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„Димитър А. Ценов" - Свищов

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# 90 години дарителство, знание, иновации и устойчиво развитие в СА „Д. А. Ценов" – Свищов

Том III



5-7 ноември 2026 г.

**СТОПАНСКА АКАДЕМИЯ „Д. А. ЦЕНОВ“ – СВИЩОВ**

МЕЖДУНАРОДНА НАУЧНО-ПРАКТИЧЕСКА КОНФЕРЕНЦИЯ

# 90 ГОДИНИ ДАРИТЕЛСТВО, ЗНАНИЕ, ИНОВАЦИИ И УСТОЙЧИВО РАЗВИТИЕ В СА „Д. А. ЦЕНОВ“ – СВИЩОВ

Свищов, 5-7 ноември 2026 г.

*Посветена на 90 години от създаването на Стопанска академия „Димитър А. Ценов“*

Сборник с доклади

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*Международната научно-практическа конференция е организирана при изпълнение на Административен договор № КП-06-МНФ/23 от 18.08.2026 г. (BNSF-1.010-0023-C01) на Фонд „Научни изследвания“ при МОН по Процедура за подкрепа на международни научни форуми, провеждани в Република България*

Академично издателство „Ценов“
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**ISBN 978-954-23-2690-8 (print)**
**ISBN 978-954-23-2691-5 (online)**

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INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC AND PRACTICAL CONFERENCE

# 90 YEARS OF CHARITY, KNOWLEDGE, INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN D. A. TSENOV ACADEMY OF ECONOMICS - SVISHTOV

Svishtov, 5th - 7th November 2026

*Dedicated to the 90th anniversary since the establishment of D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics*

Conference Proceedings

## VOLUME III

*The International Scientific and Practical Conference was organized in the implementation of Administrative Contract № КП-06-МНФ/23 of August 18, 2026 (BNSF-1.010-0023-C01), awarded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science under the Procedure for Support of International Scientific Forums Held in the Republic of Bulgaria*

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**ISBN 978-954-23-2690-8 (print)**
**ISBN 978-954-23-2691-5 (online)**

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# WOMEN DONATIONS TO SWEDISH RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

**PhD student, Ciocoiu Elena-Adriana**[1]

**Abstract**: *The purpose of my research is to highlight the gifts that noble women made to religious institutions across Sweden. The donations to churches and monasteries that are examined include money, real estate, and religious artifacts. In my study, I argue that women were able to demonstrate their support for the new religion through donations, were financially independent, and owned property. However, in order to illustrate the intricacy of the interactions between women and men, I intend to provide instances in which women's freedom to donate was restricted initially by men's absence of support for their decisions, as well as instances where men's consent for the donation to be finalised was requested. In order to show how the families of the higher social classes were interested in the new religion and how their contributions strengthened their position, as well as the religious institutions positions in society, instances where women donated alongside their male counterparts will be discussed.*

**Keywords**: *Sweden, women, donation, church, land*

**JEL:** I30

## 1. Introduction

During Middle Ages, donations to religious institutions were an expression of an individual's faith. They served as a mean to secure a place in Heaven, the fundamental principle being that pious actions are evidence of a good Christian, an ideal aspired by the individuals of the time. However, numerous scholars, among them Catharina Andersson, proposed the theory that donations represented a method to consolidate a person's position in society(Andersson 2013, p. 219).

C. Andersson stated that donors were aiming to forge strong relations with religious figures, in addition to acquiring spiritual benefits consisting of special prayers, masses and potentially securing a burial place within the eclessiastical institution(Andersson, 2013).

In this paper, I want to show examples of Swedish women who have donated in order to show their support for the new religious ideology and, perhaps, increase their financial influence in society. In order to demonstrate the upper societies' interest in supporting the new religion, instances of women performing donations alongside men will be examined. In order to portray women's status at the period, instances of men resisting women's intentions of donating will be addressed.

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## 2. Women independent donations to Religious Institutions

According to a late medieval record stated, Alvastra estate was donated to Alvastra Abbey by Queen Ulfhild (1095 – 1148) (Holmström 2014, p.82). Marie Holmström suggested that the monks might have received a part of the current parish Västra Tollstad and proprieties on the Visingsö island (Holmström 2014, p.82).

Ulfhild's sister, Margareta, is stated to have donated the land she owned in Östergötland to the canons of Linköping for the good of her soul(Andersson 2013, p.541).

