Saints and Sainthood around the Baltic Sea
Chapter Four

Finnish Saints’ Traditions and Folklore: Interpreting St. Anne, St. Katherine of Alexandria, and St. Birgitta of Sweden

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This chapter will investigate some of the oral and vernacular remnants of the cults of saints and traditions concerning them in Finnish folklore. The folklore data was collected mostly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, folklore does not represent medieval Finnish saints’ cults, but rather it reflects the living traditions of later centuries. However, the persistent variety of these traditions proves the profound and widespread impact of medieval Catholic teaching, and shows how these cults were shaped and made useful in the life of the mainly peasant population. Further, the existence of a vivid oral tradition suggests that the Lutheran reformers were either not successful or they did not care to root out all the features of the older lived religion, even though official claims and decisions were made by the synods or by leading members of the clergy.¹

In the following pages, a short outline of recent studies on medieval Finnish saints’ cults will be presented. The analysis of this chapter focuses on oral and vernacular traditions of three female saints: St. Anne, St. Katherine of Alexandria, and St. Birgitta of Sweden. Some festivities and traditions related to a larger spectrum of Catholic saints will also be discussed.

Folklore collections in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (Helsinki) abound with information about calendar customs in connection with medieval Catholic saints—proverbs, beliefs, and ritual traditions. Among the archival materials that have also been published and digitized are songs about saints in Kalevala meter, as well as charms or vernacular prayers to these saints in the same ancient meter.²
Charms for healing, farming, animal husbandry, and hunting document express faith in the intercessory powers of saints, and also in the help of pre-Christian spirits. The medieval liturgical calendar of the Diocese of Turku, with its succession of saints’ feast days, gave an organized framework to the order of work duties in the agrarian calendar. The intertwining of pragmatic and ecclesiastical concerns provided a powerful mnemonic aid in the oral culture of the laity. The earliest preserved records of folk traditions concerning the saints, including records of what people actually did on the feast days, date back to the seventeenth century, but the bulk of folklore texts were collected and written down two centuries later. Collecting folklore was part of the nationalist ideology of the nineteenth century, and folklorists were initially more interested in the pre-Christian mythology and the ancient heroes of the Finns than in medieval Catholic traditions. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century and even the beginning of the twentieth, with the widening of the concept of folklore, that the mythology of the Roman Catholic past came to be regarded as worthy of scholarly attention.

Since the turn of the millennium, research on saints’ traditions in Finland from a historical or art-historical perspective has been active, and several monographs have been published on the liturgical legend of St. Henry of Finland, wooden sculptures of St. Anne (St. Anne with the Virgin and Child) from medieval Finnish churches, and the cult of St. Olav in Finland. The cult of St. Birgitta of Sweden and various hagiographic and other literary traditions related to her have been studied in several volumes. Research on medieval pilgrimages in Finland and from Finland is the subject of a recent volume. Various aspects of literary culture in medieval Finland, manuscripts and their fragments, medieval Finnish stone churches, and some broader aspects of medieval cultures have been studied in several volumes. All these sources and many more provide information about the circumstances in which medieval believers lived and acted. The verbal expressions preserved in folk poetry and calendar customs may add some understanding to the ways the saints were comprehended and interpreted.

Not all the saints in the medieval calendar of the Diocese of Turku have left their mark on later folklore. The number of saints in the liturgical calendar of the Missale Aboense (1488) was about two hundred, whereas the number of locally respected saints in parish churches was around fifty-three; these were saints’ feast days when working was forbidden. The highest rank was given to twenty festivals; those connected to the Virgin...
Mary and Jesus were in the highest rank, and so were those of Saints Anne, Birgitta, Erik, Henry, John the Apostle, John the Baptist, Katherine of Alexandria, Lawrence, Michael the Archangel, Nicholas, Peter and Paul, Stephen, and Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins. The feast of Saints Olav, Barbara, and Margaret had the rank of *duplex*.12

The most obvious explanation for the survival of the memory of a saint in folk tradition is that the saint’s feast day marks an important date in the agrarian calendar—starting or finishing an important task in the fields or with livestock, or inside the house. The four seasons of the northern climate, with their weather conditions and the contrast and changes between light and darkness, have also had a strong impact on shaping the calendar traditions of the saints.

Among the most fascinating traditions are a number of epic poems in Kalevala meter, which have preserved at least some connection to a saint’s hagiography: songs about St. Henry, St. Katherine, St. Stephen, St. Mary Magdalene, and St. Margaret. These epic songs in the old meter bear a strong testimony of the efforts of the people to remember these holy persons and their stories in vernacular oral culture. It is hard say when each of these poems came about, but the fourteenth to fifteenth century would be the time when saints’ cults were spreading in Finland. Historian Tuomas Heikkilä comes to the conclusion that the hagiographic legend of St. Henry in Latin would have been written in the last decades of the thirteenth century, but the Kalevala-meter poem in Finnish was created later and used the Latin text as its source; both were used side by side.13

Behind the folklore texts we can in some cases distinguish what people had learned and understood about the saints, and even the sources for their interpretations. Parish priests could provide a mediating link between Latin sources and their interpretations in vernacular culture. In the Diocese of Turku, parish priests preached in the vernacular (though no texts of such sermons have been preserved). Preaching in the local vernacular was also a characteristic of the mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, who played a prominent role in late medieval Finland.14 Sermons on the memorial days of saints focused on their hagiography, and saints’ lives provided material for the popular *exempla* sections of the sermon. One of the most influential collections of hagiography, the *Legenda aurea*, by the Dominican priest, later bishop, Jacobus of Varrazze (Jacobus de Voragine), was used in the Diocese of Turku; remnants of three copies have been found. Thus, people had a chance to hear about these distant
figures, whose exemplary life stories included many horrifying events and exciting turns.

