

The Northern Crusades

(prepared by Rachel Cheung for sharing in Fr. Ha's MA class (20120222))

The Baltic or Northern Crusades started in the late 11th century, not as a planned and proclaimed holy war as the crusading wars against the Muslims in the Holy Land in the 11th through 13th century, but was a general expansionist movement, initially undertaken by the Catholic Danes and German states as they moved aggressively into the lands of the pagan Slavic Wends (in the present day German Baltic coast). Beyond the Wends, these intruding forces, later joined by Catholic Sweden and their allies with military orders supported by the Church, encountered and fought other peoples : the Prussians, Livonians, Lithuanians and Estonians, on the route from west to east along the southern Baltic shore. Although it is not disputed that the Holy Wars of the Mediterranean which brought about spectacular conquests did amount in the end to a sad waste of time, money and life with the Holy Places remained lost to Muslims, the Northern Crusades, less spectacular and much less expensive, did help to bring changes that lasted until the modern time.

Christianity in the Baltic

The Northern Crusades did not happen suddenly and without notice. It was indeed a built-up of events starting as early as the Scandinavian rulers' conversion to Christianity from the 8th century. Christianity was, in the early stage of its gestation on the Baltic soil, embraced only by rulers and chieftains who were attracted to this religion they reckoned as one of prestige which was shared by powerful European rulers. It was only after a prolonged period of assimilation and resistance of course that followers were baptized after their rulers or chieftains.

European civilization of the Latin Church and culture extended into Scandinavian not just because European powers wished it and worked for it, through missionaries and armies as the usual practice adopted in converting pagans in other places, but also because powerful people in the north thought it was in their interest, at least in promoting their short term political ambitions.

In Charlemagne's time, the Saxons (living in what today is Germany) were baptized after Charlemagne who "preached with an iron tongue" had defeated them after a 30-year long bloody war. This form of conversion through military conquest and followed by foreign occupation did not apply to the Scandinavian countries during the course of their conversion to Christianity. If military strong Christian neighbours was the coercion reducing pagans to embrace Christianity, as what had happened to the Saxons, the Scandinavians did not come under such immediate threat as their immediate neighbours were largely Muslim Bulgars and the Jewish Khazars. But these neighbours did arouse concern some time later which made the Christian Europe and the Church to wage the so-called Northern Crusades.

The conversion to Christianity of the Baltic people was not sudden and complete, and was not as portrayed by some people as being mainly attributed by the achievement of missionaries. It was a slow

and piecemeal assimilation with the driving force coming from the machination of their local political leaders.

Powerful chieftains lived there in the 8th century. Power was not given and for all. These chieftains needed to persuade warriors to follow them, by giving out gifts (mostly exotic goods and these are called “denegeld”) to and in return receiving counter-gifts by way of loyalty from the followers. To plunder as Vikings was one of the ways to gain and give exotic goods and in return to be assured of the warriors’ loyalty. Chieftains further strengthened the ties with and among their followers using local religious and quasi-religious rituals to create social bonds as strong as family ties, blood brotherhood and fellowship of warriors. Not content with homegrown traditions, ambitious chieftains imported Christianity, the most attractive foreign religion, just as they imported (by trade and looting) exotic goods, and to demonstrate their liaison with and support by the Christian European powers which “conferred” such prestigious religion. By Christian kinship which did not cost too much expense as that of denegeld, the bond between the rulers and their warriors could be further enhanced.

It was not until the 10th century that Christianity really put roots down in Scandinavia, to such a degree that kings converted and called themselves Christians. This happened at different pace and in different parts of Scandinavia : Denmark first as it was closest to Christian Europe, Norway second and Sweden last.

In the end, a few leaders stood out, having succeeded in creating for themselves stable kingdoms established on, inter alia, the Christian model of loyalty that they could pass onto their heirs. This, about the time of the end of the 11th century, was the beginning of the history of the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

Outbreak of the Crusades

Apart from the fact that some Baltic kingdoms gradually arose after (not coincidentally but almost as a necessary result of) adopting Christianity as their de facto state religion (as pagan rituals were sometimes suppressed), many Baltic tribes and states remained shut-out to Christianity. In the 11th century, people dwelling between the River Elbe and Oder, i.e. the Finns, the Livonians and Estonians, the Semigallians and Curonians, the Prussians and the Lithuanians, remained largely non-Christians, and during the following 3-4 centuries consecutively fell victims to their aggressive invading Christian neighbours headed by the various German states and Denmark, later joined by Sweden and their allies, with the active involvement of military orders perplexing the whole period.

There were other attributes, which either stood alone or intertwined with one another, that provided for the ripe time for these crusading movement to take place and eventually to succeed :

- (1) Missionaries (mostly but not exclusively German) to the Baltic peoples welcomed the crusades as some of them were so successful in attracting converts that they were then faced with threats of

being killed or expelled by the very annoyed tribal leaders and the most convinced believers in the Norse old gods.

- (2) Merchants (mostly German but also Scandinavians who came to Visby on Gotland for trade) used to seek protection from native pirates to gain access to local markets along the Baltic coastline, up the Daugava River, and in Rus by paying tributes. They wanted the access to be free of these costly interference.
- (3) Western princes (Sweden, Denmark and Poland) and prelates who were eager to expand their domains saw the crusades as a convenient excuse and a means of obtaining outside military help.
- (4) Popes and papal legates were concerned that the peoples of this region would be left outside Christendom completely or, almost as bad, would fall into the “schismatic errors” of the Orthodox Church - the salvation of souls became mixed with the contest for power in the Holy Roman Empire.
- (5) The crusaders would not have established permanent local presence in, e.g. the Daugava River Valley, if the local people, like the Livs there, and later the Letts, had not seen that cooperation with these foreigners was in their long-term interest. “Divide and rule” might have been the crusaders’ policy, but the divisions were ready-made. In a military backward and quarreling land, the crusaders made alliances with the weaker tribes against the relatively stronger, until the whole country came under their control. Only the strongest native peoples-the Russians and the Lithuanians – could defend themselves against the combined forces of traditional enemies and the crusaders.
- (6) The knights were especially dominating and important in the crusades. Not just because of their military superiority, which was short-lived, but also their vigor. This upstart nobility was ambitious and daring pan-European in its origin and attitudes, its men were good at war, its women were eager for profitable marriages. Similarly, merchants were heroically active in their search for new markets.

The Major Crusading Wars

As there are various good books / materials detailing the crusading wars, I do not think wise to repeat herein the facts/events that took place simply for giving an outline of the wars.

Conclusion :

There are indeed some impacts brought by the Northern Crusades. We will examine these impacts one after the other as follows :

1. The rising classes of aggressive nobles, clerics and merchants opened up the Baltic in ways that monarchs and prelates were able to exploit.
2. The military involvement of the Church by way of its military orders.
3. The influence of the Teutonic Order.
4. The domination by Germans leading to the development of Lutheranism and acceptance by the majority of the Baltic people.
5. The development of trade along the Baltic.

Bibliographies

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6. For comparison and reference of geographical domination by the Baltic powers at different eras , please consult "Maps of the Baltic Lands (1000 A.D. onwards)"
<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/baltics.html>