Book Section:

Conclusion

From Vineyard of the Lord to Outpost of Empires
Actors and Networks in the Conquest, Government and Society of Livonia
(Twelfth–Sixteenth Centuries)

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The nucleus of the land that became known as Livonia was formed with the coming of a German mission to the area of the lower Daugava inhabited by the pagan Livish people around the year 1186. This 'vineyard of the Lord' (*vinea Domini*), as the chronicler Henry of Livonia termed it, led a precarious existence during its initial years, but by the mid-thirteenth century the efforts of missionaries, crusaders, clerics, fighting monks and settlers from northern Germany and Denmark had imposed Western Christian rule over the entire area of present-day Latvia and Estonia to produce a conglomeration of territories in which effective sovereignty was divided among a number of bishoprics, the Teutonic Order, and the kingdom of Denmark.[1]

Fragmented structures of government within a single geographical area were by no means unique in medieval and early modern Europe, as can be seen in the even more complex territoriality prevailing in many parts of the Holy Roman Empire up to 1806. However, the political fragmentation of Livonia was compounded by the fundamentally distinct natures of its principal territorial parts. The Livonian bishoprics were similar to the many ecclesiastical principalities in Germany, but they were to all intents and purposes independent of any superior (especially after the Great Schism diminished papal authority), even though many, if not most of their personnel were recruited from Germany (Neitmann 2017; Selart 2017). By contrast, the duchy of northern Estonia formed part of the Danish realm between 1219 and 1346, while the crushing defeat of the Sword Brothers at the hands of the Lithuanians in 1235 conveyed their lands and surviving personnel into the Teutonic Order, an international religious organisation whose headquarters were originally in the Holy Land, and from 1309 in Prussia. The Livonian branch of the Order was at first answerable to the Grand Master and general chapter, but its geographical distance to the Order's other territories gave it an effective autonomy of action which was increasingly confirmed in formal terms by the mid-fifteenth century. Of course, through the circumstances of its creation, and the mobility enabled by the Baltic Sea and the Hanseatic League, Livonia was closely linked with northern Germany and Scandinavia, and beyond them, to all of Western

Europe, although this did not imply any political dependence, other than imprecisely defined ties to the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. Add to this the importance of other ecclesiastical organisations, notably the Cistercians and Dominicans, and it can be seen that the character and functioning of the Livonian territories were determined to a large degree either by institutions based outside Livonia, or wider networks extending over numerous territorial borders (Tamm 2017).

All of these diverse links contrasted with Livonia's relationship with the Russian-speaking, Orthodox lands to the east. It is striking that despite their geographical proximity, the church and principalities of Novgorod, Pskov and Izborsk showed little interest in extending political influence into the region, other than the areas around Tartu and the lower Daugava, and even less in the conversion of their pagan populations (Selart 2015). The German and Danish missions were able to establish their Latin Christian polities largely unhindered, and the Mongol invasions left the surviving Russian principalities too weak and preoccupied to endanger the new establishments, especially with the growth of Lithuania to a major power in the course of the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, trade – especially in luxury furs from Karelia and Siberia – provided the basis for significant links between Livonia and the Rus' lands. It was only the rise of Muscovy in the fifteenth century that presented an existential threat to Livonia from the Russian Orthodox world.

An additional level of complexity in the social structure of Livonia, which distinguished it from many Western polities, was provided by the ethnic composition of the country and its geographical dimensions. The incoming conquerors and their descendants were overwhelmingly German in origin and speech (even within Danish Estonia), and almost exclusively made up the governing classes, the clergy, and most of the merchants and artisans; they resided overwhelmingly in the towns, castles, religious foundations and rural manors. Similar consequences can be observed in the colonisation of the Slavic lands east of the River Elbe and the Teutonic Order's conquest of Prussia, yet there was one great difference. The conquests of Transalbingia and Prussia included a vast extension of German language and culture, whether by imposition or adoption: by the end of the seventeenth century the Slavic languages within Germany had died out, with the sole exception of the Sorbish tongue of Lusatia; Old Prussian, a Baltic language related to Lithuanian, had suffered the same fate. By contrast, the Livish, Lettish and Estonian languages maintained their positions among the rural population of Livonia, and increasingly were to be found among the urban populations, while ethnic diversity was increased by the immigration of Swedes

and Russians into both rural and urban areas in the early modern period (Kala 2006; Selart 2009 and 2014).[2]

