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The Order of the Sword Brethren and the idea of Jerusalem as *Heimat*

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The Order of the Sword Brethren and the idea of Jerusalem as *Heimat*

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Foundation of the Order

The Order of the Sword Brethren (*Militia Christi de Livonia*) was founded in the early thirteenth century in what was then known as Livonia (mod. Latvia) as part of the ongoing processes of mission and conquest covering both Latvia and Estonia. During this period, an increasing number of missionaries came to the region with the aim to baptize and christianize the local pagan peoples and subjugate them to the supremacy of the Roman Church. These early missionary endeavours quickly evolved into proper crusades, with the first formal crusade in Livonia taking place shortly before 1200.

The third bishop of Livonia, Albert of Riga (sed. 1198–1229), soon recognized the need for permanent military support and initiated the founding of the Order of the Sword Brethren in 1202. The order thus became the first military order to be founded outside the traditional crusading territories of the Holy Land or Iberia.¹ The new order was given the rule of the Knights Templars by Pope Innocent III (sed. 1198–1216). The order however did not enjoy a very long history: most of the brethren, alongside their master, Wolkin, and a number of western crusaders were killed by an overwhelming force of Samogitians and Semigallians during an expedition into modern-day Lithuania in 1236. Afterwards, the remaining brethren were absorbed into the Order of the Teutonic Knights, who took over the order's possessions in Livonia and Estonia.²

¹ One of the contemporary chronicles, The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia (HCL), claims that it was a Cistercian monk and co-worker of the bishop by the name Theodoric who was the actual founder of the new order, thus stating that “brother Theoderic foreseeing the treachery of the Livonians and fearing he would be unable to resist the multitude of pagans, and, moreover, to multiply the number of the faithful and to preserve the church among the pagans, founded certain Brothers of the Militia of Christ” (*Eodem tempore previdens idem frater Theodericus perfidiam Lyvorum et multitudini paganorum non posse resistere metuens, et ideo ad multiplicandum numerum fidelium et ad conservandam in gentibus ecclesiam fratres quosdam milicie Christi instituit*), Heinrichi Chronicorum Livoniae, ed. Leonid ARBUSOW – Albert BAUER (Monumenta Germaniae Historica SS rer. Germ. [31]), Hannover 1955, VI,4. A translation into English can be found in BRUNDAGE, James E., The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, Columbia 2003. Arnold of Lübeck also offers a description of the founding of the Order although his narrative differs in certain respects from the account found in Henry of Livonia, see Arnoldi Chronicorum Slavorum, ed. Georg Heinrich PERTZ (Monumenta Germaniae Historica SS rer. Germ. [14]), Hannover 1868; for a recent translation into English, see LOUD, Graham A., The Chronicle of Arnold of Lübeck (Crusade Texts in Translation), Abingdon 2020.

² Regarding the general history of the order, see BENNINGHOVEN, Friedrich, Der Orden der Schwertbrüder. *Fratres Milicie Christi de Livonia*, Köln u.a. 1965.

The fact that the Sword Brethren were granted the rule of the Knights Templar by the pope could indicate that the new order would also lean on the larger and older Order of the Knights Templar in its own self-understanding. For example, the sources state that the knights of both orders wore similar white garments, and several early sources even imply that the Sword Brethren were referred to as ‘Templars’ in some of the official documents.³ Addressing this issue, Pope Innocent III stated in a letter of 1210 that the Sword Brethren “who observe the Rule of the brothers of the Knights Templar shall wear a different sign on their habit, in order to show that they are in no way subject to them.”⁴ Thus, while the Knights Templars wore a red cross on their white garments, the Order of the Sword Brethren took up the symbol of a red sword; hence their more common name.⁵ Despite this early identification with the Templars there is nothing in the sources, however, that indicates that the Sword Brethren actually cultivated a foundational Narrative about themselves hailing from the Holy Land or even Jerusalem like the Templars.

The Lord’s Vineyard and the land of the Virgin Mary: Livonia as ‘Heimat’

Unlike most other military orders, the Sword Brethren have left no account of their own founding, nor of the ideas they may have had about a spiritual or physical homeland. We therefore have to look more broadly at the available sources related to the mission in Livonia and Estonia to find out if the main actors cultivated ideas about a specific homeland (Heimat). The relevant sources include (missionary) chronicles, papal letters, letters to or from regional or local secular and ecclesiastical leaders, and letters to or from the Sword Brethren themselves.

Prominent among the sources offering some insight into the history of the Sword Brethren are the chronicles which write about the ongoing missionary efforts and crusades in Livonia and Estonia not only on a general level, but also more specifically mention the Sword Brethren with a clear ‘outside-perspective’. Most important among these texts is the chronicle of Henry of Livonia (*Chronicon Livoniae*), completed around 1227.⁶ The

³ MURRAY, Alan V., The Sword Brothers at War: Observations on the Military Activity of the Knighthood of Christ in the Conquest of Livonia and Estonia (1203-1227), in: *Ordines Militares* 18, 2013, pp. 27–37, here 27.

⁴ “*Regulam quoque fratrum militiae Templi servantes, aliud in habitu signum praeferent, ut ostendant, se illis nequaquam esse subiectos.*” Liv-, Est-, und Kurländisches Urkundenbuch nebst Regesten, ed. Friedrich Georg von BUNGE et al. (Reval, 1853–), vol. 1, XVI.

