The Homecoming of the Birgitta Relics

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Introduction

When Birgitta Birgersdotter died in Rome on July 23, 1373, she already had the reputation of a saint. Her own will was that her mortal remains be brought to the monastery under construction in Vadstena, Sweden. The task of accomplishing this was given to her daughter Catherine and the other members of the Swedish “Bridgettine circle” in Rome. They left the eternal city on December 2, 1373, traversed the Alps and journeyed through Moravia, Bohemia, and Poland to Gdańsk (Danzig), where they arrived in May, 1374.2

“A port that they had not thought of”

The first Swedish collection of posthumous miracles attributed to the Blessed Birgitta begins by relating a number of miracles connected with the journey of the relics under the heading De miraculis in via translationis reliquarum versus Sweciam (‘On miracles that occurred during the transfer

1 An earlier version of this text was published as “Birgittarelikernas hemkomst” in Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift 1992, 189–93. However, both the relative obscurity of this publication in the notice section of the journal, and the occasional return of the question of the homecoming of the Birgitta relics both in research publications and in works of popular history motivates a reworking of my original contribution.
of the relics to Sweden’).3 One of these miracles is related to the crossing of the Baltic in order to reach the Swedish homeland. During the crossing, doubts came up regarding which port to touch in at, in view of the fact that war raged in Sweden.4 The political situation in Sweden was in fact tense during the first semester of 1374. King Albert met with active or passive resistance from a part of the Swedish nobility, and in neighboring Norway, deposed kings Magnus and Håkan waited for an opportune moment to strike. On February 3, Bishop Gotskalk of Linköping was murdered by a nobleman with the support of some of his comrades. The motive for the murder is unclear, but it was probably related to the political unrest.

The relation of the voyage of the company bringing the Birgitta relics to Sweden goes on by saying that a very bright star came up on the sky little after noon and went before them to a port they had not thought of beforehand (“ad portum non precogitatum”).5 The star was later identified as Birgitta. Nothing is however said about which port it was to which the star led them. Instead, the only indication given in the miracle collection of the continuation of the journey talks about a landing at the port of Söderköping, the obvious port for a company aiming at the heart of the province of Östergötland, where Vadstena is situated. A miracle that was experienced

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3 Acta et processus canonizationis beate Birgitte (A.&P.), ed. Isak Collijn, Uppsala 1924–31, 145–48. The heading exists in only one of the manuscripts of the canonization process, the A 14 of the Royal Library (Kungliga biblioteket) of Stockholm that has once belonged to the Vadstena Abbey library.

4 A.&P., 146.

during their stay there is explicitly referred to as having occurred “when we first arrived in the kingdom of Sweden”.6

*Translatio Sancte Birgitte and the Sikavarp Tradition*

Which then was the “port that they had not thought of beforehand”? One answer is given in the printed breviary of 1493 for the Linköping diocese. The story of the voyage across the Baltic and the star that led the company is retold in the *legenda* of the Translation feast of the Blessed Birgitta, on May 28. Here it is said that the port to which the ship was safely led by the star was Sikavarp on the island of Öland.7

The medieval diocese of Linköping encompassed most of southeastern Sweden, including both the island of Öland where Sikavarp is located and the old royal mansion of Vadstena where the Abbey founded by Saint Birgitta was erected and where the saint herself had her grave. What is the significance of the mentioning of Sikavarp as the port to which the relics of Saint Birgitta arrived in 1374 in a breviary that was printed more than a century later? As we shall see, scholars differ with regards to their answer to this question. Two main groups can be identified, one for which the breviary represents an authentic tradition and the relics were really landed at Sikavarp, and another which sees in the Sikavarp legend an attempt to

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6 “vbi primo venimus ad regnum Suecie”, *A.&P.*, 147. A later, more elaborated version of the story is found in *A.&P.*, 109–10.
promote pilgrimage to this port of eastern Öland that was property of the Linköping bishop.