The complex nature of the governmental and social structures of Livonia provides a compelling case to analyse its history in terms of actors and networks. This volume, which follows such a path, is thus a welcome addition to the innovative research produced in the renaissance of history writing in Estonia and Latvia that has taken place since the restoration of independence of these two countries in 1991. It is appropriate that the volume opens with a study of Albert von Buxhövden, Bishop of Riga, who can be considered as the first maker of Livonia, in a way that neither of his two predecessors, Meinhard and Berthold of Loccum, ever managed to be. Unlike them, he comes over as a rather worldly career churchman, with a wide family network in Saxony which would prove to be a crucial resource in state building. Albert was responsible for many of the key institutions of Livonia through the foundation of the port of Riga and the transfer of the bishopric there from its exposed original site at Ikšķile, the introduction of the Cistercian Order and other missionaries, and the establishment of the Sword Brothers as a permanent military force (Benninghoven 1965; Hellmann 1989; Murray 2016 and 2018). These developments provided key infrastructure to continue the conquest and conversion, and laid the pattern for the future division of the territory. Marek Tamm analyses the activity of Albert beyond Livonia in travelling to Germany, Denmark and even Rome. These journeys were time-consuming, but vital in terms of recruitment and lobbying, both to secure the material assistance of crusaders and missionaries, and also the crusade bulls and other privileges that provided a constitutional framework for the church of Riga. Tamm rightly concludes that 'Livonia was made outside its borders as much as inside'.

One of Albert's main achievements was to restrict Danish encroachment to the northernmost areas of Estonia. The kingdom of Denmark had a long tradition of crusading and conquest along the islands and southern shores of the Baltic, and made efforts to extend these conquests into Livonia and Prussia (Bysted et al. 2009; Olesen 2010). Kersti Markus demonstrates how both the Danish monarchy and church were keen to express their enthusiasm for crusading in art and architecture, drawing comparisons between their activities in the Baltic Sea region and the effort to defend or liberate the Holy Land. It could be argued that Denmark's ambitions, which extended to much of northern Germany as well as the eastern Baltic, were far beyond what the kingdom was able to realise. Certainly the Danes were unable to recover from the effects of the great Estonian revolts of 1343, and the sale of the Danish territory by King Valdemar IV to the Teutonic Order in 1346 produced a

new arrangement of government, divided between the Livonian branch of the order, the archbishopric of Riga and the bishoprics of Tartu, Saaremaa and Curonia, while the cities of Riga and Tallinn exercised increasing degrees of autonomy from their nominal overlords.

Juhan Kreem's study of the careers of knight brothers of the Teutonic Order illuminates some of the institutions and networks which underpinned its rule in Livonia. It reveals a pattern of mobility similar to that found in other military orders, with recruitment of men in the European heartlands, who would be sent out to areas of service (such as Prussia or Livonia), providing a constant supply of trained and experienced men. In contrast to the Danish monarchy, the order did not suffer from regencies, minorities or incapable rulers; if a master of Livonia proved unequal to his duties, he was usually retired or transferred elsewhere. The key group within the Teutonic administration was probably the higher officials, whose career paths made them highly experienced, but Kreem also shows the importance of lesser officials who were more integrated with local networks. He brings out the importance not only of the well-known pattern of recruitment of knight brothers in the Rhineland and Westphalia, but also the particularly strong links between Livonia and Bremen. It is also interesting that it was permissible for a knight brother to leave the Order if he was the last of his lineage, and had to revert to lay status in order to continue the family line. This custom, which seems to contrast with the practice in other military orders, shows how the Teutonic Knights were heavily dependent on recruitment from particular kinship networks.

