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Heroic Contradictions: An Introduction

>»It's me, hi
I'm the problem, it's me
At teatime, everybody agrees
I'll stare directly at the sun, but never in the mirror
It must be exhausting always rooting for the anti-hero«
Taylor Swift: Anti-Hero (2022)

Negations of the Heroic

Ulrich Bröckling has sketched out a typology of ›Negations of the heroic‹.[1] In this article, he sets out from a definition of the hero as a morally deviant figure—deviant in a positive sense, set apart from normality and the masses—and the polarizing force of the heroic as a field of power which tends to affect all those within it. From these two aspects of the heroic, Bröckling defines potential negations of it in three possible dimensions: a quantitative moral dimension, in which the negation of the heroic fails to meet heroic standards; a qualitative level, in which the negation can be as great as the hero, but with morally negative attributes; and a categorial difference, in which the negation refuses to relate to the heroic field of power altogether.[2] There are two common denominators to this typology of negations: first, the moral matrix on which both the heroic and its negation unfold and are measured against; and second, the construction of the heroic figure within the potential cultural expressions of their identity. Both of these common denominators rely heavily on examples and figurations of the heroic as produced in 20th century Western societies: the alleged moral matrix on which they unfold needs the imagination of a common cultural system connected to a common system of values, in which both the heroic qualities and its deviations can be easily identified and categorized. This does not work anymore if we do not understand the system—if, for example, moral qualities that contradict

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1 Ulrich Bröckling: Negations of the heroic – a typological essay, in: helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 5 (2019), pp. 39–44.

2 ibid., p. 40.

each other, or contradict our understanding of the heroic, are ascribed to a hero, the matrix is ripped and the relation between hero and negotiation is disturbed.

The tension between the person and their heroization is also significant for a specific historical period and for a specific way of approaching it through cultural studies. The idea of culture as a relatively fixed matrix bound together by a set of values, collectively understood and shared, has been criticized from various perspectives—minority perspectives, postcolonial perspectives, or simply a structuralist understanding of the relation between language and social reality. Whether Superman emerges in the DC-universe, Harry Potter in the Hogwarts books, or Max Manus (1914–1996) as an actual person in the Norwegian resistance movement during WWII and accordingly in books and movies about him, makes little difference if one trusts the figurations as much as the people themselves—or none of them at all.[3] However, recently most real-life heroes have met criticism because not all aspects of their real life were quite as heroic as previously imagined—Mother Theresa (1910–1997) did not merely help the poor but put maybe even more focus into missionizing and anti-Communist propaganda; Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg (1907–1944) may have tried to kill Adolf Hitler, but only after he was convinced that the war could not be won by the German Reich;[4] and Greta Thunberg did start the most important movement for climate justice, but also voices a position in the complex Middle East conflict that has been questioned by many parties.[5] In all of these cases, some chronological distance from the historical figure themselves, a broader perspective, and more knowledge about the circumstances, and insight into other sources than the ones used for heroization have helped to nuance the view on the person, which in some cases led to the destruction of the heroic image, for better or for worse.

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3 Andreas Rauscher: The Marvel Universe on Screen: A New Wave of Superhero Movies, in: Mark Berninger (ed.): Comics as a Nexus of Cultures: Essays on the Interplay of Media, Disciplines and International Perspectives, Jefferson 2010, pp. 21–32; Ulrike Kristina Köhler: Harry Potter – National Hero and National Heroic Epic, in: International Research in Children's Literature 4 (2011), no. 1, pp. 15–28; Gunnar Iversen: From Trauma to Heroism: Cultural Memory and Remembrance in Norwegian Occupation Dramas, 1946–2009, in: Journal of Scandinavian Cinema 2 (2012), no. 3, pp. 237–248.

4 Bill Niven: The Figure of the Soldier as Resister: German Film and the Difficult Legacy of Claus Schenck Graf von Stauffenberg, in: Journal of War & Culture Studies 2 (2009), no. 2, pp. 181–193.

5 Mucha Mkono/Karen Hughes/Stella Echentille: Hero or Villain? Responses to Greta Thunberg's Activism and the Implications for Travel and Tourism, in: Journal of Sustainable Tourism 28 (2020), no. 12, pp. 2081–2098.