Paintings and sculptures in local medieval churches were another important source of inspiration when saints’ lives were reinterpreted. Pilgrims were able to see the abundance of art depicting saints in far-away churches and to talk about it when they came home. There is documentation of pilgrimages made from Finland to Rome and to Santiago. In the North, Finnish pilgrims visited the grave of St. Olav in Nidaros (Trondheim) and the grave of St. Birgitta in Vadstena; in Finland, they visited the Cathedral of Turku, the Birgittine cloister of Naantali, the sacred places of St. Henry in Köyliö and Nousiainen, and, moreover, the churches (Hattula, Renko) on the road from Hämeenlinna to Turku.15

Christian names bear the memory of saints, even today. Roughly speaking, the most common Christian names at the end of the sixteenth century were the names of the most respected saints, and in the calendar of 1790, three-quarters of the Christian names were still the names of saints.16 The international saints’ names were transformed to a number of Finnish vernacular variants, for example, Marja, Marjatta, Marjukka, Anna, Annikki, Anni, Pirkko, Pirjo, Matleena, Leena, Kerttu, Kerttuli, Henrikki, Heikki, Juhani, Jussi, Olavi, Olli, Erkki, Eero, Jaakko, Pietari, Pekka, Petri.

In this chapter, I shall sketch how the folklore of saints can be interpreted—what it reveals and what it does not. The surprising thing is that the recorded items of folklore about saints vary considerably: they can seem odd or irrelevant, but they can also include actual references to the life story of a saint or an understanding of his/her importance. The three popular female saints on whom my discussion focuses, St. Anne, St. Katherine of Alexandria, and St. Birgitta of Sweden, are remembered in very different ways in folk tradition. There must be reasons for this kind of variation. St. Anne and St. Katherine are nonhistorical, “old” or “mythical” saints, whose cults were deeply rooted in the tradition of the international church well before the fourteenth century. Their status as powerful intercessors may have been particularly attractive, especially to women. St. Birgitta (ca. 1302–1373) is a historical figure whose cult became widespread in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The stories about saints are many layered, built on the tensions between the historical and nonhistorical, fiction and belief. In any case, the saints fit into the mythological continuum from the pre-Christian belief in spirits, and in Finland, both belief systems flourished side by side.
St. Anne, the Mother of Mary, in Western and Eastern Finland

The cult of St. Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary, actually arose in the sphere of the Eastern Church as early as the fourth century. A church was built by the Emperor Justinian in her honor at Constantinople in the sixth century, and the day of its consecration at the end of July became the feast day of St. Anne (July 26) in many parts of the Christian world. The Finnish Dominican-influenced Calendar of Saints of the Diocese of Turku celebrated St. Anne just after St. Lucy on December 15, but the Birgittine cloister of Naantali held a mass for her on July 26.17

The strength of Anne’s cult in medieval Finland can be concluded from the number of her representations in Finnish medieval church art. Only Jesus and Mary are more frequently depicted in sculptures than St. Anne.18 In Sweden and in Finland, the cult of Anne was promoted by the Birgittine Order.19 St. Anne was the patrona of the Birgittine monastery in Naantali, near Turku in Finland.20 In Birgitta’s writings, the value of the work of wives and mothers is strongly emphasized, with references to Mary and her mother Anne.21

St. Anne had an altar in the Cathedral of Turku.22 Anne’s wooden sculptures—many of which represent the common type in which St. Anne holds the Virgin and Child in her lap—have existed or still exist in more than twenty medieval churches.23 Paintings depicting St. Anne or parts of her legend have existed in five churches; she is the patroness of five churches or chapels, and one decorated chancel was dedicated to her. Moreover, there is evidence that the Dominican Order, in the fifteenth century, was planning a convent in Raisio near Turku dedicated to St. Anne, though this plan never was carried out.24

Art historian Elina Räsänen’s research material includes forty-five sculptures of St. Anne in Finnish medieval churches.25 Thus, there is plenty of material proof of this saint’s importance in the religious life of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Finland, but as is the case in general with the veneration of saints, no accounts have survived of the reactions of ordinary devotees to these sacred images.26

In medieval Turku, the Guild of St. Anne was active, and took care of her altar in the cathedral. According to the Finnish historian Mikko Piippo, the Guild (fraternitas) of St. Anne was one of the eleven guilds known to have existed in Finnish medieval towns; in the countryside, there were seven guilds.27 Most of the town guilds were situated
in Turku—besides the Guild of St. Anne, there were the Guilds of St. Nicholas, St. Erasmus, St. Gertrud, St. Ursula, and the Guild of the Three Kings. Unfortunately, hardly any information remains of the actual functions of the guilds in Finland—only a list of members of the Guild of the Three Kings after it was founded in 1488. The members were leaders of the church and church elite, the most notable noblemen, and representatives of the town administration. All source material that exists concerning the guilds in Turku points to their connections with the church—that is, their activity in taking care of the altars and giving money for the care of the sick and poor. Piippo points out that European research on guilds has discovered that their most important function was drinking and feasting, along with some religious ceremonies like remembering the dead.

