

Foundation of the Pirita Convent, 1407–1436, in Swedish Sources

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Summary

Abstract: This article is largely based on Swedish sources and examines the role of the Vadstena abbey in the history of the Pirita convent, from the founding of its daughter convent in 1407 until the consecration of the independent convent in 1431. Various aspects of the Vadstena abbey's patronage are pointed out, revealing both a helpful attitude and interfering guidance. Vadstena paid more attention to Pirita than to other Birgittine monasteries and had many brothers and sisters of its monastery there. Such closeness to the mother monastery is a totally new phenomenon in the history of researching Pirita, and still needs more thorough analysis. Correspondence with Vadstena offers more detailed data about the merchants considered to be the founders of Pirita, whose origins have remained vague to this day.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Birgittine order, Pirita convent, relations to Vadstena abbey

The current article examines the foundation of the Pirita convent, mainly on the basis of Vadstena abbey sources. Currently, I have found about 20 documents in the Swedish State Archives in Stockholm and in the Uppsala University library that, to some extent, reflect the relations between the Vadstena abbey and Pirita convent during the founding and building of the latter. The other chief source is the diary of the Vadstena abbey, *Diarium Vadstenense*, which contains ten notes about the Pirita convent during the relevant period. The diary is, of course, well

known to researchers of the Birgittine Order but, together with other Swedish sources, it is possible to discover new aspects in the relations between the Pirita and Vadstena convents.

Vadstena was the mother abbey of the Order of the Holy Saviour, *Ordo Sancti Salvatoris*. The founder, Birgitta Birgersdotter (1303–1373), had a revelation in 1346: Christ gave her the constitution of a new order. In 1349, Birgitta left Sweden and settled in Rome in order to personally ask permission from the pope to found a new order. The Order of the Holy Saviour was confirmed in 1370 and again in 1378 under the Augustinian Rule, with the addition of the Rule of the Holy Saviour, *Ordo sancti Augustini sancti Salvatoris nuncupatus*.

The main aim of the Birgittine Order was to purify all Christians; it was established primarily for women. Each convent was comprised of 60 nuns under the supervision of an abbess. They and visiting laymen were served by 25 brothers, who were divided into classes: 13 priests, four deacons and eight lay brothers. Their head was called a general confessor, and not a prior or an abbot. They were not typical monks who, after joining the order, received instruction to become deacons or priests. Only those men could become priests or deacons in a Birgittine Order who had had special ordination before. They called themselves priest brothers, deacon brothers or lay brothers, according to their status. Sisters and brothers lived in separate quarters, although they shared the same church. The monastery and the church were dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

The Vadstena abbey was consecrated in 1384. The Birgittine Order began rapidly developing after Birgitta was canonised (7 October 1391). A further boost was provided

by the first complete Latin publication of Birgitta's *Heavenly revelations*, commissioned by the Vadstena abbey and printed in Lübeck in 1492. The Order's third convent was Pirita, near Tallinn, with the medieval name *Mariendaell/Marienthal*. The next nine Birgittine monasteries were all located in Northern Europe. By the end of the Middle Ages, there were a total of 27 Birgittine monasteries, ten of which were closed due to the Reformation, although several monasteries were still established in the 16th–18th centuries. Special mention should be made of monasteries in Spain and Mexico, 11 of which still exist. Of the 'old' monasteries in Europe, four are still working.

Examining Swedish material, we see that the head of the Vadstena abbey kept a close watch on the building of the Pirita convent after the first meeting on 5 May 1407, when people arrived from Livonia and said they wished to found a convent near Tallinn that would belong to the Order of the Holy Saviour. According to the *Diarium*, the founding involved 34 persons, 16 of whom were virgins and six of whom were priests. The men asked for privileges, relics of St. Birgitta and a copy of *Cantus sororum*, i.e. notes and text. *The Sisters' Song* was the distinctive feature of the Birgittine order; the sisters had their own *officium* and their own Virgin Mary mass, and the brothers followed the prayers fixed by the local bishopric.

After laying the cornerstone, which according to Balthasar Russow (*Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt*, 1578) took place on 15 June 1407, Vadstena sent two brothers to Pirita for a year to teach those who wished to enter the convent.

Three Tallinn merchants are considered to be the founders of the Pirita convent: Heinrich Swalbart, Gerlach Kruse and Heinrich

Huxer. The Swedish documents show that the last two were priests, and that Gerlach Kruse came from Söderköping and was the brother of Hans Hildebrandsson, who entered Vadstena as a brother in 1415. The sources also mention Borchard Sawdel in 1412 as a priest active in the founding of the convent.