⁵ Arnold of Lübeck, book V, also states that the knights chose the sword as their specific badge.

⁶ See note 1 for the bibliographical data.

chronicle describes in relative detail the founding of the order and its activities until the end of the 1220s. Overall, the author takes a critical view of the Order's activities and the growing conflict between the Order and the bishop of Riga. Nevertheless, this chronicle offers a relatively good impression of some of the fundamental ideas of both the missionaries and the members of the Order regarding a geographical or spiritual affiliation. The so-called Livonian Rhymed Chronicle (*Livländische Reimchronik*), completed around 1290, must also be mentioned here, as this text was written by a member of the Teutonic Order in Livonia and thus represents the views of the Sword Brethren' successors, albeit from a much later period.⁷

On a general level, the fundamental narratives of these sources seem to be based on descriptions of specific missionary work – this appears distinctly biblical in its form. Both Livonia and Estonia are consistently described as the new fields of mission – often referred to as the Lord's vineyard – which, through God's own intervention and will, had now become the target of an extensive missionary effort. Consequently, this also came to apply to the Sword Brothers, whom these texts place within the same overall narrative.⁸ This description of the new mission is particularly prominent in Henry of Livonia's Chronicle. It relates to these new lands in distinctly biblical phrases, often referring to the priests and monks as (either true or false) workers in the Lord's Vineyard. At the same time, the crusaders and the knightly brethren are encouraged to fight the battle of the Lord (*prelia Domini*) while setting themselves as a wall for the House of the Lord day and night (*qui se murum pro domo Domini die ac nocte ponerent*).⁹

This clearly articulates the missionary efforts in both Livonia and Estonia as a continuation of a sacred history that began with the Great Commission as described in the New Testament. Thus, the authors placed the missionary work in Livonia and Estonia in a biblical framework which was meant to legitimize the local work as equal to the deeds done in the Holy Land. It is therefore also

⁷ *Livländische Reimchronik: mit Anmerkungen, Namenverzeichnis und Glossar*, ed. Leo MEYER, Paderborn 1876. For an English translation, see *The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle*, transl. Jerry C. SMITH and William L. URBAN, Madison ²2001.

⁸ For a thorough analysis of the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, see JENSEN, Carsten Selch, *Through Words, not Wounds. History and Theology in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, Turnhout 2024.

⁹ The reference to the battles of the Lord is a direct reference to the Bible: *Prelia Domini* is found in I Samuel 25.28; in other places *bellum Domini* (e.g. Exodus 17.16; I Chronicles 5.22) or *prelum Israel* (I Maccabees 3.2) is used instead. As examples in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, see HCL XI.5 and XXVII.1. A reference to the wall of the Lord's House can be found in HCL XI.3.

important that the various sources repeatedly portray the local events as a direct result of a divine act of will that now allowed many pagan peoples to accept the Christian faith.¹⁰

Similarly, new holy places are established through the specific acts of conversion and baptism, the destruction of pagan shrines, the bloody martyrdoms of some of the missionaries, and the construction of churches and new religious centres of power. Very characteristically, Henry of Livonia even describes the episcopal city of Riga as nothing less than the City of God (*civitas Dei*), and the entire region as Mary's inherited lands.¹¹ A similar idea is found in the Livonian Rhymed Chronicle, which repeatedly refers to Virgin Mary as the ruler of these lands.¹²

In this respect, both chronicles seem to perceive Livonia and Estonia as being on a par with the Holy Land. Henry of Livonia specifically has Bishop Albert proclaim to the pope: "Holy Father, [...] as you have not ceased to cherish the Holy Land of Jerusalem, the country of the Son, with your Holiness' care, so also you ought not abandon Livonia, the land of the Mother, which has hitherto been among the pagans and far from the cares of your consolation and is now again desolate. For the Son loves His Mother and, as He would not care to lose His own land, so, too, He would not care to endanger His Mother's land."¹³

According to these texts, the Holy Land may indeed have belonged to the Lord Jesus Christ as his homeland, but Livonia and Estonia belonged to the Holy Virgin Mary, making her the one true guardian of these lands. To that extent, one may summarize that, among some of the actors in these lands, Livonia and Estonia were perceived – in a biblical sense - as their true 'homeland' and on par with The Holy Land itself, even if the Sword Brethren were themselves silent in these matters.

¹⁰ This theme is also prominent in the much later Rhymed Chronicle, l. 113–160. Since the chronicler belonged to the Teutonic Order, Virgin Mary also have a prominent role in this text.

¹¹ The reference to the City of God is found in HCL IX.4. The image of the city of God was very strong in the liturgical celebration of the crusades, cf. GAPOSCHKIN, M. Cecilia, Invisible Weapons. Liturgy and the Making of Crusade Ideology, Ithaca – London 2017, pp. 31–35.

¹² It is especially prominent in the opening pages of *The Livonian Rhymed Chronicle* describing for example how the Sword Brethren had a banner depicting the Virgin Mary (l. 1005ff.).

¹³ HCL XIX.7: *terram sanctam Ierosolimitanam, que est terra filii ... sic Lyvoniam que est terra matris.*