*Andreas Lindblom’s Theory*

Art historian Andreas Lindblom represents the first of these scholarly traditions. In a 1955 article he has made a noteworthy attempt to trace the journey through Europe of the group of friends who traveled with Birgitta’s relics. He accepts that the “port they hadn’t thought of” was Sikavarp. Furthermore, he combines the Sikavarp tradition with another Birgitta miracle, which in Lindblom’s interpretation gives evidence of a stop at Bröms on the border between the Swedish province of Småland and the then Danish province of Blekinge. Lindblom also finds evidence in a seventeenth century record from Ålem parish further north on the mainland coast of Kalmar Sound that the relics were also landed there. His conclusion is that the relics were taken from place to place along the coast from the Danish border to the port of Söderköping so that the relics could be duly venerated in what developed into a triumphal journey.8 Lindblom’s view has gained a strong grip over at least parts of the scholarly community, and relations based on his reconstruction were published as late as in 2003.9

We will now look closer into the sources that were used by Lindblom to support his thesis of stops at Bröms and Ålem.

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Bröms

As have already been mentioned, Lindblom’s theory of a stop at or near Bröms—a Danish fortress at the then Danish–Swedish border at the point where it meets the Kalmar Sound coast—is supported by a Birgitta miracle. In this account, we are told about a nobleman from the Swedish province of Östergötland who was captured by his enemies and taken to a place at the coast more than thirty miles (*miliaria*) from his home. A ship was prepared to take him to Germany. He invoked Lady Birgitta and made a vow to her, hoping for her intercession to help him remain in his country. When he had ended his prayer, armed persons came from the nearby fortress of Bröms and intervened to stop the abduction. After having settled the matter, the man could return to his home.¹⁰

The story about the nobleman exists in several different versions in the canonization acts, and the version just related is the primitive version that is part of the *Relatio Upsaliensis*, the first collection of Swedish Birgitta miracles which was sealed by the Archbishop of Uppsala in May 2, 1375.¹¹ Andreas Lindblom however sets out from a secondary version, in which a good number of significant details have been added. The nobleman is identified as Håkan Fadersson of Söderby in Örtomta parish east of Linköping, squire and rural judge of Memming’s *härad*.¹² Two passages that have been added to

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¹⁰ *A.&P.*, 161.
¹¹ *A.&P.*, 163–64 (sealing), 592 (name).
the text are particularly important for Lindblom’s discussion. One of them is the information that when Håkan Fadersson was standing on the beach he had heard that those who were bringing Lady Birgitta’s relics home from Rome were taking a pause not far from the place where he stood (“pausandi gracia consisterent non longe a loco, quo ille staret”). The other is the statement that Håkan after having returned to his home joined the company that followed the relics on its way to Vadstena, where they arrived on July 4.

In Lindblom’s view, the miracle tale is evidence of a stop of Birgitta’s relics near the Danish–Swedish border, on the way from the first landing on Öland. It is however most problematic that he sets out from the secondary version of the tale. This is found in the beginning of the miracle collection that was brought together by a commission nominated by Bishop Nils Hermansson of Linköping, and proceeding according to the stricter instructions that had been issued by Cardinal Nucerini, since the first collection did not meet the standards required by a canonization process.13

We have no exact information as to when the new commission started its work, but it can not have been earlier than in the autumn of 1375. It includes however material that had been written down already in the beginning of 1375.14 The report of the Commissio Lincopensis was sealed in Stockholm on December 9, 1376.15 The additions to the tale of Håkan Fadersson may have been made at one of many possible occasions, since Håkan was a

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13 A.&P., 611–12 (instructions by Cardinal Nucerini), 143–44 (instructions by Bishop Nils). Both texts are undated in the acts of the canonization process.  
15 A.&P., 144–45, 351.
frequent visitor to the monastery. Moreover, he is explicitly said to have retold his tale at many occasions. This is clear from testimonies at the canonization process.\textsuperscript{16}

When the secondary text gives the impression that Håkan Fadersson told his story at the arrival of the relics in Vadstena, this is an illusion created by the additions to the text. The following passage illustrates this. While the primary text dryly states “et redijt ad propria gaudens narrans omnibus graciam sibi factam”, the secondary version is considerably more detailed:

\begin{quote}
Ille vero, dum reuerteretur ad propria, venit ad illos, qui transtulerunt ossa domine Brigide, et sequebatur eos, vsque dum collocassent ea in monaste-rio suo Wastena, quo collocata sunt quarto nonas julij annj predicti, narrans graciam secum factam.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