Vårfruberga nunnery from Södermanland was founded by jarl Siward and Ingeborg, his daughter, during the middle of 12th century(Lovén 2014, p.132). Regarding Ingeborg, in King Knut Eriksson's letter from 1167 – 1174, it was stated that she sold Granby and Billby, located in St. Per, to the monks from Viby. (Lovén 2019, p. 53-54)

Magnus Johanssons' ( ? – 1294) widow, Ingeborg, donated Säby and Åsby from Rytterne parish to Sko monastery, with the clause that she will be buried next to her husband in its churchyard (Frithiof 1909, p.16).

Katarina Tjälfvesdotter (1190/1250 - ?), part of the Blå elite family, donated in 1274, the homestead entitled Wathar, to the Sko nunnery, in exchange for a burial place within its churchyard(Frithiof 1909, p.17)

C. Andersson stated that Gudhem convent became prestigious due Queen Katarina Sundesdotter's (1215 – 1250) generous donation to the nuns undertaken in 1250 (Andersson 2021, p.9). Regarding the donation, is it known that she offered „estates and gold", although is it unknown what they consisted into as the records have been lost (Löfgen 2009, p.18). However, Tracey Sands theorized that the convent have been expanded as result of Katarina's donation (Sands 2010, p.74)

Ragnfrid/Ramfrid Gustavsdotter's (1255 – 1307) numerous donations to Uppsala Cathedral have been regarded by T. Sands as indicative of her piety and religious interests (Sands 2010, p.75).

In Katarina of Steninge's testament, dated 5th November 1311, is mentioned a generous propriety donation to the friary church from Sigtuna, along with the mention of a canopy offered (Sands 2010, p.76) . In addition to this donation, it was noted that she donated propriety to Uppsala Cathedral, T. Sands theorizing that her aim was to obtain the right to the tithe of the Lassa Parish (Sands 2010, p.76).

Queen Helena (1200 – 1255), wife of Knud The Second (? – 1234) donated land in Slaka parish to Vreta nunnery where her sister, Ingegärd, was prioress(Line 2007, p.485)

As a mean to support Knud the Holy's feast, Kristina Fastesdotter (1210 – 1289) donated to Alvastra Abbey between 1258 – 1281(Nilsson 2015, p. 342) a imagine of Saint Knud carved on a tooth or tusk of a walrus, theorized by Sara Nilsson to have reflected her interest in the cult of royal saints from

Denmark(Nilsson, 2015). Among other donations is it mentioned that she donated proprieties to a number of monasteries, churches and individuals, among them Ramshammer domain to Alvastra Abbey being included (Orning 2015, p.583).

In her testament from 1286, Hafrid Sigtryggsdotter (1229 – 1286) noted a donation to the convent from Gudheim of her estate in Esperyd and "her chapel at the altar of St. Katherine, at the same place, where she also chooses her grave"(Sands 2010, p.73). Tracey Sands proposed that Hafrid could have provided financial support for the construction of a chapel either within the convent church, either on its ground, later enstrusting it to the convent with the clause of being buried there (Sands 2010, p.73)

In year 1287 a woman known as Botildis of Vimarka donated 15 marks to the Franciscan friary of Linköping, demanding to be buried in the churchyard(Tagesson 2000, p.219 - 220) .

In a letter from 1293 it is mentioned that Kristina Elofsson donated 10 marks to Alvastra Abbey (Frithiof 1909, p.17). A small donation, in my opinion, was made purely as an expression of one's religiousity.

Erik and Valdemar Magnusson's widows, Ingeborg Hakansdotter (1301 – 1361) and Ingeborg Eriksdotter (1297 – 1356), donated after the death of their husbands in 1317, the Ödeshög estate to Linköping Cathedral as maintenance for a prebend(Tollin, 2010) .

In 1321, Ingrid Svantepolksdotter donated Tägneby and Yttertuna estates to Vreta monastery, later becoming an abbess there(Lovén 2010, p. 200).

In 1336, the noblewoman Bengta Algotsdotter ( ? – 1340) donated her farm from Hånger to the nuns convent from Skänninge (Tollin 2010, p.96). Regarding this donation, Clas Tollin stated that this propriety have been evaluated at 200 marks, this number being 5x times higher than the prince of an ordinary tenant farm(Tollin 2010, p. 96). It is possible that such a valuable donation was made with the purpose of proving one's financial power.

