

WENDISH CRUSADES: AN IMPERIAL CONQUEST OF THE BALTICS

Ellie Kinsman

University of Massachusetts Amherst

The Elbe River has long been considered an untouched gem of Europe: a true image of pristine nature with high, rocky mountain peaks overlooking the windy river and lush pine forests full of abundant wildlife. In the thirteenth century, when Crusaders from the Holy Roman Empire approached the land East of the Elbe River, it was a pastoral vision with stone castles and small villages scattered amongst the glades and marshlands. The Slavic people who resided within the landscape lived simple lives, tilling their land with wooden tools and herding their animals. Similar to the scenic wonder of recent snowfall, there is something notably seductive about being the first to make a mark—to take a piece of nature and claim it for oneself. One could imagine that this is how the Crusaders saw themselves as they advanced on pristine Slavic lands—that they would be the first footprint in a field of unblemished snow. While this was hardly the case, as the Wends had long occupied the land, the Crusaders saw themselves as using the land for its God-given purpose: to better and profit Latin Christendom.

This essay will argue that the Wendish Crusades of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries uniquely demonstrate an evolution of crusading ideals to accommodate the Baltics' religious, economic, and political domination on behalf of the Holy Roman Empire. The literature surrounding the Medieval Crusades tends to interchangeably use the terms “Wendish Crusades,” “Northern Crusades,” and “Baltic Crusades” to refer to the twelfth and thirteenth-century military campaigns directed against the Wends, a non-Christian Slavic peoples residing east of the Elbe River in present-day northeast Germany and Poland. However, for ease of reading, I will only use the term “Wendish Crusades” in this essay to refer to the same military campaign.

One primary goal of the Wendish Crusades was the religious conversion or missionizing of the pagan Wends to justify the Northern military campaign as a righteous religious cause deserving of a shift of focus from the First Crusade in the Holy Land. These crusades differed from the First Crusade in many ways; however, the most considerable difference lies in the Wendish Crusades' emphasis on conversion rather than combat. Before the thirteenth century, conversion was not a

crusading ideal of the Crusades.¹ So, those who took part in the Crusades to the Baltics had to face the sudden religious and ethical dilemma associated with integrating a pagan population into a Christian society. Therefore, the Wendish Crusades marked a shift in the Holy Roman Empire's crusading ideals to accommodate the missionizing of their conquered subjects.

The belief in God was not exactly something Crusaders could force onto unwilling people; however, they made an exception for those who came to God willingly, even if it was through coercive (or fatal) measures. In the 1147 *Proclamations of Northern European Crusades*, Bernard of Clairvaux argued that the conversion (or death) of pagan people was necessary to uphold the moral rightness of Latin Christendom. He used hostile language in his letter, comparing the Baltic pagans to an evil serpent ready to strike: "He has raised up evil seed, wicked pagan sons, whom, if I may say so, the might of Christendom has endured too long, shutting its eyes to those who with evil intent lie in wait, without crushing their poisoned heads under its heel."² Bernard's wrathful words made it apparent that forced conversion was the only mercy available to the Baltic people at the will of the Holy Roman Empire, and their only alternative would be extermination. The significance of this jarring proclamation was the foundation laid to not only permit but to encourage forced conversion of the Wends.³

Yet, the permissibility of forced conversion only grazed the surface of the Church's ethical dilemma. Once in the Northern lands, the military campaigns had to decide to what degree of coercion would maintain the validity of the conversion. Forced conversion remained a genuine concern to those in the Baltic region at the time of the crusade, as it was a central topic in *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* and Helmold's *Chronicle of the Slavs*. While baptism by treaty was considered a baptism by force, it was not the same as dunking an unwilling soul into baptismal waters.⁴ This moral distinction made by Crusaders avoided force within the actual performance of the rite and, therefore, maintained the victory of conversion. However, it seemed this sanctified distinction made little difference to the Baltic peoples. For example, in Henry's *Chronicle of Livonia*, the Wends would accept baptism in exchange for the building of fortified walls, only to ritually rinse themselves of the baptism once the construction of the walls was complete.⁵ The conversion of the Baltic pagans to Christianity throughout the Wendish Crusades proved less fruitful than the Holy Roman Empire first anticipated. However, in contrast, the Christian settlement of Baltic lands supplied the Holy Roman Empire with spoils of conquest unrelated to the religious domination of the Baltic peoples.

