do not know how the altar and the grave were adorned, but large funds were donated for that purpose. Among other things, the monastery received two luxurious gold crowns that were to be used either for adorning the altar with two paintings of the coronation of the Virgin Mary or in the coronation ceremonies of future kings and queens. Either way, the importance of Philippa and Eric would be perpetuated, but the subsequent king of the three kingdoms, Karl Knutsson Bonde, did not appreciate this. He had been involved in the final deposition of Eric in 1439 and became king in 1448. In 1454, he came to Vadstena Abbey and demanded that the brothers show him the crowns and other objects donated by Philippa. He then stated that owning such expensive
Map of the grave stones in Vadstena Abbey church, from an engraving made in 1653. Gravestone number nine is that of Queen Philippa. The heading reads: Geometrica Delineatio Öfwer Closter Kyrkiann i Wadhstena Anno 1653. Reprint of a geometric drawing from 1653 of the Abbey Church in Vadstena. Photo: Uppsala University Library.

objects endangered the souls of the brothers, and took the crowns and other objects with him. Later, the crowns were pawned in Lübeck. Apart from this demonstrating that the symbolic power of such gifts was fully appreciated by others, it is interesting to note that the memorial book entry recording the visit states that the valuables had been donated by Philippa, making no mention of King Eric in that context.¹⁸

It would appear that the monastery never commissioned the paintings of the coronation of the Virgin for the altar, as the crowns were still there in 1459. This means they had not been sold to finance extensive artwork, and there is no remnant or mention of any such paintings in Vadstena Abbey Church. There is, however, evidence of at least one major work of art provided for the church by Queen Philippa. Among the few remains of the medieval church's ornamentation, which was in all likelihood very rich, there is a wooden sculpture of unusual quality and beauty depicting Saint Anne, holding on her lap the Virgin Mary, who in turn is holding the infant Jesus. Art historians consider it the most valuable decoration in the church from an aesthetic point of view, and there is strong evidence suggesting that Philippa ordered it from the Lübeck artist who created it in 1425, when the altar was inaugurated.¹⁹
The grave and the altar are placed closer to the entrance of the church than to the front altar. This location appears to have been significant. In a medieval church, the interior is divided into different parts with different purposes, some accessible to the congregation and some closed to them. The front of the church, the chancel, was oriented towards the east, and only accessed by male priests and monks. The largest part of the church, the nave, was for the congregation. In the southern part of Vadstena Abbey, the sisters of the order attended church on an elevated balcony, screened from the congregation. The sepulchre of Philippa is positioned in the nave, close to the centre but on the northern side. This meant that her altar and resting place were situated where the congregation would see them well, and in plain view of the sisters who were on the opposite side. The brothers would have had access to the altar as well.

The altar appears to have been founded in steps. According to a letter dated 25 March 1425, Philippa was in Vadstena and issued a letter founding a cross in the church, a cross devoted to Saint Anne. Her letter states that the abbess and the confessor general were to appoint the chaplain.20 Philippa had apparently donated funds to finance a chaplain for her altar, an arrangement called prebend (Lat. *prebenda*). Later on, however, in December 1427, she wrote another letter, in which she asked the bishop of Linköping – the diocese in which Vadstena was located – to appoint her own chaplain Petrus Krak to the prebend of Saint Anne in Vadstena.21 Some months later, the bishop issued a letter confirming that he was going to do so, apparently being in Vadstena Abbey at the time.22

The arrangement surrounding the choir of Saint Anne is mentioned only a few times, but the significance is considerable. It combined the aspect of visual representation in the form of an altar, possibly also a cross, and, eventually, a tombstone, with ritual performances in the form of a chaplain who would be responsible for continuously holding Mass for the Queen and her family members. It is very probable that Philippa had intended for her husband, King Eric, to rest there too. But Eric was ousted from the thrones of the three Scandinavian kingdoms as a result of uprisings in the 1430s, so this never occurred. However, it is fair to say that the work done by Philippa to immortalize her name turned out to be a successful media strategy that both legitimized and manifested the position of her family in the turbulent power struggles of the time.