If this had been the occasion of the writing down of Håkan’s story, we would have expected to find the primitive version in the beginning of the \textit{Relacio Upsaliensis}, not—as is the case—in its end.\textsuperscript{18}

The instructions of Cardinal Nucerini necessitated a restart of the writing down of miracles. Håkan Fadersson’s tale, however, could easily be supplemented with the help of the \textit{miraculè} himself. Not only were his name and place of residence added according to the instructions, but Håkan took the chance of embellishing his story and adding a number of details. When he says that he was inspired to make a vow by the fact that the relics had been landed nearby for a stop, the wording is vague: “consisterent non longe a

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{A.&P.}, 464–65 (testimony by Petrus Johannis, who has heard Håkan Fadersson relate his story in his own house), 470–71 (testimony by Johannes Petri), and 555–56 (testimony by Petrus Olau).

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{A.&P.}, 109, 161.
loco, quo ille staret”.

This might be a pious construction based on his later knowledge of the stop on Öland, the coast of which had been visible to him on the other side of Kalmar Sound, or it might refer to the supposed stop of the relics in Ålem on the Småland coast of Kalmar Sound, about 70 kilometers north of the place where Håkan had been held hostage. I do not think that we have evidence for a most unlikely stop at Bröms.

Instead, I will now go on to discuss the possible stop at Ålem and the evidence that can be brought forth to support it.

**Ålem**

In response to an inquiry after antiquities in the realm, carried on by the clergy under Royal decrees issued in 1666, the learned rector of Ålem parish, Georg Brunnerus, wrote as follows:

Jfrån ålhems Sokn.
När som H. Britass lijk kom ifrån Rom och skulle förass till Wadstena kloster, det hon sielf hade låtit upbyggia, at begrafwass, blef det öfwerförct ifrån ölandh och landsat på Smålandz sidan uti strandahäradet och åhlems sokn widh Giäddenäss uti Cappelwiken, der som står upsat it stort träkorss, huilket kallass H. Britas korss.
ålhem 4 octob 1667.
Georgius Brunnerus.  

While Andreas Lindblom finds the tradition trustworthy, a later scholar, Ann-Marie Jönsson, is for the understandable reason of the text’s being al-

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18 A possible occasion for the writing down of the story is April 10, 1375, when Håkan co-sealed an entrance charter issued at the entrance of a virgin in the monastery; *Diplomatarium suecanum*, vol. 10, n° 8754.

19 *A.&P.*, 108.

20 From Ålem parish. / When St. Birgitta’s dead body came from Rome and was to be brought to Vadstena monastery, that she herself had had built, it was brought over from Öland and landed at the Småland side in Stranda härad and Ålem parish at Gåddenäs in Kapellviken [Chapel’s Bay], where a big cross is erected, which is called St. Birgitta’s
most 300 years later than the event that it describes disinclined to ascribe value to its data.\textsuperscript{21}

For two different reasons, I am less reluctant to rule out the stop at Ålem. The first reason is its notable coherence with a tradition that has been written down by Petter Åhstrand in 1768 in a book on northern Öland, where he says that St. Birgitta landed in Sikavarp on her way home from the Holy Sepulcher, and that she had thereafter set over the Kalmar Sound from Borgehamn at the west coast of Öland to the mainland. At Sikavarp as well as in Borgehamn, Åhstrand points to chapels that are said to commemorate the voyage of St. Birgitta.\textsuperscript{22} This tradition is obviously confused, since Birgitta Birgersdotter never came back to Sweden alive after her voyage to the Holy Land, but it lends some support to the theory of a landing in Sikavarp, followed by a land transport over Öland and a short sea voyage over Kalmar Sound to Ålem at the other side.\textsuperscript{23} In historian Nils Blomkvist’s view, late local tradition in Bredsätra parish (such as Åhstrand’s, we might assume) proves nothing, since it may have emanated from the liturgical readings in the breviary.\textsuperscript{24} Still, I regard it as noteworthy that the tradition

\textsuperscript{22} Petter Åhstrand, Beskrifning öfwer Öland: Besynnerligen det norra motet eller fögderiet: Jämte bihang af åtskilliga gamla konunga-bref, Upsala 1768, 165.
\textsuperscript{23} See also Marie-Louise Sallnäs, “Den heliga Birgittas hemkomst: Tradition och verklighet i öländskt trettonhundratal,” Kalmar län: Årsbok för kulturhistoria och hembygdsvärd, 2002, 22–34
retold by Åhstrand contains details that are not to be found in the breviary, and that bind them together with the Ålem tradition.

