

PATRIA HIEROSOLYMITANA

Conceptions of Heimat
in the ecclesiastical
institutions of the
Middle Ages



A Scholarly Blog
ed. by John Aspinwall and Nikolas Jaspert

The Teutonic Order and the True Cross at Marienburg: Connecting with Jerusalem

Aleksander Pluskowski



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386



UNIVERSITÄTS
BIBLIOTHEK
HEIDELBERG

DFG

Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) –
CRC 1671/1 – 517096657 / Gefördert durch die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) –
SFB 1671/1 – 517096657.



Dieses Werk ist unter der Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY-SA 4.0 veröffentlicht.
Die Umschlaggestaltung unterliegt der Creative-Commons-Lizenz CC BY-ND 4.0.

Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg 2026.

Die Online-Version dieser Publikation ist dauerhaft frei verfügbar (Open Access).

doi: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00038441>

Publiziert bei
Universität Heidelberg / Universitätsbibliothek

Grabengasse 1, 69117 Heidelberg
<https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/de/impressum>
Text © 2026, Aleksander Pluskowski

ISSN 3054-3592

The Teutonic Order and the True Cross at Marienburg: Connecting with Jerusalem

Aleksander Pluskowski (University of Reading)

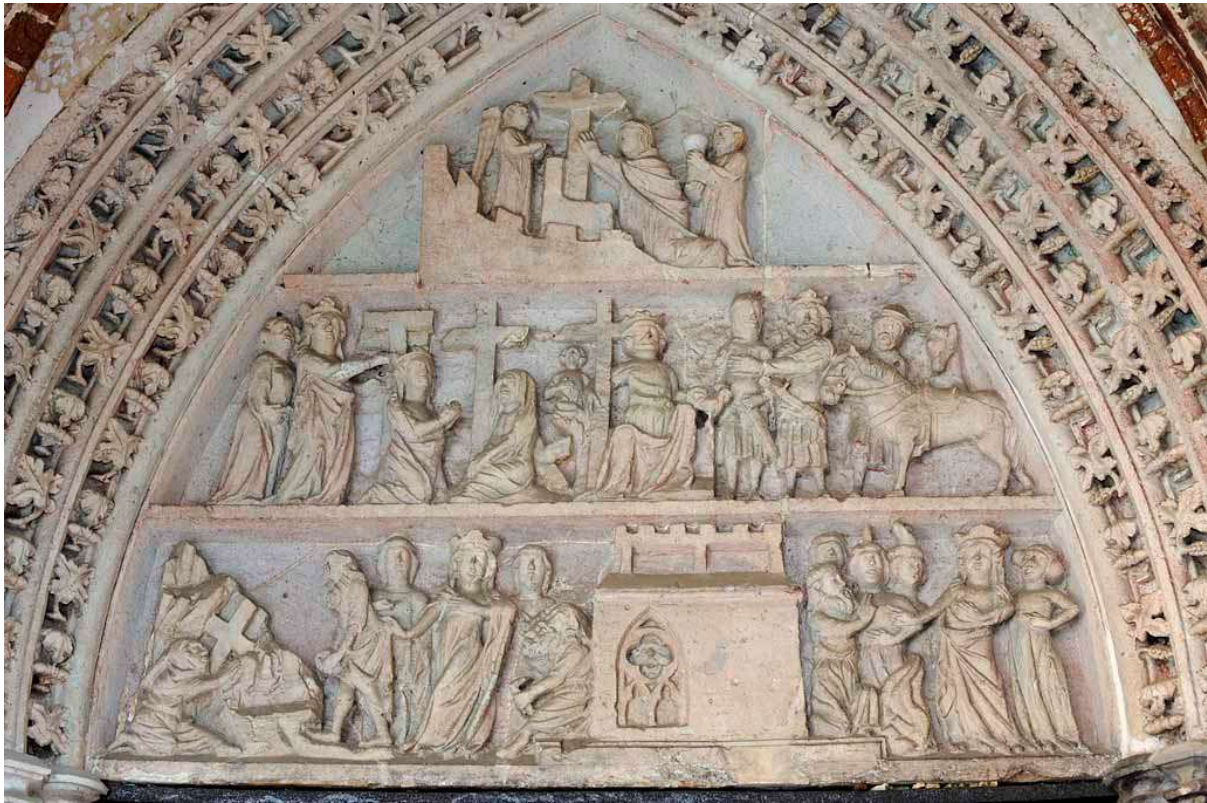


Figure 1: The tympanum above the southern portal to the chapel of St. Anne, Malbork castle, Poland. Credit: Aleks Pluskowski.