After the return of the brothers sent to Pirita in 1408, nothing more seemed to be developing from Vadstena's point of view. Hence it was decided to send a delegation to Tallinn in 1410 for a thorough inspection. The delegation managed to convince the Tallinn bishop, the Livonian Order master and the land marshal to send a petition to the pope to confirm the foundation of the Pirita convent.

On 29 May 1411, Pope Johannes XXIII confirmed all plans of action and privileges. The convent now officially belonged to *Ordo Sancti Salvatoris*, the Order of the Holy Saviour. The official name of the convent was *Vallis Mariae, Mariental/Marienthal*. Medieval Lower-German documents usually refer to it as *sunte Birgitta Kloster*.

Besides the usual privileges, the letter permitted the Vadstena abbey to send two sisters and two brothers to Pirita to instruct the new applicants. The invitation, however, arrived from Pirita only the following year. In September 1412, two brothers, one a priest and the other a lay brother-stonemason, and two sisters and two votive sisters travelled to Pirita. The list of sisters shows that there must have been a convent of sisters blessed by the bishop, separate from the building for votive sisters, i.e. young girls who wished to enter the convent.

The arrival of Vadstena representatives must have contributed to producing firmer and better observance for the convents of brothers and sisters. Sister Kristina Tokesdotter, who descended from lower nobility, was probably elected as Abbess – or rather

as Deputy Abbess, as Pirita was not yet an independent convent at that time. It could also be presumed that the priest Karl Andersson was appointed as the assistant to the general confessor because, according to the Order's constitution *Mare Magnum*, the general confessor in non-consecrated convents was called the *vice confessor et pater*. Sending the stonemason Stefan Liongasson to Pirita must have meant that a start was made in the planning of the convents and the church according to the rules of St. Birgitta.

However, the new convent soon found itself in conflict with the Tallinn magistracy, as revealed by documents in Tallinn. On 1 August 1413 the magistracy sent a letter to the Grandmaster of the Teutonic Order, and instructions to Merten Bradenborch, who had to take the magistracy letters to the grandmaster and convince him to move the Pirita convent inland.

Finding themselves in a problematic situation, the founders of Pirita began to work in two directions. First, between July and October 1413, and in collaboration with the Razeburg bishop and Sachsen-Lauenburg Duke Erich V, Pirita's daughter convent Marienwohlde was established near Lübeck. The purchase of the land was mediated by the Pirita priest Borchard Sawdel. A group of Pirita convent sisters arrived there later. According to the Swedish documents, a founder of the convent, the priest Heinrich Huxer, was elected Vice-General Confessor.

Secondly, Heinrich Swalbart was sent to the Konstanz Council (1414–1418). He went there twice – in January 1415 and, recommended by the Vadstena abbey, in February 1416 because, in Vadstena's opinion, the right to keep the convent where it was had to be defended at the Papal See. Swalbart, however, acted as he thought best. Documents in

Tallinn reveal that Swalbart, especially in his second visit to the Council, worked independently and purposefully, winning the confidence of the Riga archbishop, the grandmaster and the procurator Wormditt. As a result of his effort, the Livonian Order master Lander von Spanheim decided on 27 August 1416 that the convent could stay where it had been established.

Shortly before Order Master Lander's decision, the situation in Pirita seems to have become critical. Two votive sisters from Vadstena, who had come to Pirita to instruct the applicants, had returned to their home monastery and been ordained, according to the *Diarium*. After their departure in July 1416, Pirita seems to have sent a message to the sisters in Marienwohlde to come home because, in a document in Sweden, the Razeburg bishop forbade them to do so.

A year after Order Master Lander's decision, Pirita acquired a permit for a quarry and was able to start building both the church and the convent houses. After four years in a fairly uncertain situation, the convent's construction proceeded according to plan.

In July 1416, the votive sisters left the Pirita convent, but Deputy Abbess Kristina Tokesdotter and Sister Kristina Johansdotter remained. The stonemason-lay brother Stefan and the priest Karl Andersson had left on 7 October 1414 because of Karl's illness. According to the *Diarium*, no brothers were sent to Pirita from Vadstena after their departure. Still, the letter of a Vadstena priest, Hans Hildebrandsson, sent to Pirita on 2 September 1418, contains the opposite information. The letter could be interpreted as saying that, beginning in 1412, two Vadstena brothers stayed in Pirita at all times. The Vadstena abbey thus took seriously the permission in the papal 1411 confirmation letter regarding

sending two brothers and two sisters to Pirita.