The Saint is the Message

As mentioned, Philippa had her altar dedicated to Saint Anne and therefore wanted images of the coronation of the Virgin to adorn it. But why did she choose these two saints? If she had been a man, it is probable that she would have preferred to link her foundations to masculine saints such as Saint George, who became an immensely popular figure representing victorious kings and knights in the late Middle Ages, or a royal saint such as Saint Erik of Sweden. In her case, the choice of the two female saints is equally significant.
The cult of the Virgin was of course very important throughout the Middle Ages. The beautiful gold mosaics of the Virgin in Italian churches, such as Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, testify to the splendour of her cult. The theological aspects of her own conception and that of the Christ were debated, however. Leading theologians were unsure as to the nature of the Virgin’s own origins. During the fifteenth century, it was established that Mary herself had been immaculately conceived. Her parents Joachim and Anne had thus not tainted her with mortal sin. In 1481, a feast day celebrating the immaculate conception of Mary was introduced. This establishment of the virginity of Anne was somewhat problematic, however, as it is not supported by any such claims in the Bible.

Saint Birgitta, the founder of Vadstena Abbey, had had many revelations regarding very physical aspects of the birth of Christ and other such events. Her vision of the birth of Christ and the placing of the infant in a cradle became normative for the Church. She also discussed the conception of Mary at length, and concluded that her conception was without sin, because Mary’s parents were exceptionally pure people who had an exceptionally chaste marriage. It seems that the revelations of Saint Birgitta helped launch the cult of the mother of Mary in Sweden, and this may explain why Queen Philippa chose to associate herself with that particular saint. The Virgin Mary, on the other hand, was the strong symbol of a heavenly queen, perceived as reigning in splendour with a crown on her head. Therefore, the mediated image of the crowning of Mary did not just underline the importance of queenship and blur the boundaries between the worldly queen and the heavenly one, it also strengthened the gender aspects of medieval royal power with the help of one of the most canonized icons.

However, there may actually be yet another reason for the choice of Saint Anne and the Virgin Mary. Both were also strong symbols of motherhood and the Holy Family. Saint Birgitta may thus have wished to emphasize the importance of Anne because she, like Birgitta, was a holy woman who was not technically a virgin. The persona of Anne demonstrated that even people who had lived in a sexual relationship could be pure, if their marriage had been chaste and primarily oriented towards religion. On the other hand, Philippa may have needed to associate herself with these symbols of family and femaleness for a diametrically opposed reason: She never had any children. When the altar, and probably the sculpture of Saint Anne with Mary and the infant Jesus as well, was commissioned, Philippa had been married for nearly twenty years and had not conceived. When she died five years later, she was still childless. This was of course a problem for her, because she had failed to secure the dynasty of her husband. Although they were parents, both Anne and Mary had been constructed as symbols of virginity, and it is possible that Philippa wished to associate herself with these symbols of purity and spirituality, particularly because, in the Middle Ages, virginity had strong positive connotations of being chosen, special and different from ordinary people. Furthermore, researchers have shown that in later medieval England in particular, “performance of virginity seems to have been an intrinsic part of the enactment of royalty.”
Many kings, from Edward the Confessor to Richard II, had been constructed as virgin kings, even though they were married. Their childlessness was thus explained as being the result of their devotion to the sacred rather than as stemming from any physical defect.

Gifts and Masses as Media and Memory

Philippa gave generously to Vadstena Abbey while she was alive, and she also remembered it in her will. In doing so, she participated in an important medieval ritual practiced by all Christians. Donating to churches and monasteries was a significant way of inscribing oneself into the community of the religious orders, the parishes and even the realm itself. The records of Vadstena Abbey show that gifts were received even from the relatively poor, although of course the larger gifts from royalty and the elite were commemorated much more explicitly. Nevertheless, as historian Eamon Duffy has highlighted, anyone who donated to a religious institution would be inscribed in the bede-roll, or prayer roll, for all eternity.25

Gifts and memory were not, however, a uniform experience. Royalty, naturally, had the resources to invest more heavily than others and they used the status of select monasteries as a way to enhance their own standing. For instance, in England, royalty wished to be buried in Westminster Abbey and remembered there. In Sweden, on the other hand, a succession of monasteries had functioned as royal pantheons. Varnhem Abbey (in Västergötland) had such a function in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, while the Blackfriars Abbey in Stockholm (now Riddarholmskyrkan) was the main locus in the late thirteenth century. But from the middle of the fourteenth century, the seat of the Birgittine order in Sweden became an attractive burial site for royalty. As early as 1346, long before the monastery was actually built and the order confirmed, King Magnus and Queen Blanche of Namur donated huge sums to the future institution and clearly intended to be buried there.26 This, however, did not come about.