In an economic sense, the Wendish Crusades promised settlers abundant resources and land that had yet to be exploited by the Wends and were ripe for the taking by the Germans of the Holy Roman Empire. Moreover, the bountiful material resources within the Baltic lands, such as

¹ Pegatha Taylor, "Moral Agency in Crusade and Colonization: Anselm of Havelberg and the Wendish Crusade of 1147," *The International History Review* 22, no. 4 (2000): 757–784.

² S. J. Allen and Emilie Amt, ed., *The Crusades: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 258–261.

³ Kurt Villads Jensen, "Holy War – Holy Wrath!: Baltic Wars Between Regulated Warfare and Total Annihilation Around 1200," in *Church and Belief in the Middle Ages: Popes, Saints, and Crusaders*, ed. Kirsi Salonen and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 233.

⁴ Burnam W. Reynolds, *The Prehistory of the Crusades: Missionary War and the Baltic Crusades* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 102.

⁵ Allen and Amt, ed., *The Crusades*, 263–266.

highly-desirable furs, were incredibly alluring to the more technologically-advanced and merchant-oriented Holy Roman Empire. The economic commerce between the eastern Baltic and the North German towns centered around the fur trade and likely played a prominent role in promoting the Baltic region's invasion, Christianization, and colonization.⁶ The Crusaders possessed evident economic interests in the untouched Baltic land since they did not have the same reservations as their nature-worshipping counterparts to exploit the region's vast forests and wildlife for material gain.

The Christian West evoked imagery of the Baltic lands being a promised land of sorts, a land of vast economic potential but did not stop at the imagery of abundant wildlife. The undeniable appeal of the untainted wilderness drew in the interest of those who praised its pure nature, resembling a clean slate. The *Poem Describing Cistercian Settlement* illustrated the Baltic lands of modern-day Poland in the state that twelfth-century Cistercian monks came upon it:

For the country was wooded and without farmers, And Poland's poor people were not industrious; They plowed the sandy soil with wooden plows, not iron, And with no more than two oxen at a time. Throughout the land there were no cities or towns, But only castles, country markets, swamps, and chapels. They had no salt, no iron, no coins, No metal, no good clothing, and no shoes. They simply herded their animals. Such were the delights the first monks encountered. And yet the monks brought in all these amenities, And filled the land with them, making everything possible.⁷

Between the lines of the poem, it is clear the sense of paternalism held by the German settlers regarding the Slavic peoples' displacement from the unexploited land further justifying their eastward expansion. The fourteenth-century narrator praises the pioneering monks for their strength in the harsh environment and, more importantly, for introducing the Baltic peoples to technology, saving them from their laggard ways.

The introduction of Western technology and economy profoundly impacted the Baltic peoples, as this catapulted them into an unfamiliar realm to which the Western settlers were more adapted. The more technologically advanced Crusaders overwhelmed the indigenous Baltic population, and upon the failure of the peaceful conversion of the Wends, the native economic structures became dependent on the Crusade for their expansion and survival.⁸ In other words, the economic dominance of the Western settlers over the indigenous Baltic peoples arose from the introduction of technology and economic systems that benefited the Holy Roman Empire. German settlements were quick to begin extracting economic gains from the Baltic lands. In the *Charter to German Settlers* of 1106, Bishop Frederick of Hamburg contextualized the obligations and taxes required of the German settlers wishing to settle in Slavic lands but also assured his similarly-aligned audience that the economic stakes were unmistakably in their favor:

⁶ James A. Brundage, "Hunting And Fishing In The Law And Economy Of Thirteenth-Century Livonia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 13, no. 1 (1982): 3–11.

⁷ Allen and Amt, ed., *The Crusades*, 257–258.

⁸ Richard Spence, "Pope Gregory IX and the Crusade on the Baltic," *The Catholic Historical Review* 69, no. 1 (1983): 1–19.

These men came to us and earnestly begged us to grant them certain lands in our bishopric, which are uncultivated, swampy, and useless to our people. We have consulted our subjects about this and, considering that this would be profitable to us and to our successors, have granted their request.⁹

The grant established German occupancy in Slavic villages, increasing the financial gain they were able to extract from the acquisition of the Slavic lands.¹⁰ The colonization of the Baltics served a specific economic purpose for the Holy Roman Empire. By exploiting the region's land and resources, the Holy Roman Empire advanced and strengthened its own economy.