The Teutonic Order was founded as a field hospital during the siege of Acre; an event of the Third Crusade which sought to take back control of Jerusalem from the Ayyubids. The hospital was militarised and given the rule of the Templars and Hospitallers in 1198 (confirmed by Pope Innocent III in 1199), and its very name, the Hospital of St Mary of the Germans in Jerusalem, emphasised a connection to the most important place in the medieval Christian world, through the earlier German hospital in the city.¹

Under the leadership of its fourth master Herman of Salza, the Order rapidly grew into an international institution in the first few decades of the thirteenth century,

¹ MORTON, Nicholas, *The Teutonic Knights in the Holy Land. 1190–1291*, Woodbridge 2009.

becoming involved in the Fifth and Sixth Crusades, in Transylvania securing the Hungarian frontier against the Cumans, and subsequently in Prussia and Livonia. In the Levant, the Order amassed lands in the Galilee centred on its principal castle of Montfort (aka Starckenberg), whilst its main hospital and political centre remained in Acre. Following the Treaty of Jaffa and Frederick II's coronation in Jerusalem in 1229, the emperor donated various properties to the Order in the western part of the city, including a building next to the Holy Sepulchre, alongside the obligation to repair and protect parts of the city wall. The Order was also given control of the citadel.² Jerusalem only remained in Christian hands for a short time, until 1244, and then in 1271, Montfort castle was besieged and destroyed by the Mamluks. With the fall of Acre two decades later, the Order was driven out of the Holy Land, relocating its headquarters to Venice. In 1309, following an internal political struggle within the Order, it was decided to move the institution's principal house to Marienburg in Prussia (today Malbork in Poland), although this would only become the grand master's permanent residence from 1324. This reflected a profound shift in the Order's commitment away from the eastern Mediterranean to the defence and expansion of Christendom in north-east Europe.

Nonetheless, the Order maintained its connection with Jerusalem in various ways, which remained integral to its identity and heritage.³ Perhaps the best surviving material expression of this can be seen today in the chapel of St. Anne at Malbork castle. The chapel was created under the orders of Grand Master Luther of Braunschweig, as part of the rebuilding of the upper chapel (later church) of the Blessed Virgin in the northern range of the castle's main conventual building.⁴ Work began in 1331 and was completed in 1344. The chapel of St. Anne was located

² LOTAN, Shlomo, The Status and the Position of the German Structure in Jerusalem in the 12th–13th Centuries, in: *Ordines Militares Colloquia Torunensia Historica*. Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders 21, 2017, pp. 21–41.

³ See also DRAXLER, Nico, Am Anfang stand Jerusalem – Zur Heimatkonstruktion des Deutschen Ordens in der ‚Chronik der vier Orden von Jerusalem‘, in: *Patria Hierosolymitana – Conceptions of Heimat in the ecclesiastical institutions of the Middle Ages* (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00037615>.