The criticism of heroes does not disqualify them from being heroes, because it is evident that heroes polarise.[6] It can even be argued that heroism is always dubious and controversial. [7] As popular culture demonstrates, both on the page and screen, heroes that have gone wrong are popular and attractive. In the last two decades, anti-hero-driven TV series such as *Sopranos* (Tony Soprano), *Breaking Bad* (Walter White) and *Mad Men* (Don Draper) have locked the interest of large audiences on all sizes of screens.[8] Audiences can root for the anti-heroes and, despite their misdeeds, see them as heroic. As Andreas Haller showed in his study of an English outlaw Robin Hood, Hanseatic pirate Klaus Störtebeker, and American bank robber Jesse James, anti-heroes embody certain values and virtues of a social group that feels represented by them.[9] Although a hero may break a law, their actions are in accordance with the values of a specific group. Lawless heroes demonstrate an ambiguity of heroism, marking social and political conflicts. The attitudes towards them depend on the specific standpoint of a social class or group.[10] In this ambiguity, the potential for negations of the heroic within one and the same figuration appears.

It may seem obvious that heroes and their antagonists are interdependent.[11] Heroes frequently need to further themselves using opposition. As Stefan Berger put it, referring to 19th century nation-building, »national enemies were often overcome by national heroes and both […] belonged firmly to the pantheon of Romantic national narratives.«[12] National enemies can be as

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6   Felix Heinzer/Jörn Leonhard/Ralf von den Hoff: Einleitung: Relationen zwischen Sakralisierungen und Heroisierungen, in: Felix Heinzer/Jörn Leonhard/Ralf von den Hoff (eds.): Sakralität und Heldentum, Würzburg 2017, p. 9.

7   Johanna Rolshoven: Helden 2.0. Zur Einleitung, in: Johanna Rolshoven/Toni Janosch Krause/Justin Winkler (eds.): Heroes – Repräsentationen des Heroischen in Geschichte, Literatur und Alltag, Bielefeld 2018, p. 13.

8   Ronald G. Asch et al.: Das Heroische in der neueren kulturhistorischen Forschung: Ein kritischer Bericht, in: H-Soz-Kult, 28.07.2015, www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/fdl-136 846 (21.1.2025)

9   Andreas J. Haller: Mythische Räume der Gesetzlosigkeit in Erzählungen über Robin Hood, Klaus Störtebeker und Jesse James, Baden-Baden 2020, pp. 17–18.

10 ibid., pp. 17–18.

11 Olmo Gölz: The Imaginary Field of the Heroic: On the Contention between Heroes, Martyrs, Victims and Villains in Collective Memory, in: helden. heroes. héros E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 5 (2019), pp. 27–38.

12 Stefan Berger: The Power of National Pasts: Writing National History in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe, in: Stefan Berger (ed.): Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective, London 2016, p. 55.

effective in inspiring a nation as the national heroes, mobilising the public not around, but against themselves.

As in the case of the heroic, the anti-heroic is a predominantly male phenomenon.[13] In terms of masculinity, the hero as well as the anti-hero usually leave the sphere of the exceptional and play by the rules of hegemonic masculinity: their role as male is defined by their domination of other men whose masculinity is deemed subordinate, and their predominantly sexualized relation to women. Moral ambiguity as a heroic feature is most likely seen as more appropriate for men than for women. The most often stereotypical gender roles in heroic narratives are a clear indicator of the situatedness of the heroic within specific historical and social factors.

As Ulrich Bröckling admits in the article already mentioned here, a typology badly fits together with historical development, both of the individual and the phenomenon in general. The development of heroes over several decades we see in the James Bond movies shows that heroic masculinity in the same figure needs more brokenness, desperation, and blues in the 2010s than the blunt sexism, sexual prowess, and glamour that worked in the 1960s.[14] What is true for 007 is even more true for heroic figures that have been produced and maintained over several hundred years. The original sources documenting the figures have not changed—though many may have disappeared, and others have been created anew—but what has changed significantly is the societies in which the heroic unfolds. Both hero and their contradictions are thereby up for debate as to how the cultural system surrounding them can be understood.

Medieval heroic research

There is a deficit of historical studies on the anti-heroic or, more generally, negation within the creation and construction of the heroic. The topic of negative heroes has been dominated by literary and media scholars. These scholars are mainly interested in protagonists or mythical figures who, despite their liminal and ambiguous narrative position, have been perceived as heroes. Additionally, there has been interest in 18th and 19th century novels in

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13 Rolshoven: Helden 2.0. On gender and heroism see: Birgit Studt: Helden und Heilige: Männlichkeitsentwürfe im frühen und hohen Mittelalter, in: Historische Zeitschrift 276 (2003), no. 1, pp. 1–36; Mary Beth Rose: Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature, Chicago 2002.