Eastern and Western traditions meet in Finnish folklore about St. Anne. Anne traditions comprise three folklore genres, namely calendar proverbs, notes on calendar customs from western Finland (the area of the old Diocese of Turku), and charms/prayers from eastern Finland and Karelia. Unlike elsewhere in Scandinavia, in the Diocese of Turku, Anne’s festival day was, for an unknown reason, one week later, on December 15. At the end of the seventeenth century, St. Anne came rather to be associated with December 9, as in other northern countries. In the Greek Orthodox Church, the festival day of St. Anne and of her husband, Joachim, was, and still is, on September 9, one day after the birth of the Virgin Mary. These dates have had an effect on the folklore and calendar customs of St. Anne’s day in Finland and Karelia.

Because the festival of St. Anne falls during the darkest time of the year, the calendar proverbs observe the long night and darkness: “There is enough night to spend on Anne’s day,” “Anne’s has a long sleep in her eyes,” “Lucy’s night, Anne’s eve, the rooster falls three times from its stick.” The festival day of St. Lucy was December 13. Thus, the proverbs were important in helping people to remember the order of the memorial days of the saints, but above all they defined the order of work in the peasant calendar. For women, St. Anne’s day marked the beginning of Christmas preparations. The proverbs state that Christmas baking must be started, and beer for the Christmas season has to be brewed. In this way, Anne’s day connects her to memories of her as the original lady of the house, the Virgin Mary’s mother, who prepares a festival for the birthday of her grandson. The idea only applies to the better-off members of society who were able to store extra food for the celebration. Ideal abundance of food and drink connects Christmas to the pre-Christian celebration of the turn
of the year, called *kekri*, which was celebrated in Finland each November all the way into the nineteenth century.

In the eastern tradition, Anne has a different role. In eastern Finnish and Karelian hunting charms she is called Annikki, Annikka, Annatar, Anni, and very rarely Anna. She is appealed to as a female forest spirit, who is the wife or the daughter of Tapio, the male forest spirit. The charms describe her as holding the golden keys of her storehouse, which is a metaphor for a forest packed full of prey. These charms are full of references to the riches of Anne, to her gold and silver—in practice, linking her to valuable furs. Her name, *Anna*, is the homonym of the first-person imperative in Finnish—a direct appeal “give to me.” She is also appealed to as a protector of the cattle in the forest pasture; in the charms, wolves and bears are referred to as her dogs.

Anne’s connection to hunting is not surprising because her memorial day was September 9 in the Greek Orthodox Church and that coincided with the beginning of the hunting season. The hunting charms, used before going to the forest to hunt, appeal to her generosity as a “giver,” a provider of prey.

The role of St. Anne as the great helper of women and of the family has almost vanished from Finnish and Karelian folklore. The archives preserve a few remnants of this role, namely prayers to Anne to heal a twisted ankle by spinning a red and blue thread—usually the role of the healer in these charms belongs to the Virgin Mary or to Jesus. In folklore, other features that also connect to her legend have been better preserved. Almost all Finnish folklore concerning St. Anne connects to her role as a provider of material abundance. This is how she is seen in the folk memory of later centuries. In calendar proverbs, the darkness around St. Anne’s day is emphasized as is the great need for sleep. All of her roles in the Finnish folklore tradition show how the saints could be adapted to the local folk religion and how their roles could be expanded and applied in new environments.

**St. Katherine of Alexandria, Virgin Martyr**

While St. Anne was seen as the great mother figure and a prosperous lady of the house in western European folk traditions, St. Katherine was clearly connected with young women hoping for a good marriage. Her cult and legend were associated with the monastery of St. Katherine at the foot of Mount Sinai, founded in the sixth century.
According to the legend told by Jacobus de Voragine in *Legenda aurea*, Katherine was the princess of Cyprus living in Alexandria, a beautiful and talented young woman who betrothed herself to Jesus. Emperor Maxentius wanted to make her his mistress, but she refused. The emperor sent fifty philosophers to argue with her and turn her away from the Christian faith, but they all converted to Christianity and so did the emperor’s wife and his advisor. They were all burned. Katherine was imprisoned, but a dove fed her in the prison. She was to be tortured with a wheel, which broke down, and finally, she was executed with a sword; milk flowed from her body instead of blood. An angel carried her body to Mount Sinai.

Unlike the story of St. Anne, a part of the legend of St. Katherine has actually been transformed into a Kalevala-meter poem. This short poem, of which only a few variants exist, has a simple narrative structure. St. Katherine is called Kaia, Kaio, Kaisa, or Katrina, and her male opponent is called Ruotus, which stands for the name Herod in Finnish. In the poem, Katherine is a skillful weaver, whose hand is sought by the evil king Ruotus. Katherine refuses him, and the king sends her to the stake. One of the variants of the poem ends with the Virgin Mary reading a book; also Katherine, like several other saintly figures, is seen to hold a book in church art. Another variant of the poem combines it with a mythical theme: forging a golden woman in a fire. The theme of forging a golden woman is associated with the heroes Väinämöinen or Ilmarinen in Finnish epic poetry. As Tracey R. Sands has pointed out, there is a familiar chapter in the medieval *vita* of St. Katherine, known in two quite different Old Swedish versions, which tells that Maxentius tempted Katherine with the offer that he would have a golden statue made in her image and placed in the public square for the people to worship. She replied that the birds soiling the statue would do her little honor. In the later of the two versions, from the Linköping manuscript, Katherine’s speech is quite long and mocking, and includes a reference to goldsmiths arguing over the weight of the statue. The reference to the forging of a golden woman in the Finnish poem could well suggest an awareness of details of the life of St. Katherine and, possibly, awareness of the Swedish manuscript.