⁴ The chapel was referred to as a church from at least the end of the fourteenth century, as was the chapel of St. Anne; JÓŹWIAK, Sławomir – TRUPINDA, Janusz, *Organizacja życia na zamku krzyżackim w Malborku w czasach Wielkich Mistrzów (1309–1457)*, Malbork 2007, pp. 441–442.

directly underneath the oratory of the upper chapel, and was intended to serve as the central burial place for the Order's grand masters. Luther did not live to see its completion, and the first grand master to be buried there was Dietrich of Altenburg in 1341, after which a further ten would be laid to rest alongside him.⁵

The chapel has two entrances with decorated tympana, which saw extensive restoration in the nineteenth century, in the 1990s and 2015. The central tympanum above the southern portal contains reliefs made from artificial stone depicting the Legend of the True Cross. The story is represented across three registers, with the narrative commencing in the bottom right corner and meandering upwards. Empress Helena demands to know the location of Golgotha from the local Jews (indicated by their hats), and only one called Judas has this knowledge but refuses to divulge it.⁶ He is imprisoned, in a building represented in the centre of the lower register, and eventually gives in and reveals the location. The narrative moves to the unearthing of the True Cross, with rock debris on either side most likely representing the earthquake that accompanied the discovery. A cowed figure supporting the rubble has been tentatively interpreted by Tadeusz Jurkowlaniec as a Franciscan friar, a reference to the mendicants' role in the Holy Land and support for the Order's mission in the Baltic.⁷ The middle register depicts the three crosses of the Passion narrative which were discovered, and the True Cross is identified as a result of the miraculous resurrection of the dead. This is followed by a scene showing Heraklius meeting with the Sasanian ruler Khosrow (who had the cross in Jerusalem taken when the city was conquered by the

⁵ ADAMSKI, Jakub, Pierwotne funkcje kaplicy św. Anny w Malborku a kontekst założeń dwukondygnacyjnych w średniowiecznej architekturze sakralnej, in: *Kaplica św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku: dzieje, wstrój, konserwacja*, ed. Janusz HOCHLEITNER – Mariusz MIERZWIŃSKI, Malbork 2016, pp. 9–26.

⁶ See also ASPINWALL, John, Jerusalem-on-Thames: Thomas Whete on the Empress Helena's Foundation of the Crosiers, in: *Patria Hierosolymitana – Conceptions of Heimat in the ecclesiastical institutions of the Middle Ages* (2026). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00037610>.

⁷ JURKOWLANIEC, Tadeusz, Ze studiów nad portalami kaplicy św. Anny na zamku wysokim w Malborku, in: *Kaplica św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku: dzieje, wstrój, konserwacja*, ed. Janusz HOCHLEITNER – Mariusz MIERZWIŃSKI, Malbork 2016, pp. 43–76; JURKOWLANIEC, Tadeusz, Skąty, nisza i klęczący w wykroku. Z badań nad portalami kaplicy św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku, in: *Stare i nowe dziedzictwo Torunia, Bydgoszczy i regionu 2*, ed. Juliusz RACZKOWSKI – Monika JAKUBEK-RACZKOWSKA, Toruń 2020, pp. 53–63, 331–340.

Persians in 614), and finally in the uppermost register its restoration and adoration. In the context of the funerary chapel (and indeed, the conventual cemetery nearby), the iconography may have had eschatological meaning, representing the Order's ongoing struggle in the name of the Cross alongside the hope of salvation.⁸ The connection with Jerusalem – the Order's spiritual home – is clear. Part of the True Cross had allegedly been re-discovered after the First Crusade in 1099 and it became the symbol of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, of crusader armies who carried it into battle,⁹ and was especially popular with the military orders.¹⁰ The relationship between Jerusalem and the True Cross was also highlighted by the Order's chronicler Peter of Dusburg, who referred to Heraclius' recovery of the relic as an integral part of the Christian history of the Holy Land.¹¹ For the Order, this connection would have been reinforced by the presence of a relic of the True Cross inside the chapel of St. Anne.

In the thirteenth century, relics (and especially those of the True Cross) had been instrumental in the sacralisation of conquered pagan territories in Livonia and Prussia.¹² Encouraged by papal indulgences, these relics attracted pilgrims, but they were also used in battle against pagans in the Baltic, and represented a tangible connection to the Holy Land. The first known relic of the True Cross had been donated to Herman of Salza by Emperor Frederick II in 1233 and would be housed in the conventual chapel at Elbing (today Elbląg in Poland), whilst another

⁸ ADAMSKI 2016, p. 25.