The nature of the relationship between the Christian conquerors and indigenous population is one of the crucial questions of the early history of Livonia. At first glance it might seem that, just as in the case of the Holy Land, the acquisition of territories was justified by conquest from an infidel enemy. However, this issue is complicated by the fact that at first sight seems like as a Christian conquest was not as monolithic as might be supposed. In many cases those pagan groups which at first resisted Christianity later accepted the new faith on terms short of outright surrender, and Anti Selart analyses several cases of territorial donations which can be reconstructed from the evidence of narrative or documentary sources. These show varying conditions. The famous Caupo, one of the first Livish converts recorded by name, came over to the Christian side without coercion, yet the wording of his deathbed testament is ambiguous. When Henry of Livonia tells us that Caupo 'divided all his goods among the churches established in Livonia', one must ask whether this disposition refers to his lands, or simply to his moveable possessions, which would be entirely plausible if, as is likely, he had already conferred his lands on the church. The case of

Vsevolod, prince of Jersika, is more straightforward. Selart argues that he surrendered his lands (which Westerners would have regarded as allodial property), in order to receive them back as an episcopal fief. Such transactions were well known in the West, and they probably provided a suitable model for the acquisition of territory that bound its original holder closely to the bishop as overlord.[3] Often the donations were fictitious, but such inventions only show how the actors involved felt the need to find legal justifications for their acquisition of territory. Selart also identifies the importance of the concept of the 'yoke of Christianity' (*iugum christianitatis*), another key term used by Henry of Livonia, whereby baptism was inextricably linked to ecclesiastical discipline and temporal obligations. The crucial factor seems to have been conversion; while it was licit to dispossess infidels in the East, converts in the Baltic region evidently acquired rights that had to be respected. The issue became extremely contentious when pagan or convert rulers affected to give away territories that they did not really control. The case of the Lithuanian ruler Mindaugas, who granted the territory of Samogitia to the Teutonic Order, had consequences lasting over a century, as the order attempted to make good on its claim through repeated campaigns against Lithuania (Kubon 2016: 53–192).

Hillforts are significant as they are the most visible remnants of the political (or social) power and dynamics in the pre-crusade society of Livonia. But not all were elite residences, and some were not always permanently inhabited. Marika Mägi's chapter needs to be read in the context of a highly vigorous debate among archaeologists and historians in Estonia and Latvia about the function of hillforts both before and after the crusader conquest (for example, Šnē 2009; Valk 2014). Mägi makes the crucial point that a significant number continued to be inhabited well into the fourteenth century, in some cases, being converted into towns on the Western pattern. They also played a role in trade networks. Because of peculiar seasonal conditions, it was often necessary for merchants to spend periods waiting or overwintering before they could continue their journeys. However, the destruction or abandonment of many sites, especially on the coast, shows a greater concentration of economic activity that was almost certainly driven by the imposition of new political structures.

For the earliest period of the formation of Livonia we are heavily reliant on two very contrasting narrative sources alongside documentary and archaeological evidence. Henry's chronicle is a thoughtful and sophisticated account, full of Latin wordplay and biblical allusion (Undusk 2011). The Middle High German *Livonian Rhymed Chronicle* is a much blunter literary instrument, with far simpler language and messages (Murray 2001 and 2019).