The third Finnish variant uses the burning of Katherine as an introduction to a charm that was used for healing burns. The depiction of Katherine as a weaver is also an oblique reference to her depictions in ecclesiastical art. The wheel on which she was to be tortured according to the legend, and which was her most recognizable attribute in church art,
was associated with spinning and weaving not only in Finland but all over
Europe. This made her the patron saint for occupations such as rope mak-
ers, wheel smiths, spinners, and weavers.

We have no evidence of what the conceptions and rituals of the
Finnish laity concerning St. Katherine were like in the late Middle Ages,
when her cult in the Catholic Church was at its zenith. However, in later
godlore collections the role of St. Katherine is clear.

The legend and cult of St. Katherine of Alexandria were infl uential
and widely spread in late-medieval Europe, and in Scandinavia, the Baltic
region, and Finland; she was the most celebrated fi gure among the virgin
martyrs of the Roman Catholic Church. Katherine was one of the “Four
Capital Virgins”40 and one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, whose interces-
sion was sought at the moment of death.41 Their help seems also to have
been sought for earthly concerns in many cases.

In the Diocese of Turku, Dominican infl uence was strong in the
fourteenth century, thus differing from other parts of the Archdiocese of
Uppsala; this is evident in the liturgy and calendar used.42 A Dominican
house was established in Turku in 1249.43 The cult of St. Katherine was
supported particularly by the Dominican Order, evidently because of
the emphasis on the value of learning in her hagiographic legend. The
Dominican Order promoted studies in theology and philosophy, and
every convent had to have a lecturer, whose teaching the monks had to
follow. The order also established its own schools for higher education,
usually in connection with a university.44 During the time of Bishop
Johannes of Westphalia (1370–1385), a chancel for St. Katherine was
built in the Cathedral of Turku, and a prebenda was established.45 For St.
Birgitta of Sweden, St. Katherine was an exemplary saint, and the name
Katarina was well represented in all branches of her family; there is a good
deal of devotion to St. Katherine in Birgitta’s natal family.46 Katherine’s
importance in medieval Finland is proved by the great number of repre-
sentations of her in Finnish medieval church art, outnumbering those of
all other virgin martyrs. Only the Virgin Mary was a more popular fi gure
than Katherine among female saints in Finland.47 Paintings or sculptures
of St. Katherine are found in twenty-three medieval churches in Finland.
She had her own chapel in the Cathedral of Turku and altars in a few
smaller churches (Mynämäki, Lohja); moreover, at least three (Kaarina,
Huittinen, Hammarland), and perhaps as many as six (e.g., Lammi,
Karleby, Virolahti), churches were dedicated to her.48 St. Katherine’s feast
day on November 25 was celebrated with the degree of totum duplex, as
noted in the *Missale Aboense* of 1488, which includes the liturgical material of the medieval Diocese of Turku. The Virgin Mary and St. Anne were two other females honored by such a high degree, whereas other female saints were celebrated with the degree of *duplex*.49

*St. Katherine as the Protector of Sheep and Cattle*

During the 1870s, a mistress of the farm recited the following Finnish vernacular prayer to St. Katherine, on the evening of the saint’s feast day, November 25:

Katrina, quick woman, good lady, carrying leaf fodder,  
weed of the yard, flower of the field, pretty lady of the  
manor.  
Cast me a sack of oxen, flinging me a bag full of cows.  
Black ones would be fine, and spotted ones would suit.  
Go around at night with your brush, in the day with a  
bunch under your arm,  
walk on the lanes unheard, inspect the cowshed  
crouching down,  
groom the animals, straighten their hair.50

The parish of Kangasniemi in the county of Savo, eastern Finland, where this text was written down, was a farming area in which woodlands were cleared by fire, with hunting and fishing as important supplemental food sources.51 This peripheral region was far from the cultural centers of southern and southwestern Finland, and the Dioceses of Turku and Viipuri. In the Protestant Finland of the end of the nineteenth century, Katrina was petitioned with these words, and with other similar prayers, to take care of the cattle.

It may be difficult to see the connection with the image of St. Katherine of Alexandria behind this text. The hagiographic legend of the celebrated virgin martyr dates her death to early fourth century and describes her as a learned and beautiful maiden of royal birth. She was persecuted by Emperor Maxentius but defended her virginity and Christian faith and died as a martyr.52 The “myth-making mechanism” of the Catholic Church53 was at work when constructing the legend of St. Katherine from a variety of sources.

In the folkloric example, Katrina is described as a beautiful and helpful female. Following the structure of the charm she is first addressed and praised, and then her services are requested. She is portrayed by the
charm as carrying a brush and fodder for the cattle and walking around in the lanes and in the cowshed taking care of the animals.