My second reason for upholding the theory of stops at Sikavarp and Ålem is the fact that both places were important bases for the Linköping Church, and thus may have been regarded as safe stations for the relic transport. More than half of Bredsättra parish, where Sikavarp is located, was owned by the episcopal mensa. The Bishop’s bailiff for Öland resided at Bo manor in this parish, and the harbor and marketplace of Sikavarp were supervised by him.\textsuperscript{25} Important parts of Ålem parish were owned by the Resurrectionis prebend at the cathedral.\textsuperscript{26}

\textit{The Landing at Sikavarp—A Late Medieval Construction?}

The chief alternative to the theory presented here is best formulated by Nils Blomkvist in his 1979 work on medieval turn-over places on Öland. Blomkvist do not wish to exclude altogether the idea of a landing at Sikavarp, but finds it more likely that this was a construction made during the episcopate of Henrik Tidemansson (1465–1500) in order to promote pilgrimage to Sikavarp, where the chapel already may have had a St. Birgitta


altar. The presence of large economic interests of the episcopal *mensa* in Bredsättra parish may have made this construction even more attractive.27

Clearly, the fact that the identification of the port is first to be found in the *Breviarium Lincopense* of 1493, as well as the fact that Ulf Birgersson, author of the *Vita Katherine* and a person who had personally known some of the people who were on this transport does not mention Sikavarp, should make us dubious.28

Is there then any possibility to trace the Sikavarp tradition to an earlier point in time than the episcopate of Henrik Tidemansson? In the Memorial Book of Vadstena Abbey, the *Diarium Vadstenense*, the following entry is found under the year 1440:

> Item, legenda translacionis beate Birgitte tunc primum fuit compilata per quendam fratrem (et lecta in choro, sed multum est abbreviata) videlicet Iohannem Benekini.29

Of this Brother Johannes Benechini (in Swedish Johan Benekesson) it is said at his death twenty-one years later that he originated from Öland (“nacione tamen Ölandensis”).30 Before his entry in Vadstena Abbey in July, 1416, he had been priest at St. Nicholas’s Church in Kalmar. From the cited entry we may learn that the Translation legend composed by him was large and had to be abbreviated before it was read in the choir. As an Öland native and as a contemporary of the great researcher of Birgitta traditions Ulf Birgersson—

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27 Nils Blomkvist, “Medieval Eketorp”, 76. Blomkvist would rather have Bröms as the unexpected port (note 120).
29 Moreover, the legend of the translation of the Blessed Birgitta was then for the first time written down by a brother (and read in the choir, though much abbreviated), namely Johannes Benechini; *Diarium Vadstenense*, ed. Claes Gejrot, # 500 (my translation).
author of the *Vita Katherine*—chance is that he had information about a landing on Öland, if it had happened. But did his legend contain any mention of Sikavarp? Is there a possibility to know?

At the National Archives (Riksarkivet) in Stockholm, a large collection of pages from mutilated medieval codices has recently been cataloged. Searches have so far revealed three fragments where the *Translatio Sancte Birgitte* is mentioned, or parts of its liturgy can be found. All are from the fifteenth century. One is a fragment of a breviary, in all likelihood older than the printed one. The other two are fragments of a *Kalendarium* and an *Antiphonarium* respectively.\(^3^1\) None of them allows neither a positive nor a negative conclusion as to the mentioning of Sikavarp. These findings are preliminary and will be developed in a future version of this paper.

*Does the Feast Day of the Translation of Saint Birgitta Commemorate the Sikavarp Landing?*

I have above cited an article by Ann-Mari Jönsson from 1987, in which she discussed the translation of Saint Birgitta, and more specifically why the feast day of this event was fixed at May 28. In her well documented article, she questions Andreas Lindblom’s reconstruction of the last part of the journey; including the landings at Bröms and Ålem. She discusses in detail Håkan Fadersson’s tale, and points to the fact that the place name *Bryms* (present day Bröms) varies in the manuscripts. She also sets forth that when

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\(^3^0\) *Diarium Vadstenense*, ed. Claes Gejrot, # 715.