Both of these works figure in two related chapters. Linda Kaljundi discusses the semantic field applying to the concept of 'neophytes', as opposed to converts. Conversion might be thought to imply willingness on the part of the convert, but it is clear that the acceptance of Christianity was often a political decision imposed downwards by members of indigenous elites, whose followers or subjects often had little choice in the matter. She argues for a contrast with the Christianisation of the Slavic lands on the German frontier; in the work of the chronicler Helmold of Bosau, for example, pagans are mostly portrayed as the objects of conversion, or in some cases destruction. In the case of Livonia (especially in Henry's chronicle) there is much more emphasis on the neophytes as active participants, and indeed, the conquest and defence of the country would not have been possible without the military support of Livs, Letts, Wends and – eventually – Estonians, serving alongside the armies drawn from crusaders, Sword Brothers and episcopal vassals (Kļaviņš 2009; Murray 2013a and 2013b). Kaljundi also makes the point that the *Rhymed Chronicle* does not refer to neophytes as such, but tends to use ethnonyms. However, one should note that the text often uses the Middle High German term *lantvolc* (literally 'country people'), which one could regard as an attempt to cover the same semantic field as neophytes, especially since it is often contrasted with *pilgerîne* (pilgrims, crusaders) or *brûdere* (knight brothers of the military orders). In fact, the *Rhymed Chronicle* tends to support Kaljundi's essential points about Henry's chronicle, since it repeatedly stresses how these allies were glad to take the field alongside their Christian lords. Kaljundi's chapter is buttressed by a complimentary study by Wojtek Jezierski, who offers an innovative approach to understanding actors in the conquest through the portrayal of emotions in the same two sources. This is a challenging topic, since the two works are so different in character and style, but it is welcome that Jezierski gives them equal weight. Henry's chronicle is loved by historians for all manner of reasons (Tamm, Kaljundi and Jensen 2014), but despite its sophistication and wealth of detail it may be less representative of the mentality of crusaders and Teutonic Knights than the *Rhymed Chronicle* (Murray 2001), although it is important, as Jezierski recognises, to consider the conventions and limitations imposed on the writing of history by epic poetry.[4]

Half of the papers in the volume are concerned with urban society and culture, especially of Tallinn, an indication of the wealth of sources concerning the city which have still not been fully explored. Manuscript fragments of important religious texts discovered in Tallinn City Archives and described by Tiina Kala testify to contacts with centres of learning in the West, and emphasise the role of the Dominican Order in the intellectual life of the country (Tamm 2017). Commemoration of the dead in prayer and the liturgy was of course a

major part of medieval religious life, but especially so given the importance of religious institutions in Livonia, as analysed by Gustavs Strenga. Particularly striking is how co-operative activity in prayers and *memoria* not only crossed boundaries between different religious orders, but also between religious orders and lay organisations, such as the Guild of Draymen (beer porters) of Riga.

The importance of surviving evidence such as council protocols, testaments, accounts, and records of transactions means that for the later Middle Ages and the early modern period we are exceptionally well informed about urban elites. A wonderful case in point is Hans Viant, whose career is presented by Anu Mänd. He came from Westphalia and had no relatives in Livonia when he settled there. For several years he led a life split between his birthplace (Schwerte in Westphalia), where he retained citizenship rights, and Tallinn, where he was active in the Brotherhood of the Black Heads before becoming a councillor and then – within five years – burgomaster, a remarkable achievement for a newcomer. This career was certainly helped by the wealth he acquired through trade and dealing in property. On his death he possessed urban houses worth at least 34,000 marks, almost ten times the average purchase price of a town dwelling, in addition to extensive rural property. Even more remarkably, the combined bequests made in his will to family, guilds, hospitals and religious institutions show that he had disposable cash amounting to just under 15,000 marks. Most of his accumulated wealth must have derived from his extensive trading networks, and it is no surprise that men like Viant tended to occupy the main administrative offices in Tallinn and other towns. Such wealth also allowed burgesses to indulge in quite diverse forms of self-representation of Tallinn Burghers, as studied by Krista Kodres, who clearly demonstrates the importance of visual and material culture as a component in the making of Livonia.

The importance of bequests and patronage has meant that merchant elites have attracted a great deal of attention, but the richness of the Tallinn City Archives permits detailed knowledge of other groups, who, even if they lacked the status of a Hans Viant, played key roles in the functioning of the city. Medieval scribes are often thought of as an educated but relatively lowly profession. Tapio Salminen's investigation of the work and careers of city scribes over 300 years brings out their importance. The employment of so many individuals with these skills by the council is a clear indication of the city's growing autonomy and assertiveness in administrative and economic affairs, and the fact that they had to take an oath is indication of their responsibility in correctly recording and preserving data: 'Trusted as a keeper of secrets, the city scribe is established as the guardian of oral and written management of information of the council as not only their ears but also as a resource