The deeds and functions of St. Katherine in Finnish vernacular religion were first documented as early as the seventeenth century, which is less than two centuries after the veneration of the Roman Catholic saints was, at least on the official level, suppressed through the Protestant Reformation. However, in country parishes far away from the centers, these practices on saints’ feast days were overlooked by the local clergy, and they could live on as a tradition of the agricultural year. In the seventeenth-century records of eastern Finnish district courts or episcopal visitations, there are no signs that people would have been accused of veneration of saints. Christfrid Ganander, a Finnish scholar of the Enlightenment, writes in his *Mythologia Fennica* of 1789 in the following way, which expresses a certain distance from the phenomenon he is describing: “Sanct Catharina. One of the saints, who is prayed to, the good lady of the cow house in the company of the Virgin Mary ... who should take care of the cattle. A prayer to her is the following, to keep the bears away from the cattle ...” He then cites a lengthy charm in Kalevala meter for protection of the cattle.

Ganander also pays attention to how the festival day of St. Katherine has been celebrated by the Finnish laity—he uses the past tense, but the ritual was actually practiced until the end of the nineteenth century:

> This is one of the papist festival days among the Finns. On that day the lady of the house collected flour from women in the neighbourhood, and a porridge called “mämmi” was made. They also cooked a cow head, especially kept for this occasion, and the tongue of the cow and the “mämmi” were eaten in the cowshed. The sheep were shorn three times a year, as is done even today.

Both cattle and sheep link to the legend of St. Katherine. Cows, as producers of milk, connect to a famous miracle of hers. When Katherine was beheaded, “milk gushed forth from her body instead of blood,” as Jacobus de Voragine tells in *Legenda aurea*. Katherine’s torture wheel was equipped with knives, but it was broken by an angel. The torture wheel was clearly viewed in vernacular tradition as evoking a spinning wheel, and thus also connects the saint to sheep, as producers of wool.

The date of St. Katherine’s feast day in the calendar, November 25, has affected the ways in which it was celebrated to promote the well-being of cattle and sheep. St. Katherine’s day was one in the chain of larger
and smaller agricultural celebrations of the late autumn—including St. Michael’s day, St. Martin’s day, and the pre-Christian turn of the year called *kekri*. In the oldest record of Finnish and Karelian ethnic religion, the list of “old gods of the Finns and the Karelians” written by Mikael Agricola in 1551, *kekri* was understood as a spirit that would increase the growth of cattle. In Finland, by early November all agricultural work was finished, and the sheep had to be shorn. The wool collected around St. Katherine’s day was called “Katherine’s wool”, and there was a proverbial saying, “Katherine shears the sheep.” Work indoors should be started at this time, which for women meant spinning and weaving. In Estonia, as well as in many other countries in Europe, it was forbidden to spin on St. Katherine’s day, but in the Finnish speaking area we find this only in Ingria.

There are more than fifty descriptions of this women’s ritual in the Folklore Archives—the latest from the 1930s, which could refer to the actual practice of the ritual at the end of the nineteenth century. These stem mainly from eastern, southeastern, and central Finland, and Ingria. They all emphasize the ritual meal in the cowshed—porridge, cow’s head and tongue, sheep head, and beer. Prayers to St. Katherine were recited. This was mainly a women’s ritual: they, whose main concern was to take care of the cattle and sheep, celebrated together and prayed for success in their work, asking for protection and fertility for their animals. Some records add that the ritual foods, such as beer and porridge, were given to the cows as well. The women’s ritual took place in the cow house, which was transformed into a sacred space. It was a place where women appealed to St. Katherine for help, kneeling down as they would do in the church. The vernacular ritual had been transferred from the official sacred space to the home circle.

A great number of calendar proverbs associated with St. Katherine’s Day remark upon the weather conditions typical for that time of the year. November is often wet. Both Finnish and Estonian folklore mention the urinating Katherine in this context; or could it be a later development, the degradation of the saint? Thus, she is called “the pissing Katherine” or the “water tail Katherine”; the proverb states: “Katherine is pissing on her feet.” The order of the saints’ days for late November appears in a proverbial mnemonic saying with similar content: “Katherine is pissing on Andrew’s mittens”—St. Andrew’s day follows soon after St. Katherine’s day, on November 30.
The legendary poem of St. Katherine, discussed above, is well in line with some other Finnish Kalevala-meter ballad songs, which also tell the story of a woman who wants to make up her own mind. These songs have been called by such names as “The Intruder Killer,” “The Hanged Maiden,” and “The Husband-Killer.” This was a popular storyline among Kalevala-meter ballads: a girl, Katherine (or equivalents of the name), had to fight for her life and turn down a bad suitor or even kill an intruder. The religious message has not been well preserved in the text of the Finnish legendary poem of St. Katherine—only the name of the girl, which is a variant form of the name of the saint, and the basic opposition: a skillful girl who does not want to marry a powerful, evil man.

The ritual meaning of St. Katherine in Finland, among the laity, was more alive than the actual legend about her. She was venerated as the provider and protector of sheep and cattle. But did the same people who prayed to her as the patroness of sheep and cattle actually know the story of the virgin martyr Katherine? In any case, she was considered a helper of women, whose main concern in the agrarian society was to take good care of their animals, which were the source of nourishment and clothing. Through this important link to livelihood and everyday concern for the welfare of domestic animals, the appeals to St. Katherine and rituals to venerate her have been able to penetrate through many centuries.