\(^3^1\) Stockholm, Riksarkivet: Fr 22216 (=CCM Br 263), Fr 25625 (CCM Kal 33), and Fr 20360 (=CCM Ant 156).
the tale says that Håkan was brought more than 30 “miles” (*triginta miliaria*) from his home, *miliaria* should not be seen as a rendering of Swedish miles, but since the miracle collection was intended for use in the canonization process in Rome, *miliaria* should denote Roman miles, while Swedish miles are rendered in another miracle tale in the same collection as *longas leucas*. Thirty Roman *miliaria* from Håkan Fadersson’s home in Söderby could be translated as approximately 45 kilometers, instead of ca. 300 kilometers, which would be the case if they denoted Swedish miles. This would take us not to Bröms, but rather to a place in the vicinity of Söderköping, where the relics are known to have been landed at June 29, 1374. The place could be either one of the manors Bråborg (earlier Branäs) or Herrborum (earlier Borum). I however cannot support this theory. Admittedly, the name *Bryms* exists with variants in the manuscripts, as Jönsson points out, but the manuscripts which usually have the most reliable renderings of place names, Cod. Ups. C 15 of the Uppsala University Library and Codex Harleianus 612 of the British Library both have the form *Bryms* (in one case, the Codex Harleianus has the explainable misspelling *Brynis*). The witnesses who were cited to confirm Håkan Fadersson’s tale at the canonization process in Rome were well acquainted with the man and his tale and would have corrected the place name if it had been mistaken. I also think that *miliaria* was the word used by the recorders of the miracle at its original recording, as a simple translation of the Swedish word *mil*. In

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34 See above, note 16.
this case—in contrast to another case cited by Jönsson—no learned
digression concerning the term has taken place.35

The 1493 breviary maintains that the feast day of the translation was chosen
to commemorate the first arrival of the relics in Birgitta’s homeland. Ann-
Mari Jönsson does not know of any translation day of a saint being cele-
brated to commemorate a such occasion. Instead, she finds evidence for an
earlier translation in Vadstena than the one hitherto known, which she hy-
pothetically fixes on May 28, 1381. I do not question her findings
concerning this earlier translation, but since the breviar of 1493 does not rule
out that a translation day could be celebrated on the day of the arrival of the
relics, we might perhaps suppose that the date of the translation in 1381 was
chosen because of this original landing.36

_was the sikavarp chapel originally dedicated to saint brigit of kildare?

I will end with a brief discussion of the question of which saint the mid-thir-
teenth century chapel—now ruin—at Sikavarp originally was dedicated to.
The chapel is first mentioned in 1515, when it is simply referred to as Sik-
avarp in Ölandia. A mid sixteenth century source calls it St. Brita’s chapel.
The name of St. Birgitta—of which Brita is a common Swedish variant—on
a thirteenth century chapel is of course puzzling. Either the chapel has been
rededicated to Saint Birgitta or has had this saint added to its unknown origi-

36 See also Tore Nyberg, Birgittinsk festgåva: Studier om Heliga Birgitta och Birgittinorden (Skrifter utgivna av Svenska kyrkokemiska föreningen 46), Uppsala: Teologiska institutionen vid Uppsala universitet 1991, 419–20. Nyberg does not follow Ann-Mari Jönsson, but argues for the choice of May 28 as a commemoration of the first landing of the relics at their arrival from Italy in 1374.
nal patron saint, or is this an instance of a chapel dedicated to the Irish Saint Brigit (Brigida) of Kildare.³⁷

The first of these hypothesizes has long been predominating within the scholarly community. Nils Blomkvist and Sölve Göransson have both dismissed the theory of the Irish saint as a patron saint here. For Blomkvist, St. Catherine of Alexandria is the most likely patron saint, since a *convivium* (guild) with this saint as its patron saint is known to have existed in Bredsättra parish in 1413.³⁸

The alternative theory, minted by William Anderson in 1936, has however acquired an eloquent protagonist in the eminent long time scholar of the churches of Öland, Ragnhild Boström. She regards St. Brigit with her cow as a more genuinely popular saint in a rural environment than the aristocratic Birgitta. She also finds support for her theory in Brigit images on the nearby Baltic island of Gotland.³⁹ Church historian Sven-Erik Pernler has published a contribution on these, and also directed attention to the presence of Brigit’s