delivering them the recorded knowledge they needed in their proceedings whatever they were'. Another key group were the mintmasters studied by Ivar Leimus, responsible for the quality and security of the coinage. Some, such as the Wulff family, were effectively professional dynasties tied to specific localities, but others were highly mobile, moving without noticeable problems between employment in different jurisdictions. Paul Gulden (d. 1593) grew up and trained in Saxony, but through time worked successively as mintmaster for the Livonian Order, the town of Tallinn, and the kings of Sweden and Denmark. Mintmasters were clearly sought after professionals, and the conditions of their employment evidently left them free to engage in trade alongside their paid employment. Gulden's economic activities, which took him to Moscow and elsewhere, show many similarities to the Skalm family studied by Ilkka Leskelä. Operating from bases in Stockholm and Turku (Åbo) in the kingdom of Sweden, its members traded with the ports of Gdańsk, Lübeck and Tallinn. In their operations they were similar to the Lombard and Tuscan merchant or banker families that maintained dependencies in France, Flanders and England.

As Mänd suggests, the data on merchants offers great possibilities for prosopographical enquiry, not only for the information they can provide about careers and connections, but for potentially fascinating insights into social history. To give one example, it seems that the word *Vetter* (cousin) was widely used among merchants even when applied to people who were not related by kinship or marriage. An investigation of such terms of address and the social system which lay behind them would offer an interesting comparison with similar practices evident in the vernacular correspondence of the gentry and merchants of England, such as the Cely and Paston families (Häcker 2019).

Indeed, many of the essays make clear the importance of the Middle Low German language, which – if not an institution *stricte sensu* – was a major means of communication within Livonia, connecting it with wider networks such as the Hanseatic League. Latin was of course the universal means of communication in Catholic Europe for most of the Middle Ages, but by the period discussed its use was becoming restricted to the church and universities, with secular administrations increasingly adopting vernaculars. In Western secular society the prime position must go to the French language, which was used not only in France, but also in the southern Low Countries, England and northern Italy as the vehicle of courtly culture and administration as well as a great deal of trade. However, in terms of influence and reach, the Low German language was a close second. It was already a vehicle of mercantile life and activity around the Baltic Sea region when it was implanted in Livonia by the conquerors, and came to link the key actors and institutions of Livonia with northern

Germany, Prussia, the kingdoms of Denmark and Sweden, and even to the Low Countries and England. A merchant of Tallinn might not have been understood by the rural population only a few miles from his home, but he could do business without difficulty in Lübeck, Turku, Bruges or Gdańsk.

Livonia may have been situated on the periphery of the Western world, but it was linked to central places and institutions by a variety of networks. This geopolitical situation only changed with major conflicts occurring in the mid-sixteenth century. After the Livonian War major chunks of territory were either occupied by Muscovy and Sweden, while the remainder entered into a state of dependency on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. What had begun as a poor, tentative missionary bishopric ended as booty of the great empires of eastern Europe. Yet for the centuries between these two points Livonia's government, economy and society operated through complex relations involving diverse actors and institutions on its own territory as well as external connections throughout northern Europe.

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[1] The metaphor of the vineyard of the Lord is used by Henry to apply to the church in both Livonia in the narrower sense and Estonia, especially to emphasise the primacy of the German mission over the claims of the Danes (HCL XXIII.4, p. 158, XXIV.2, p. 170, XXIV.5, p. 176). For other metaphors, see Bombi 2007.

[2] While the Livish language has now all but died out, in the Middle Ages it was spoken around the western, southern and eastern shores of the Gulf of Riga (Tõnisson 1974).

[3] A famous example of such a transaction occurred in 1071, when Richilda, countess of Hainaut, fearing the encroachments of Count Robert I of Flanders, surrendered Hainaut, Valenciennes and her other allodial possessions to be held as fiefs from Godfrey III, duke of Lower Lotharingia, who in turn was to hold them from the bishop of Liège (Hansay 1902).

[4] For example, the MHG adjective *vrô* ('happy, glad, pleased') would appear to offer numerous cases of emotional language, but one also needs to bear in mind its role as a discourse marker occasioned by its frequent use a rhyme word (Murray 2019).