St. Birgitta of Sweden in Finland

In contrast to St. Anne and St. Katherine, St. Birgitta of Sweden is a historical saint, whose biography and canonization process are well known. During her lifetime, she had many roles: those of a wife and mother, an influential politician, and a mediator of heavenly messages. Birgitta died in Rome in 1373, and she was canonized in 1391. Soon after canonization her cult spread also to Finland, and her name appears in liturgical calendars of the Finnish diocese as early as 1396, first with the rank of duplex, and later as totum duplex. She was declared one of the patron saints of Sweden together with, among others, St. Erik, St. Olav, and St. Elin of Skövde, and, as late as 1999, she became one of the patron saints of Europe. After Birgitta’s death, the order she had founded, the Ordo sanctissimi Salvatoris, more commonly known as the Birgittine Order, founded their first monastery in Vadstena, in the diocese of Linköping. During the fifteenth century, a further monastery was founded in Naantali, near Turku in Finland.
For Birgitta’s canonization process, people were interviewed about miracles that were attributed to the saint’s influence. Of the sixty-four miracles recorded, four had taken place in Finland. Historian Sari Katajala-Peltomaa has studied miracle stories documented in connection with canonization processes and notes that one of the miracles attributed to St. Birgitta tells about a seven-year-old girl from western Finland who got lost in the woods, was searched for by a group of people from the neighborhood, but was found after her father called on St. Birgitta for help. This happened around 1375, and the grateful father, his daughter, and some villagers made a pilgrimage to Birgitta’s grave in Vadstena.

The strength of Birgitta’s cult in late medieval Finland is apparent from the fact that there are over thirty depictions of her Finnish churches. She is typically portrayed holding a book or writing tablet in her hand or has turned toward a writing table. Several churches were dedicated to her (Halikko, Lemland/Åland Islands, Lempäälä, Loppi, Naantali, Padasjoki, Tuulos, Uusikirkko/Kalanti, Vihti).

The first document about the festival day of St. Birgitta, on October 7, comes from 1406, even before the establishment of the monastery in Naantali. Soon after the Naantali monastery was founded, it acquired an influential position in Finnish religious life, and actually became a serious competitor with the Cathedral of Turku for donations and pilgrims. The nuns were in contact with local people buying and selling goods, and the skill of sewing as a professional activity was spread to the citizens by the nuns.

Considering the influence of Naantali Abbey and the Birgittine Order, and the strong cult of St. Birgitta in Finland, the surviving folk traditions about this saint are very modest compared to those about St. Anne and St. Katherine. The festival day of Birgitta in early October is surrounded by other important days of the agricultural year, such as the festival day of St. Matthew on September 21, syys-matti, which initiated the indoor work of the farm, and the festival of Archangel Michael, mikkeli, when the cattle were taken inside, and after which the farm servants had their free week and could get hired to another farm. This season was full of festivities; the agricultural tasks around the day of St. Birgitta were already associated with other saintly figures.

Ethnologist Kustaa Vilkuna has stated that Birgitta traditions were strongest in the areas of Häme and Savo, where the Christian mission was still underway in the fifteenth century. Especially in Savo, pre-Christian folk belief flourished in this period. In comparison, there is no
recorded folk tradition about Birgitta in the southwestern area of Finland around Turku known as Varsinais-Suomi, where Naantali and Halikko are situated. Birgitta is not a prominent figure in folklore sources. There are hardly any signs of her in Kalevala-meter poetry; only the name of Birgitta has been woven into the origins of the bear and of the dog, in Kalevala-meter charms:

Pirjotar quick-tempered lady  
who was not willing to spin  
and could not sew  
cast her wool to the water  
threw her ball of wool...  

Pirko was favourable to the air  
turned herself towards the wind  
showed her bottom to the hard wind  
the wind made her pregnant  
the bad weather made her heavy  
she carried the dog in her womb  
(…)  
to become company for a wanderer  
to please the hunter.

This concept of St. Birgitta not being able to sew goes back to an image painted on the altarpiece bought for the church of Vadstena in 1449; these images about her childhood go back to her vita which was written after her death when her canonization was in progress. The image further connects to a miracle legend about her: Birgitta having been orphaned at the age of eleven, was sent to her aunt Katarina. She was sewing with other girls but was in despair because she could not sew as well as she wanted. When her aunt entered the room, she saw an unknown lady beside her, helping her, but who then disappeared. However, the work was beautifully done. The legend was interpreted as evidence of Birgitta’s shortcomings as a seamstress because the Virgin Mary had to help her. How this interpretation of Birgitta was spread is difficult to trace, because it appears only in a singular text, and thus it is not possible to speak of an actual tradition. Birgitta is understood as an opposite of St. Katherine, whose Finnish legendary poem depicts her as a diligent weaver.

Vilkuna has paid a good deal of attention to the use of the Finnish name of Birgitta. It became not only a popular first name, Pirkko or Pirjo, but was also used in connection with the name of the group of beetles known as Coccinellidae. In Finnish the name is leppäpirkko “blood pirkko,”
referring to the red color of the beetle. The name has a good number of variants that are connected to female saints, not only to Birgitta, but also to St. Gertrud (leppäkerttu or leppäterttu), St. Katherine (lentokaija, leppätiira from Estonian lepatriinu). In eastern Finland and Karelia, this beetle is called God’s cow (jumalanlehmä) or even Ukko’s sheep (ukonlammass) or Ukko’s cow (ukonlehmä). Ukko is the name of the pre-Christian god in Finnish, which points to a continuum of heavenly figures in the name of this beetle. The saintly connection is also found in other languages: in Swedish nyckelpiga, or Jungfru Marie nyckelpiga, English ladybird, and in German Marienkäfer.73