The donations of Philippa represent a similar tactic, and her personal attentions towards the abbey began in 1415. According to the memorial book, she visited the monastery for a second time that year and apparently stayed for a few days. (There is no record of her first visit.) The brothers showed her the relics of the abbey, and on the following day she asked to be accepted as a sister ab extra in the order, a request that was immediately granted. Her mother-in-law, Margareta, had also been a sister ab extra, an honour linking the queens to the monastery without affecting their daily lives as laypersons. The same year, 1415, Philippa was also present when a girl was given as a nun to the convent.

A few years later, the queen began working more intensely for the good of the abbey. In 1419, she personally wrote letters to the Pope regarding the status of the Birgittine Order, and also engaged her brother, Henry V of England,
in the same endeavour. 27 Two years later, and perhaps strengthened by such high-profiled engagements, she asked for a mass to be celebrated daily, for all eternity, for the souls of the king, herself and her parents. 28 The brothers of the monastery later noted that the queen worked in a more notable way than did the king in the business of enhancing the real and symbolic status of the monastery. 29

Vadstena Abbey and the Claims of the Lancaster House

As seen above, Queen Philippa handled many aspects of her connection to Vadstena Abbey herself and was thus perceived as a person who was unusually devoted to the order. However, the importance of the connection to Vadstena lies beyond her as an individual, and this is evident from the first moment of her queenship in Scandinavia. When the young princess was sent from England to be married in the cathedral in Lund, she was accompanied by a large entourage. Most notable was Henry of Ravensworth, an English knight, who immediately after the wedding headed to Vadstena to establish contact and to assure the brothers and sisters that he intended to establish a monastery of the Birgittine order in England. This was the beginning of several years of work, during which many brothers and sisters from Vadstena were sent to England to establish the new monastery.

The result was Syon Abbey in England, created in 1415, and supported by Henry V. In the memorial book of Vadstena Abbey, there are several entries dealing with the establishment of this English monastery. These entries give the impression that the establishment of Syon Abbey was more important than any of the other new establishments taking place during the fifteenth century. The Birgittine order also established itself in Denmark, Norway, Germany as well as other places, but the creation of a house in England is the only event of this kind that is marked by elaborate ceremonies in the memorial book. In May 1415, seven women and two men left Vadstena Abbey to travel to England and found the new monastery. They were led from Vadstena “with great ceremony”, conducted by the Archbishop of Lund, three bishops from Sweden and one from Norway. A large number of knights and high envoys were also present during this public and prestigious event. 30 Indeed, this is the only time that such a ceremony is recorded in the context of founding a new Birgittine abbey. For instance, regarding the foundation of a new abbey on Lolland, Denmark, the same year, there is no record of any participation of high clergy and knights. 31

The high value placed on the foundation of Syon Abbey is explained by its role in the creation of legitimate claims by Henry V. Saint Birgitta had become a central figure in English political propaganda. In her earliest revelations in the 1340s, the Virgin Mary had suggested a solution to her regarding the conflicts between England and France. The Virgin said that the English royal family had legitimate claims to the throne of France, and suggested a long-term solution
whereby the French King Philip VI would adopt the English King Edward III as his son and successor, thus solving the problem without violence. In later versions of this revelation, it was instead noted that the Virgin wished dynastic marriages between the French and the English to solve the issue. Either way, Saint Birgitta’s revelations provided the English kings with an important ideological tool to support their claims to France, and by the fifteenth century, Birgitta had come to be perceived as one of England’s most important saints. Saint George is another such saint. He was by most accounts a man martyred in what is today Turkey in the fourth century, but was perceived as an English saint by the English in the fifteenth century.32