The Wendish Crusades shifted the crusading ideal from a show of religious piety to a show of political virility on behalf of the Holy Roman Empire. In past crusades, the warriors sent to distant lands often sought pilgrimage to a holy Christian site, such as the shrines in the Holy Land. While the Wendish Crusades could not be justified as pilgrimage because there were no sacred shrines to visit, the papacy still provided religious justification.¹¹ In a letter to the Archbishop and Clergy of Magdeburg in 1199, Pope Innocent III offered total forgiveness of the sins of anyone who weathered the pilgrimage crusades to the Baltics.¹² To be sure, this was not the first time the papacy had permitted the commutation of a pilgrimage vow in exchange for joining a crusade, but it does signal the start of a routine, widespread use of the papacy's authority to do so, a development that would fundamentally alter the crusading enterprise during the thirteenth century and later.¹³ In other words, the Letters of Pope Innocent III indicated the use of papal power to fulfill a political and military agenda set forth by the Holy Roman Empire. Although there was not a concrete religious benefit for those making the journey to the Baltics, the papacy likened the strengthening of the Holy Roman Empire to that of religious piety, which justified why the papacy could grant forgiveness in the case of the Wendish Crusades.

This evolving vision of a solid and ever-expanding empire was a vision fulfilled by the Wendish Crusades and its unification of diverse lands and peoples under Christendom. *The Travels of John Mandeville*, which depicted the likely fictional Christian kingship of Prester John in the Far East, posits a worldview that aligned with the desires of the fourteenth-century Holy Roman Empire.¹⁴ The legend and popularization of the story of Prester John indicate the Christian West's awareness of precisely what the military conquest of distant lands could provide the empire in the realm of imperial power and expansion. *John Mandeville on Prester John* romanticized the idea of the Eastern empires, which proved themselves as self-sufficient and powerful, with the source of their power drawn from the subordination of other kingdoms.¹⁵ In the story of Prester John, the Holy Roman

⁹ Allen and Amt, ed., *The Crusade*, 256–257.

¹⁰ J. A. Perkins, "Dualism in German Agrarian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28, no. 2 (1986): 287–306.

¹¹ James A. Brundage, "The Thirteenth-Century Livonian Crusade: Henricus de Lettis and the First Legatine Mission of Bishop William of Modena," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 20, no. 1 (1972): 1–9.

¹² Allen and Amt, ed., *The Crusades*, 216–220.

¹³ Brundage, "The Thirteenth-Century Livonian Crusade," 3.

¹⁴ Allen and Amt, ed., *The Crusades*, 364–366.

¹⁵ Marianne O'Doherty, "Imperial Fantasies: Imagining Christian Empire in Three Fourteenth-Century Versions Of 'The Book Of Sir John Mandeville,'" *Medium Aevum* 86, no. 2 (2017): 323–349.

Empire saw a glimpse of its future: a powerful Christian empire that went far beyond the bounds of Western Europe.

At the beginning of the Wendish Crusades, we see the development of a problematic concept take hold: religious righteousness extending into imperialist colonialism. While the Holy Roman Empire stood on the grounds of moral authority and civilized society, they took more resources than they offered to the Slavic peoples, making one reconsider who was assisting who. Within the study of colonialism, we see empires claim to use their wide-reaching success to help less fortunate societies, but how fortunate can the conqueror be if their success depends on the resources of those they conquer?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, S. J., and Emilie Amt, ed. *The Crusades: A Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.
- Brundage, James A. "Hunting And Fishing In The Law And Economy Of Thirteenth-Century Livonia." *Journal of Baltic Studies* 13, no. 1 (1982): 3–11.
- Brundage, James A. "The Thirteenth-Century Livonian Crusade: Henricus de Lettis and the First Legatine Mission of Bishop William of Modena." *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 20, no. 1 (1972): 1–9.
- Jensen, Kurt Villads. "Holy War – Holy Wrath!: Baltic Wars Between Regulated Warfare and Total Annihilation Around 1200." In *Church and Belief in the Middle Ages: Popes, Saints, and Crusaders* edited by Kirsi Salonen and Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, 227–250. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
- O'Doherty, Marianne. "Imperial Fantasies: Imagining Christian Empire in Three Fourteenth-Century Versions Of "The Book Of Sir John Mandeville."" *Medium Ævum* 86, no. 2 (2017): 323–349.
- Perkins, J. A. "Dualism in German Agrarian Historiography." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28, no. 2 (1986): 287–306.
- Reynolds, Burnam W. *The Prehistory of the Crusades: Missionary War and the Baltic Crusades*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Spence, Richard. "Pope Gregory IX and the Crusade on the Baltic." *The Catholic Historical Review* 69, no. 1 (1983): 1–19.
- Taylor, Pegatha. "Moral Agency in Crusade and Colonization: Anselm of Havelberg and the Wendish Crusade of 1147." *The International History Review* 22, no. 4 (2000): 757–784.