In Finnish folklore the name appears in a popular children’s rhyme and a little vernacular ritual. When the beetle is sitting on the hand of a child, the rhyme is said, and the beetle is sent off: (1) to the side of a stone church, (2) to the side of a big stone, (3) to father and mother, (4) over the sea, (5) as far as cow bells can be heard. The beetle is asked to perform various tasks: to eat porridge there, to bring golden clothes, to say where the suitors come from, where the person saying the rhyme will be married, or whether the cowherd can get to the church on Sunday. The references of the rhyme connect with a variety of areas which match the interests of women: cattle, food, clothes, predicting the future, and marriage. Could the children’s rhyme be a variant of a long-forgotten medieval vernacular prayer? In any case, the name of the beetle and the rhyme along with it are not proof of any awareness of St. Birgitta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the rhymes were collected.

Vilkuna also pays attention to the negative connotation attached to Birgitta’s vernacular name, Pirkko; the word äkäpirkko in western dialects is used for a child who is “misbehaving” but has fits of anger, and the verb pirjastaa for making noise or misbehaving.74 Vilkuna draws this notion of Birgitta’s having been a disobedient child from the altarpiece in Vadstena: a painting shows how Birgitta’s foster mother Katarina is about to punish her with a whip.75

Folk traditions about St. Birgitta have a different character than the traditions about St. Anne and St. Katherine. Birgitta’s memory is dimly distinguished in the children’s rhyme, and there are no important rituals relating to her, as there are for St. Katherine. There is only one archived record about her festival day: on that date, it is time to start making fishing nets.76 St. Birgitta’s irrelevance in the agrarian calendar wiped out any popular memory of her as a saint.
Folk Traditions on Saints’ Festival Days

The liturgical calendars, with their ranking of saints’ feast days, expressed the view of the church elite about the importance of various saints, but clearly not every saint become equally revered and remembered by the laity, and there was local variation as to which saints were considered most important. Certainly, the saints whose feasts were celebrated with the highest degree were more emphasized by the church than those celebrated with lower degree, but the laity had its own ways. Some saints’ days, such as those of St. Mary Magdalene or St. Olav, were celebrated with the highest degree only in the Dominican calendar dating from 1407. However, the laity’s appreciation of the festival days differs from that of the church elite, as we shall see from the following synopsis.

As no sermons have been preserved from medieval Finland, we do not know how the saints and their festivals were presented or how the message was delivered in the vernacular language. The story of the life of the saint had to be interesting enough for people to relate their own lives to it. The most important and most frequent festival days were those connected to the Virgin Mary and Jesus, who were of higher rank than the actual saints, and highly appreciated also in folk tradition. In the following summary, I shall briefly present the saints’ festivals and how they have been observed in folk traditions. The emphasis was on weather, agricultural work, behavior of animals, and rituals of protection.

**Henry (January 19, June 18):** The day “breaks the winter’s back” (midwinter); half of the cattle fodder is left and two-thirds of the food for the people; the bear turns over in its sleep; if there is little snow, there will be no hay in the summer; if there is cold weather, the summer will be warm. The translatio of St. Henry was celebrated in June with a large market in Turku, but it has left no marks in the later folk tradition.

**Erik (May 18):** Cold weather on this day predicts a warm summer; rain on this day is worth gold; the cuckoo is heard; plowing must be started, oats/barley/peas/flax are sown; it is time to fix the fences and to let the cattle out into the woods.

**John the Baptist (June 24):** The most important festival of the summer, this is the day for magic, omens, and beliefs: weather omens, omens about the crops, love magic, fertility magic, magic securing the success of the cattle; hoards can be discovered; musical skills can be learned from the water spirit/devil; bonfires are lit; the year’s first sauna whisks are made of birch.
Peter and Paul (June 29): Warm summer begins; turnips are sown; working on this day will cause thunderstorms; cutting hay begins; bonfires are lit.

Mary Magdalene (July 22): If it rains on this day, there will be rain for seven weeks.

Olav (July 29): Autumn time begins, so the hay harvest must be finished; “Uoti’s hook” (hunger) was feared, in case grain was consumed before the new crops were ready. The day was celebrated by eating a yearling sheep.

Lawrence (August 10): There is cold and rainy weather; swallows gather in flocks; threshing begins; sowing the rye begins; hunting fowl with traps begins.

Michael the Archangel (September 29): Crops must be inside by this day, and the cows and sheep should be taken inside; work inside the house begins; beginning of winter; weather omens; magic to protect and promote the welfare of the cattle and horses; celebrated by eating a ram.

Birgitta (October 7): Pirjetta (Birgitta) is the mother of the bear; net weaving is started (both these notions are rare, as there is only one text on each).

Katherine of Alexandria (November 25): This is the last celebration in the chain of fall festivals before Christmas preparations begin; prayers and ritual meals, mainly by women, to promote the success of the cattle and sheep; weather proverbs; rainy time.

Nicholas (December 6): The weather on this day will continue until the end of December.

Anne (December 15): Anne figures as the mistress of the house; Christmas preparations are started; she is the provider of prey, protector of cattle; the darkness of the period is emphasized.

Stephen (December 26): Cold winter begins; weather omens; magic to promote the welfare of cattle and horses; festival of men and horses; horse races when returning from church; mumming traditions with songs.