Henry V’s use of Saint Birgitta has been analysed by Nancy Bradley Warren. She notes how the Lancastrian kings closed down several other monasteries and gave the funds to the new Syon Abbey. Henry V even provided for it in his will. The founding of Syon took place in 1415, shortly before the war in which Henry emerged victorious at Agincourt. When he returned from battle he was greeted by an enormously lavish ceremony, in which earlier male warrior saints were evoked, but also the Virgin Mary and virgin saints in general.33 Henry V thus succeeded in linking himself and his victory to the lustre of earlier English saints, but also to Saint Birgitta and the Virgin Mary, two women who symbolically bolstered his claim to the throne of France through his mother’s ancestry.

Thus, the emphasis on the Birgittine order in the first half of the fifteenth century was not solely created by Queen Philippa. From the moment of her marriage, a link was established between her native England and the Birgittines of Vadstena Abbey in Sweden. The Abbey and the order were important in many respects and thus constituted a media platform not only for her, but for her father and brother as well. With time, however, Philippa was able to act personally to create her own use of the resource provided by the Birgittines.

**Conclusion**

Vadstena Abbey surfaced as a media platform for Queen Philippa for several reasons. It was used to propagate claims to legitimate rule, both by pointing to hereditary rights and by establishing moral rights. Through her foundation of an altar and a future burial site, she created a close and highly visible affiliation with the spatial centre of Sweden at the time. She also emphasized the importance of holy women through her commission of works depicting Saint Anne and Saint Mary. The links between England and Scandinavia were underlined even further by the prayers that were to be said every day in Vadstena for herself, her husband and her parents. Her self-chosen burial place, the altar and the masses thus constituted additional memory sites that were meant to last infinitely. Moreover, these media platforms also inscribed her into the community of Christians and the community of the realm, linking her to everyone who contributed to Vadstena Abbey and the Birgittines, even after she was dead.
QUEEN PHILIPPA AND VADSTENA ABBEY

There must certainly have been aspects of the link between Philippa and Vadstena that were observed by her contemporaries, but that are lost to us today. However, the love and devotion she showed the monastery, not only through gifts and good works but also through her many recurring visits, must have made a profound impression on everyone at the time. When she died in 1430, Philippa was in Vadstena to celebrate Christmas and the New Year. The conversations and the care she shared with the brothers can be seen as subtle and private rituals that also communicated valuable aspects of her power as a public and mediually conscious Queen. And because the medieval female saints with whom she aligned herself functioned as mediators between the spiritual and secular worlds even after her death, Queen Philippa of Scandinavia can be said to have functioned as a kind of medieval medium in her own right.

Notes
6. Ibid., p. 2.
7. Ibid., p. 10.
8. Berglund.
12. Fröjmark, and Lars Andersson.
15. In the sources, the location is alternately called “altar” (*Diarium Vadstenense*, no. 374, 27 December 1427, and *Svenskt Diplomatariat*, letter 20990, 14280418), “the queen’s chapel” (*Diarium Vadstenense*, no. 698, 29 June 1459), “cross” (*Svenskt Diplomatariat*, letter 20459, 14250325a), and “prebend” (*Svenskt Diplomatariat*, letter 20931, 14271221). It was probably an altar. For *Svenskt Diplomatariat* (subsequently referred to as SD) see, http://www.statensarkiv.se/default.aspx?id=4044.
17. *Diarium Vadstenense*, no 379, 18 May 1427. The bishop of Stavanger, Audun, was installed by the bishops of Linköping, Skara and Växjö.
18. *Diarium Vadstenense*, no 641, 8 January 1454.
20. SD no. 20459, 25 March 1425.
21. SD no. 20931, 21 December 1427. Issued at Helsingborg.
22. SD no. 20990, 18 April 1428.
23. Lindgren.
29. Diarium Vadstenense, no. 333, 17 June 1422.
30. Diarium Vadstenense, no. 254, 21 May 1415.
31. Diarium Vadstenense, no. 258, 1415, and no. 268.
32. Samantha J.E. Riches, "St George as a Male Virgin Martyr", in Riches & Salih (eds).
34. Sven-Bertil Jansson (ed), Engelbrektskrönikan (Stockholm: Tiden, 1994).