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³⁷ The liturgical cult of St. Brigit (Brigida) of Kildare in Sweden has been thoroughly studied by Toni Schmid in a 1943 article in *Analecta Bollandiana*. The name of Birgitta Birgersdotter herself is evidence of a certain popularity of the Irish saint, as is the name of the source in Västergötland where according to tradition, King Olof Skötkonung was baptized. Apart from that, the findings of Toni Schmid only indicate that Brigit’s feast day was commemorated in most Swedish dioceses, but at a low liturgical rank. As a dedication saint in Sweden, Brigit is extremely uncommon. Church historian Sven-Erik Pernler sees Rådene church in Skara diocese as a possible Brigit church. The post-medieval evidence for the name Brita on Västerhaninge church (Strängnäs diocese) and Sikavarp chapel are mentioned as possible indications for Brigit dedications; Sven-Erik Pernler, “Spår av gotländsk Brigida-kult” [mit einer deutschen Zusammenfassung: “Spuren eines gotländischen Brigida-Kultes"], in *Archiv und Geschichte im Ostseeraum: Festschrift für Sten Körner*, ed. Robert Bohn etc., Frankfurt am Main etc.: Peter Lang 1997, 57–66.

name in a prayer for the protection of cattle in Bro parish on northern Gotland in the seventeenth century. Evidently, St. Brigit has been famed also on Gotland for her ability to protect cattle.40

Pernler also points to the presence of two images in two neighboring churches on southern Gotland. In Linde, the Irish saint is included in a retable from 1521, and in Hemse, her image is found on the northern wall of the church.41 The style of the mural in Hemse is that of the anonymous “Passionsmästaren” (“Master of the Passion”) from the mid fifteenth century. In the vicinity of the St. Brigit image there is a similar image of St. Katherine of Vadstena. In my view, this should be enough to make us highly suspicious of the authenticity of both images. They were restored in 1896 by C. Wilhelm Pettersson based on drawings by Axel Herman Hägg.42 Pettersson is notorious for his creative reconstructions of medieval wall paintings. No other mural of St. Katherine exist on Gotland, and her name is misspelled in the legenda: “Catharina” where one would expect “Katherina”. I have commented on this image in my dissertation.43 Now what of St. Brigit? One might well guess that we are in front of a reworking inspired by the Brigit image of the retable in nearby Linde church. This image in turn might well have been a mistaken delivery from the retable makers in

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42 Erland Lagerlöf, and Bengt Stolt, Hemse kyrkor: Hemse ting, Gotland, band 6:3 (Sveriges kyrkor 131), Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1969, 214. Photos of the murals discussed here are found on pages 225, 218, 227,and 228.
43 Anders Fröjmark, Mirakler och helgonkult (1992), p. 160, note 61. I do not, however, wish to maintain that the image originally depicted an apostle, since all apostles can be otherwise accounted for in the church.
Lubeck, where the two Bridgets may have been confused. However, the 
prayer discussed above could be seen to indicate that St. Brigit was in fact a 
popular saint on Gotland, so the image in Hemse may well be authentic—
albeit reworked. In that case, the neighboring St. Katherine might perhaps 
originally have been a St. Giles with a deer—an image that is also present in 
the Linde retable.

A possible cult of St. Brigit of Kildare in three parishes on Gotland is not, 
however, enough to let us suppose that a coastal chapel on Öland should 
have been dedicated to the same saint. In all likelihood, the “Brita” in Si-
akavarp is Saint Birgitta of Sweden, and that is the simplest and most likely 
interpretation whether or not the Birgitta cult in Sikavarp was founded in a 
landing of the relics there in 1374.44

44 The “official” theory of the dedication saint may however be said to be that it is St. 
Brigit of Kildare, since that is what the County Administrative Board of Kalmar county 
publicizes on its information signs at Sikavarp, dating from 2007. This is the more 
remarkable since the same signs adhere to the theory of the chapel being that of the St. 
Catherine convivium, which would normally have indicated that this saint was the patron 
saint of the chapel.