⁹ MURRAY, Alan V., 'Mighty against the Enemies of Christ': The Relic of the True Cross in the Armies of Kingdom of Jerusalem, in: *The Crusades and Their Sources: Essays Presented to Bernard Hamilton*, ed. John FRANCE – William G. ZAJAC, Aldershot 1998, pp. 217–238; KIRSCHBERGER, Timo, *The Kingdom of the Cross – Veneration of the Holy Cross in the Crusader States*, in: *Devotional Cross-Roads: Practicing Love of God in Medieval Jerusalem, Gaul and Saxony*, ed. Hedwig RÖCKELEIN – Galit NOGA-BANAI – Lotem PINCHOVER, Göttingen 2019, pp. 107–122.

¹⁰ BOROWSKI, Tomasz – GERRARD, Christopher, *Constructing Identity in the Middle Ages: Relics, Religiosity and the Military Orders*, *Speculum* 92/4, 2019, pp. 1056–1100, 1071.

¹¹ Peter of Dusburg, IV, 77–78.

¹² LEIGHTON, Gregory, *Ideology and Holy Landscape in the Baltic Crusades*, Leeds 2022, pp. 104–106, 120–128.

is noted in the castle chapel at Thorn (today Toruń in Poland) in 1263 and at Rehden (today Radzyń Chełmiński in Poland) in 1285.¹³

In the second half of the fourteenth century, the Order's grand masters promoted a revival of religious life within the institution, particularly in Prussia. This saw the procurement of new relics, including those of the True Cross. The largest collection was documented in Marienburg, with one fragment kept in the chapel of St. Laurence mentioned in 1358, and two reliquaries of the True Cross are noted in the church of St Mary in the 1430s.¹⁴ This provides the context for the presence of such a reliquary in the chapel of St. Anne, first documented in 1394.¹⁵ It is not known when the relic came into the Order's possession, but if the depiction on the southern portal was created to emphasise the presence of the True Cross within the chapel, the deposition of the relic could have been linked to the building works completed in 1344. For those brethren, members of the conventual household, and pilgrims passing through the southern portal to venerate the relic, the link between the Order and Jerusalem would have been clear and tangible.

¹³ LEIGHTON, *Ideology and Holy Landscape*, p. 114, 124; POLEJOWSKI, Karol – SZYBKOWSKI, Sobiestaw, *The Teutonic Knights, the Bishop of Warmia and the Relics of the True Cross in Prussia in the Second Half of the Fourteenth Century*, in: *The Military Orders VII: Piety, Pugnacity and Property*, ed. Nicholas MORTON, London 2019, pp. 258–266, 261.

¹⁴ ZACHARIAS, Rainer, *Die Reliquienwallfahrt zur Hochmeisterresidenz Marienburg*, in: *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands* 50, 2002, pp. 11–35; *The Teutonic Knights*, p. 262.

¹⁵ *Das Marienburger Ämterbuch*, 124–126; ROZYNKOWSKI, Waldemar, *Średniowieczne wyposażenie liturgiczne kaplicy św. Anny*, in: *Kaplica św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku: dzieje, wstrój, konserwacja*, ed. Janusz HOCHLEITNER – Mariusz MIERZWIŃSKI, Malbork 2016, pp. 79–85.

Bibliography

Sources

Das Marienburger Ämterbuch ed. Walther Ziesemer, Danzig 1916.

Peter of Dusburg = Petrus de Dusburg, 'Cronica Terre Prussie', ed. Max TÖPPEN, *Scriptores Rerum Prussicarum*, vol. 1, Leipzig 1861 repr. Frankfurt am Main 1965, pp. 3–219.

Literature

ASPINWALL, John, Jerusalem-on-Thames: Thomas Whete on the Empress Helena's Foundation of the Crosiers, in: *Patria Hierosolymitana – Conceptions of Heimat in the ecclesiastical institutions of the Middle Ages* (2026). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00037610>.