John the Apostle (December 27): Christmas celebrations continue with visits, dances, and singing; the day was called the third day of Christmas.

It is easy to see from the list above where the emphasis lay on the important saints’ festival days—or at least those traditions that remained until the early twentieth century: it was the work calendar, beginning or ending a task, feasting, predicting the weather, observing omens about the
Conclusion

The vernacular traditions of St. Anne and St. Katherine were deeply rooted in late medieval Finland and continued to be observed to a much greater extent than was the case with other saints. They were connected to the people’s livelihood. The welfare of cattle and sheep was particularly the concern of women; although men could also take part in the household feast of St. Katherine, they did not join the women in the cowshed. Prayers were offered to St. Anne to protect the cattle in the woods but also to grant success in hunting, which was the province of men. The gender lines in these cases were not strict.

St. Anne and St. Katherine were important saints on the other side of the Gulf of Finland in the area of Estonia, too. Many local churches and altars in larger churches were dedicated to both saints, and St. Katherine was known as a protector of sheep in Estonia as well as in Finland. Saints’ traditions came to Finland not only from the West through Sweden but also from the South and Southeast. That there was frequent, grassroots contact over the Gulf of Finland by merchants and local people who sold and exchanged their products has been documented in sixteenth-century records.79

St. Birgitta was a respected ecclesiastical figure soon after she was canonized. In the vernacular imagination, however, she did not have a special, unique role like Katherine or Anne. On the whole, the late folklore sources about most saints only include observations of weather conditions or define the dates for starting or finishing an agricultural task, whereas folklore traditions about both St. Anne and St. Katherine illustrate why people needed their saints in the same way as they needed their old household spirits: to protect themselves from the threats of life and to help them in making their living.

NOTES

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These questions are discussed by Raisa Maria Toivo, *Faith and Magic in Early Modern Finland* (Houndmills, 2016); and by Miia Kuha, *Pyhäpäivien vietto varhaismoderin ajan Savossa* (vuoteen 1710) (Jyväskylä, 2016).

Kalevala meter is the old Finnish poetic meter, which is an unrhymed, nonstrophic trochaic tetrameter. It was used not in only epic and lyric songs, but also in charms, ritual poetry, children's songs, riddles, and proverbs. Matti Kuusi: Introduction, in Matti Kuusi, Keith Bosley and Michael Branch (eds.), *Finnish Folk Poetry—Epic: An Anthology in Finnish and English* (Helsinki, 1977), pp. 62–65. The oldest Kalevala-meter traditions (89,000 texts) have been published in *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* (SKVR), 1908–1948, 1994, in fifteen volumes, and can be found online at http://skvr.fi


Knuutila, *Soturi, kuningas, pyhimys* p. 178; for the problems with the plentitude of saints’ festival days, see Göran Malmstedt, *Helgdagsreduktionen. Övergången från ett medeltida till ett modernt år i Sverige* (Göteborg, 1994).


17 Malin, Der Heiligenkalender Finnlands, p. 101.


19 Räsänen, Ruumiillinen esine, materiaalinen suku, p. 253.

20 Lamberg, Jöns Budde, birgittalaisveli ja hänen teoksesta, p. 324.


22 Malin, Der Heiligenkalender Finnlands, p. 251.


25 Räsänen, Ruumiillinen esine, materiaalinen suku, p. 35.

26 Räsänen, Ruumiillinen esine, materiaalinen suku, p. 246.


28 Malin, Der Heiligenkalender Finnlands, p. 241.


33 Krohn, Suomalaisten runojen uskonto, p. 178.


37 For the texts, see Kuusi, Bosley and Branch, Finnish Folk Poetry—Epic, pp. 312–14.


40 The others were St. Margaret, St. Barbara, and St. Dorothy.


44 Ibid., 3:180.


46 Sands, *The Company She Keeps*, pp. 79–82.


48 Hiekkanen, *Suomen keski-ajan kiwikirkot*.


50 Katrina, kipo kaponen
hyvä rouva, roukku selkä
piha rikka, pellon kukka
kaunis kartanon emää.
Heitää mulle hääkkä sääki
lehmää sääki len’kauta.
Kyllä mustatii menis
kirjavaiset kielpoas.
Käy yöt suka käässä
päivät tulko kainalossa
käy kuja kuuruusissa
läävät länkänöissäsi
sukimmassa suoromassa.
(Suomen kansan vanhat runot VI, 2:5670)


The population of Ingria, on the southeastern coast of the Gulf of Finland, consisted of Izhors, Vôtes, and Finns, until the Second World War, when the area was devastated and its people were dispersed.


Setälä, “Pyhä Birgitta ja Suomi,” p. 179.


Pirjotar pikainen vaimo
jok ei keträtä kehahna
eikä ommella osanut
visko villasa vesileen
kuppaili kuontalonsa ...

(*Suomen kansan vanhat runot* VII:5, nr. 3936)

Pirko ilmallen rania
tuulellen känneleksen
ahawalen pylistäksen.
Tulipa tulta tineheiksi
paksuki pahoa sätä.
Kantoipa koirran kohusan
(...)
kukewallen kumbaliksi
mieliksi metän käwiän.

(*Suomen kansan vanhat runot* VI:2, nr. 6284)


Malin, *Der Heiligenkalender Finnlands*, p. 162.
This condensed and subjective synopsis is based on the calendar customs published by Hautala in *Vanhat merkkipäivät*.