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Girl power in the 14th century

Who was Bridget of Sweden?

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History books are full of men, but some Swedish ladies around 650 years ago swept the floor with the old men, in power and business. In this article, I'll allow you to discover Sweden's most influential entrepreneurs, innovators, and feminists!

Bridget of Sweden, or Heliga Birgitta in Swedish, could even be one of the most influential historical Swedish persons, apart from regents. How come? Who was she?

As storytellers normally don't have business acumen, history books do not show the business and operational point of view, which interests me the most. In this article, I'm attempting to repair the damage.

Birgitta Birgersdotter, also known as Saint Bridget, was born in 1303 in Uppland and died in 1373 in Rome.



Heliga Birgitta - St Birgitta
Den svenska Birgitta - Birgitta av England och Sverige 1303
Sittande, skulpterad av en fransk mästare.

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Wooden statue of Saint Bridget in the Abbey Church in Vadstena, own image.

Saint Bridget had a huge impact on Swedish and European politics, and she started a business that led to the creation of a great city, Vadstena. Saint Bridget was one of Sweden's greatest entrepreneurs of all time. It was mainly due to her daughter Katarina Ulfsson — co-founder of the monastery business, she was one of the greatest innovators we had in Sweden. Katarina brought about the canonization of her mother, built up the brand, handled the marketing, and grew the business into what we today would call a “billion-dollar industry” and a major international company. The monastery business also built a new and important city. The business helped to create new markets and products. It was a family business and Katarina served as CEO (the formal title was Abbedissa). Her niece Ingegerd Knutsdotter took over and the business entered a phase of profitable growth.

Business concept, product portfolio and differentiation, monetization and financing

The business idea was brilliant and similar to that of Google and Meta, having a collection of free products for consumers, and selling an abstract product to power-holders who derive their livelihood from consumers and benefit from network effects. Instead of search services and digital forums, the Saint Bridget's monastery business offered services for pilgrims, either free or at cost. Instead of advertising space, customers bought, among other things, indulgences and other services related to the world's (in my opinion) most commercially clever intangible invention ever invented by man, namely purgatory combined with indulgences.

This medieval innovation, indulgences, which are based on purgatory and guilt, have created enormous value over hundreds of years and distributed enormous resources among people, and this has greatly benefited even the poorest in society, for example through the work of Saint Bridget. Purgatory is a completely fictitious and abstract concept invented in late antiquity but only recognized, along with indulgences, by the Catholic Church in 1215, as a legal form of financing. Purgatory is a place, where those who died in grace and had not repented all their sins, were purified under great suffering before they could enter paradise. Purgatory had huge space problems and the process took a long time — too long, many thought. Those who were rich paid large sums of money to quickly cleanse themselves of their sins and reduce this terrible suffering of pain and fire after death. Indulgences replaced penance for sins, at a price. It is similar to a one-off life insurance policy, but with

oneself as the beneficiary, not privately but publicly. Indulgences were thus also used to build a good reputation. For church activities, such as monasteries, indulgences were a legitimate and important financing for church buildings and pilgrimages. Saint Bridget and her daughters maximized this to build up their activities. The price of guilt and a high societal image can be very high.

The monastery business also sold other services, such as entry places for convent virgins (often upper-class brides, who were thus saved from becoming married-off child producers as youngsters), to power-holders (rich relatives). Both customer groups were international. Pilgrims came from all over Europe. This was certainly no coincidence but cunningly planned and executed. The family got Queen Margaret to fix city rights to Vadstena. This enabled influential decisions that led to Vadstena becoming a northern European pilgrimage site, equal to Rome, and the flow of pilgrims turned north as it was closer for half of the “customers”.

The strategy was to continuously grow the monastic order’s business through a constantly increasing influx of new upper-class sisters and especially new pilgrims in need of food, shelter, nursing, and medical care, as well as through trade in luxury goods. This provided more income for operations and management and good funding for investment and expansion of activities.