In 1421, Pirita sent the Vadstena sister Kristina Johansdotter back without prior warning, for which they were admonished, as the sisters' convent was integral. However, the problem solved itself because an elderly sister died the same night.

At the chief chapter of the Order of the Holy Saviour in Vadstena in 1429, Vice-General Confessor Gerlach Kruse expressed a wish to send a sister to Pirita who could speak German. This happened, although the letter concerning the arrival of Sister Anna Bylow in September 1429 makes it clear that the agreement to this was only given after a long dispute. A letter of 1430, however, reveals that Pirita wished Vadstena to send more brothers as well. The mother convent disagreed, claiming that four brothers and four sisters were enough for Pirita. Such a large number of Vadstena brothers and sisters at Pirita was remarkable and its reasons deserve further study.

Other documents in Sweden reveal that priests both in Marienwohlde and in Pirita were a cause for worry for the Vadstena abbey. Firstly, they were not wearing the Order robes prescribed for non-consecrated monasteries in the constitution of the Birgittine order, *Mare Magnum*. Secondly, on 1 August the priests in Marienwohlde declared *ad Vinacula* indulgence, although at the Konstanz Council in April 1418 the pope had decided to abolish a number of indulgences, including the Birgittines' *ad Vinacula*. The declaration of indulgence angered the Lübeck clergy and they turned to the pope, demanding the closure of the convent.

Obviously due to the events of Lübeck, the Vadstena abbey decided to ordain three priests for the Pirita convent. Thus, on 2 September 1418, Gerlach Kruse and Johannes Rosenhagen from Pirita arrived in Söder-

köping on the eastern coast of Sweden, where they were received by Hans Hildebrandsson, who escorted them to Vadstena. According to the *Diarium*, three Tallinn clerics – Gerlach Kruse, Borchard Sawdel and Johannes Rosenhagen – were ordained on 9 October 1418 by the Linköping bishop. Gerlach Kruse remained in Vadstena for nine months.

Vadstena despatched Borchard Sawdel and Johannes Rosenhagen to Marienwohlde monastery and advised the convents to elect Borchard Sawdel instead of Heinrich Huxer as Vice-General Confessor. This did not happen, and Sawdel returned to Pirita the following spring. Later, in spring 1421, Johannes Rosenhagen was named Vice-General Confessor in Marienwohlde, in connection with establishing the daughter convent of Marienkron in Stralsund.

The last two letters from Vadstena in 1430 to the Pirita convent and the Tallinn bishop give instructions on how to carry out the forthcoming consecration of the enclosure. The letter to the bishop contains additional prescriptions on how to organise the election of the abbess, prioress and general confessor. It was recommended to elect Brother G(erlach) to the latter position.

No documents have survived concerning the date of the consecration of the convents, and later chroniclers offer various dates. According to Balthasar Russow's *Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt*, published in 1578, the convent was consecrated on 17 June and 1 July 1436. In his *Vermehrte Neue Beschreibung der Muscowitischen vnd Persischen Reyse*, published in 1656, A. Olearius claims the Pirita convent was consecrated on 17 June and 1 July 1431. He also mentions that Gerlach Kruse was elected 'priest and father confessor', i.e. general confessor, as recommended in the above-mentioned letter to the

Tallinn bishop. Letters from Vadstena to Pirita in 1429 and 1430 also describe preparations for the consecration of the enclosure. These letters support the date offered by A. Olearius. Pirita (Mariental) thus became an independent convent in the Order of the Holy Saviour. A few years later, in 1436, the church was consecrated.

Analysing the correspondence, it is obvious that the role of the mother monastery in the development of the Pirita convent was significant. At the same time, the activities of Heinrich Swalbart at the Konstanz Council show the relative independence of the Livonian monastery. Had he followed the recommendations given by Vadstena, the conflict between Pirita and the Tallinn magistracy would probably have been different, because Vadstena did not seem to have had a comprehensive overview of local problems. The attitude of those at the head of the Pirita convent and Heinrich Swalbart's purposeful actions were factors that influenced the Teutonic Order and, as a result, the conflict between the Tallinn magistracy and Pirita convent was resolved in favour of Pirita.

The letters contain many problems and much information that still need to be examined, and which will certainly add a lot to our knowledge of the construction of the Pirita convent and the people behind it.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir
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