In 1386 Ramborg Eriksdotter donated to Skänninge convent the estate she owned in Kalfsbygd(Cederbom 2020, p.138).

The coat of arms from Järstad Parish Church stated that Saint Birgitta's aunt, Katarina Bengtsdotter of Aspenäs (1268/1288 – 1356) was a donor to this Parish(Akestam 2009, p.3). Considering Katarina's connection to Saint Birgitta, her donation might have been a reflection of her faith, rather than an attempt to consolidate her position in society.

### 3. **Men's involvment in women's donations to Religious Institutions**

In Vita Askarii, monk Rimbert's account of his missionary journeys to Birka in 820 and 862 (Brink 2008, p.623), it is stated that a wealthy woman named Frideburg demanded her daughter, Katla/Catla, to distribute her posessions among the poor in Dorestad after her death(Sawyer 1992, p.73). Birgit Sawyer theorized that by "poor" it could be understood the clergy and

monastics since they were in short supply at that time(Sawyer 1992, p. 73). B. Sawyer's theory might be correct considering the special mention in Vita Anskarii that Frideborg explicitely told Katla that "there are there many churches, priests, and clergy, and a multitude of poor people"(Robinson 2013, p.71).

B. Sawyer have theorized that Katla might have been requested to travel away with the purpose of not being hindered from carrying out Frideburg's request by her relatives that might desire to claim rights to the inheritance, positioning themselves as against a donation to Churches (Sawyer 1992, p. 73).

Christian Lovén discussed the donations lists discovered at Vreta nunnery, stating that two lists are known: a list of donations from 1100 until around 1170 and another listen from 1162 until 1514 (Lovén 2010, p.199). Lovén explained that the existence of 2 separate lists resides in 2 different dynasties having control over this nunnery (Lovén 2010, p.199). Through donations, King Karl and his sister Ingegerd, members of the Sverker dynasty obtained patronage over Vreta nunnery, as well Ingegerd acquiring the position of prioress that consolidated Sverker's dynasty power over this institution(Lovén 2010, p.199). He mentioned regarding Karl and Ingegerd that Ingegerd's donation made to Vreta was larger than Karl's donation(Lovén 2010, p.210).

C. Lovén presented the informations extracted from the donations lists written by Rasmus Ludvigsson in 16th century(Lovén 2010, p.199).The following mentions are of interest: King Inge and Queen Helena donated goods and land, among them being included 4 attungs (according to Christian Lovén one attung was the equivalent of an ordinary farm in the 12th century(Lovén 2014, p. 127) of land in Little Vreta, 2 in Bro, 9 in Brunneby, 4 in Hucklum and 2 in Mällatorp(Lovén 2010, p. 200). King Karl donated with his daughter 6 attungs in Natastade, Ingegerd exchanged with Burislao, King Karl's son, 6 attungs in Wadeby then brought with herself to Vreta 4 attungs in Gibbetorp, 4 in Rörby that she bought from Burislao in exchange for money(Lovén 2010, p. 200). It was stated also that Queen Helena brought to Rörby 4 attungs as well(Lovén 2010, p.200).

Duke Guttorm, together with his daughter, donated to monastery Vreta 2 bols of land in Sexsiö(Lovén 2010, p. 200). Regarding Duke Guttorm, in a different listen of donations, it was mentioned that he donated 2 bolls in Dethysyö and with his daughter 3 bolls of land, instead of 2, with the mention they were all exchanged for Noraby(Lovén 2010, p.201).

In 1237 Sune, Duke Folcke's son, togheter with his wife Helena, donated to Vreta monastery Kimstade(Lovén 2010, p. 200)

In year 1370, the palace complex owned by Folkunga dinasty became the base of a nunnery complex in Vadstena(Hansson 2010, p.167). Specifically, behind this donation to the Birgittine Order are King Magnus Eriksson (1316 – 1374) and Queen Blanche (1320 – 1361) (Nord 2020, p.121). In my opinion, this donation was realised with the intention of the 2 individuals to mentain a close

relationship with the ecclasiastical figures. However, since this donation was realised to Saint Birgitta and her Order, is it not excluded the possibility that they desired the benefits of being prayed over by the nuns for the donation. Is it, also, possible that both figures might have believed in Saint Birgitta's holiness, desiring to aid her as a mean to secure Heaven after their deaths.