Saint Bridget also understood that she had to differentiate herself from her competitors (other monasteries, mainly Swedish). Therefore, she applied slightly different rules, sanctioned by the Church. Both monks and nuns were in the same monastery, but separate. This allowed for a more than doubling of the market, and a more efficient operation.

Business relations and networking

The influence on power in Sweden was also brilliantly clever and effective. Among other things, Saint Bridget and her family kept good relations with Sweden’s rulers, even if Birgitta Birgersdotter messed up a bit at the end of her court relationship. They put a lot of emphasis on building long-term business relationships and networking. The family had a strategy for creating good relationships with strong financiers and the power elite. Birgitta was a court mistress and taught Queen Blanka of Namur. Her daughter Märta Ulfsdotter was a court mistress and raised and taught the future Queen Margareta (together with her daughter Ingegerd). Margareta then became a strong and good ruler of the Nordic region for a long time

(the Kalmar Union). Ingegerd's sister Katarina Knutsdotter, granddaughter of Saint Birgitta, was a court mistress to Queen Philippa of England, who was also queen of the Nordic region (when her husband Erik of Pomerania was regent). For three generations, the family taught and raised Swedish queens — and everyone knows that it is the women who decide, in this case, ruled, even if it was their husbands, the kings, who had the formal power ;-)

Kings controlled geopolitics, military power, the war economy, and some overall policies. However, much of civil society and its culture and economy were controlled by the Catholic Church, which was based on Christianity. It was important for Saint Bridget to find the right balance and profile, to gain maximum influence.

Saint Bridget and her daughters, the monastic women, made sure they had good relations with several bishops in Sweden and Europe because they had great power. In this way, they gained great influence and could influence factors that created the conditions for and enabled the financing of their business and monastic activities. Then, of course, they also had good relations with the people, from the nobility to the poor, with financiers, customers, suppliers, employees, lawyers, mentors, and the people of the Church. They understood the importance of building and managing business relationships and creating win-win.

Saint Bridget was also great at networking. For example, through others with whom she had built a relationship, such as some Italian bishops, she managed to arrange a meeting with the Pope. She makes him accredit her monastic order. Birgitta was incredibly persistent, she waited in Rome for 20 years for this approval, a prerequisite for monastic activities in Sweden.

Vision and marketing

Saint Bridget was brilliant at classical rhetoric and easily convinced others, selling her ideas and getting them to buy into her vision. She was so good that many in Europe called her foolish, probably out of jealousy as she outperformed them in terms of results and impact.

Saint Bridget had a clear and detailed vision of her monastic activity and how it would be built in stages. One example is how she specified and dimensioned the monastery church and set the architectural style of the whole monastery — the design including the graphic design, you could say. She knew what was in vogue,

saw the market trends and future needs and opportunities, and could describe her vision well. In her marketing, she was smart. She presented the visions of her future business as apparitions and miracles, which went down well in the prevailing religious world, especially as there were no cameras at the time. The miracles eventually led to the canonization, which was the basis for further brand building. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem was of course also used in marketing.

Financing and start-up capital

Saint Bridget and her daughters managed to get large donations from the court and other powers to build the business and the necessary resources — such as the fine palace given as a gift by King Magnus, the conversion of this palace into a monastery, later the monastery church and the rest of the monastery, and indeed the town of Vadstena, which was also part of the company. The family also put their own money into the company; they were not exactly poor.

Driving force

However, Saint Bridget or Birgitta grew up with relatives on a lonely and poor farm in southern Östergötland — incidentally, just a few rowing strokes from the farms my own family comes from (and still lives on over 700 years later). This hard life probably characterized her, and this, in combination with the understanding of the opportunity to change she received through her upper-class background, probably created the driving forces required.



Own image of the palace King Magnus gave to Saint Bridget, which she had rebuilt (removing everything that looked ostentatious) to become the monastery's main building.

Isn't it strange that concepts created out of nothing — purgatory and indulgences, could have had such great value to humanity? And that a foolish woman in the 14th century could build a business empire of international stature on them.

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