ADAMSKI, Jakub, Pierwotne funkcje kaplicy św. Anny w Malborku a kontekst założeń dwukondygnacyjnych w średniowiecznej architekturze sakralnej, in: *Kaplica św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku: dzieje, wstrój, konserwacja*, ed. Janusz HOCHLEITNER – Mariusz MIERZWIŃSKI, Malbork 2016, pp. 9–26.

BOROWSKI, Tomasz – GERRARD, Christopher, Constructing Identity in the Middle Ages: Relics, Religiosity and the Military Orders, *Speculum* 92/4, 2019, pp. 1056–1100, 1071.

DRAXLER, Nico, Am Anfang stand Jerusalem – Zur Heimatkonstruktion des Deutschen Ordens in der ‚Chronik der vier Orden von Jerusalem‘, in: *Patria Hierosolymitana – Conceptions of Heimat in the ecclesiastical institutions of the Middle Ages* (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00037615>.

FROLOW, Anatole, *La relique de la Vraie Croix. Recherches sur le développement d'un culte*, Paris 1961.

FROLOW, Anatole, *Les reliquaires de la Vraie Croix* (Archives de l'Orient Chretien 8), Paris 1965.

JURKOWLANIEC, Tadeusz, Ze studiów nad portalami kaplicy św. Anny na zamku wysokim w Malborku, in: *Kaplica św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku: dzieje, wstrój, konserwacja*, ed. Janusz HOCHLEITNER – Mariusz MIERZWIŃSKI, Malbork 2016, pp. 43–76.

JURKOWLANIEC, Tadeusz, Skąty, nisza i klęczący w wykroku. Z badań nad portalami kaplicy św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku, in: *Stare i nowe dziedzictwo Torunia, Bydgoszczy i regionu 2*, ed. Juliusz RACZKOWSKI – Monika JAKUBEK-RACZKOWSKA, Toruń 2020, pp. 53–63, 331–340.

KIRSCHBERGER, Timo, The Kingdom of the Cross – Veneration of the Holy Cross in the Crusader States, in: *Devotional Cross-Roads: Practicing Love of God in Medieval Jerusalem, Gaul and Saxony*, ed. Hedwig RÖCKELEIN – Galit NOGA-BANAI – Lotem PINCHOVER, Göttingen 2019, pp. 107–122.

JÓŹWIAK, Sławomir – TRUPINDA, Janusz, *Organizacja życia na zamku krzyżackim w Malborku w czasach Wielkich Mistrzów (1309–1457)*, Malbork 2007.

LEIGHTON, Gregory, *Ideology and Holy Landscape in the Baltic Crusades*, Leeds 2022.

LOTAN, Shlomo, The Status and the Position of the German Structure in Jerusalem in the 12th–13th Centuries, in: *Ordines Militares Colloquia Torunensia Historica. Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders* 21, 2017, pp. 21–41.

MORTON, Nicholas, *The Teutonic Knights in the Holy Land. 1190–1291*, Woodbridge 2009.

MURRAY, Alan V., ‘Mighty against the Enemies of Christ’: The Relic of the True Cross in the Armies of Kingdom of Jerusalem, in: *The Crusades and Their Sources: Essays Presented to Bernard Hamilton*, ed. John FRANCE – William G. ZAJAC, Aldershot 1998, pp. 217–238.

POLEJOWSKI, Karol – SZYBKOWSKI, Sobiesław, The Teutonic Knights, the Bishop of Warmia and the Relics of the True Cross in Prussia in the Second Half of the Fourteenth Century, in: *The Military Orders VII: Piety, Pugnacity and Property*, ed. Nicholas MORTON, London 2019, pp. 258–266.

ROZYŃKOWSKI, Waldemar, Średniowieczne wyposażenie liturgiczne kaplicy św. Anny, in: *Kaplica św. Anny na Zamku Wysokim w Malborku: dzieje, wstrój, konserwacja*, ed. Janusz HOCHLEITNER – Mariusz MIERZWIŃSKI, Malbork 2016, pp. 79–85.

ZACHARIAS, Rainer, Die Reliquienwallfahrt zur Hochmeisterresidenz Marienburg, in: *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ermlands* 50, 2002, pp. 11–35.