A woman known as Sigrid, relative to the future Queen Christina of Denmark (1120/25 – 1160/70) is known to have donated the Varnhem estate to monks (Andersson 2021, p.5). Is it theorized that Erik Jedvardsson (1125 – 1160), Queen Christina's future husband, might have oppossed the founding of this monastery, attempting to convince Sigrid to stop supporting the monks from Varnhem (Andersson 2021, p.5).

A charter from 1164-1167 noted that a noblewoman named Doter donated Viby to cistercian monks, with the mention that she was in conflict with her son, Gere, due her intention to donate (Lovén 2014, p.130). C. Lovén theorized that the conflict started because the monastery was founded on Doter's husband land, he passed away and she had no rights over Viby as her children were the inheritants(Lovén 2014, p.130).

Furthermore, C. Lovén theorized that the conflict might started between Gere and Doter's husband, extending to Doter after the later's death (Lovén 2014, p.130). Despite archbishop's Stefan position favourable to the monk (Andersson 2021, p.5), this incident represents a proof that not every woman had the privilege of donating freely, highlighting the occasional disputes between men and women regarding inheritance.

In her will dated to 10th December 1288, Ragnhild Erlansdotter (1265 – 1293) noted donations to multiple eclessiastical institutions consisting in the following: 2 marks were granted to the abbeys Nydala, Julita, Alvastra, Varnhem, Roma, Sko, Vårfruberga, Risebergem Gudhem, Vretam Askeby and Solberga(Eriksson-Lind 2022, p.19). 3 marks were granted to the Dominican friaries of Västerås, Strängnäs, Skara, Lödösem Kalmar, Visby and Finland (Eriksson-Lind 2022, p.19). The most significant donation, however, is the one towards the Dominican friars from Sigtuna whom received the Lytislunda farm, her estate from Vittinge but with the clause her sons could repurchase it within one year, and lake Musamyr with its adjacent stream that leads to the preacher brothers' mill (Eriksson-Lind 2022, p.19).

An important mention regarding this will is that Ragnhild's husband, Magnus Gregersson, had to approve and give his consent regarding the donations(Eriksson-Lind, 2022). This mention is proving that Ragnhild was dependent on her husband's willingness to allow her donations, being unable to take this decision independent.

Ingibjǫrg Finnsdottir (1301 – 1361) mentioned in her charter from 1358 that the gifts given to Skänninge's convent shall never be given back at any moment(Aae 2018, p.38). In the charter she issued with her son it is mentioned that the propriety from Hammarö is passed to the nuns in perpetuity while the

one from Faurås presents a repurchase clause where it is mentioned that it must be given back to the heirs of successors at the price of 200 marks(Aae 2018, p.38). Embla Aae theorized that the perpetuity clause might be the result of her son, King Magnus IVth (1316-1374), having no claim or need for the proprieties(Aae, 2018). However, I am considering the possibility that, without such a clause, her relatives might have demanded rights over the propriety, cancelling the donation in favour of obtaining the land, such a clause preventing the propriety to be taken back.

## 4. Conclusions

The examples provided are showing a complex view on women's status in Swedish Middle Ages. Some women were able to perform donations freely, some were performing them alongside their male counterparts and some were facing opposition from men, their intentions requesting aiding from religious figures.

When it comes to the intentions behind women's donations, figures such as Katarina Bengtsdotter of Aspenäs are showing that donations could have been made with the sole purpose of expressing their devotion. Personalities such as Botildis of Vimarka and Katarina Tjälfvesdotter are proving that some women performed donations with the purpose of securing a place at the graveyard close to the religious institution. Personalities such as Queen Blanche and King Magnus Eriksson are proving that some donations might have been made with the purpose of securing close relationships with religious institutions.

The examples provided showed that women have expressed their support to religious institutions and their religiousity in various ways. Women such as Kristina Fastesdotter proved that some preferred to donate objects as evidence of their devotion. Women such as Ingrid Svantepolksdotter proved that some preferred to donate estate as expression of their support to the religious institutions. Women such as Kristina Elofsson proved that some preferred to donate money as a mean to show their devotion and support.

In the discussions surrounding donations and women's status, figures such as Doter and Queen Christina of Denmark must be acknowledged as evidence of the reality that some women were victims of controlling behaviour expressed by men. Examples such as Ragnhild Erlansdotter are evidence that, at the time discussed, women were dependent on men's explicit consent regarding future donations.

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