14 Barbara Korte: (Re-)Bonded to Britain: the meta-heroic discourse of "Skyfall" (2012), in: helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen 1 (2014), pp. 68–77.

which the main protagonists were criminals and antiheroes. [15] Stefanie Leth-bridge pointed out in her overview of the general scholarship on anti-heroes that at the beginning of the 21st century, researchers in the field had four different approaches: an interest in the cultural-historical dimension of heroes or anti-heroes; secondly (and relatedly) a focus on social values that are challenged by defective heroes; thirdly, an examination of power structures, especially gender roles; and fourthly, an interest in anti-heroes and popular culture.[16]

Some of the research on the cultural-historical dimension of heroes and anti-heroes has been carried out in the field of medieval and early modern literary studies.[17] These studies show the importance of the environment and context of moral values in heroisation or de-heroisation. As Andrea Grafetstätter has shown, the ridicule of the aristocratic heroes Arthur (Artus) and Dietrich von Bern in late medieval drama in the urban context can be seen as a dismantling of feudal and noble heroes, and the value system these heroes represented for the townspeople who performed and watched these performances.[18] The challenge to the values and existing norms as an important element of medieval anti-heroism has been described by other literary scholars as well. As Neil Cartlidge suggests, heroism in the Middle Ages was based on such values as chivalry, aristocracy, loyalty, masculinity, and militarism; anti-heroism is »perhaps so prominent in medieval romance precisely because it provides a means of challenging or examining these values«.[19] Likewise, Cartlidge emphasises that in medieval literature, writers and their audiences were also attracted to anti-heroes not because of their anxiety about the heroism, but because of the dramatic options the anti-heroic offered.[20]

Though historical studies of premodern villains and antiheroes are scarce, they demonstrate some paradoxes. As already shown, villains and anti-heroes

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15 Rebecca A. Umland: Outlaw Heroes as Liminal Figures of Film and Television, Jefferson 2016; Haller: Mythische Räume der Gesetzlosigkeit, p. 24.

16 Ronald G. Asch et al.: Das Heroische in der neueren kulturhistorischen Forschung.

17 Michael Dallapiazza (ed.): Krieg, Helden und Antihelden in der Literatur des Mittelalters: Beiträge der II. Internationalen Giornata di Studio sul Medioevo in Urbino, Göppingen 2007.

18 Andrea Grafetstätter: Der Held als Witzfigur: Artus und Dietrich im Spätmittelalter, in: Christian Kuhn/Stefan Bießenecker (eds.): Valenzen des Lachens in der Vormoderne (1250 – 1750), Bamberg 2012, p. 117.

19 Neil Cartlidge: Introduction, in: Neil Cartlidge (ed.): Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance, Suffolk 2012, p. 1.

20 Ibid., p. 2.

have the potential to be seen as somewhat positive protagonists. In the past, enemies have been not only vilified, but also sometimes quite surprisingly made to be heroes, such as the Turkish sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481) in the Renaissance Italian Turcophile literary texts; the conqueror of Constantinople elsewhere was regarded as an enemy of Christendom.[21]

In recent scholarship on the heroic and the negation of the heroic in premodern societies, the influence of the Freiburg research group *Heroes. Heroizations. Heroisms* (SFB 948) is visible. Kristin Skottki and Mike Horswell, for example, use Bröckling's concept of the heroic in their study of the construction of crusading heroes and villains.[22] As shown here, the role of the opposition in the creation of a heroic figure, as well as antiheroes, counterheroes and villains, has received little attention in historical scholarship researching premodern history and is a developing field of study. This volume seeks to explore, through regional case studies, the place and role of these negative protagonists in heroism as a larger historical phenomenon.

Heroes as the harbingers of crisis

Heroes are constructed at times of turmoil, as means of stabilizing societies or groups in a crisis. They are meant to mobilize and motivate, to personify hope, stir resistance against unbearable circumstances, and to visualize a goal to strive towards for a better future. But the mere fact that they are the harbingers of crisis also means that their birth as heroes stands on shaky ground: the interpretation of the hero's present, and their role in it, has always been up for debate. Whether they fight evil or are seen as a representative of evil, where and how they intervene and which kind of light this intervention sheds on their present is not a given. Bröckling argues from the perspective of a contemporary sociologist, and his assumption is that the societies that use heroic images and figures share a common cultural ground, and thereby also a common moral code from which the hero emerges.[23] This assumption falls flat from the perspective of historical or cultural studies, as well as from

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21 Andreas Bihrer: Der Feind als Held. Türkische Heroen in der italienischen Renaissance: Gian Mario Filelfos Amyris im Kontext turkophiler Schriften des 15. Jahrhunderts, in: Achim Aurnhammer/Manfred Pfister (eds.): Heroen und Heroisierungen in der Renaissance, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 165–180.

22 Kristin Skottki/Mike Horswell: Introduction. Making Heroes and Villains, in: Kristin Skottki/Mike Horswell (eds.): The Making of Crusading Heroes and Villains: Engaging the Crusades, vol. 4, London 2021, p. 2.

23 Bröckling: Negations of the Heroic, pp. 39–43.

a structuralist perspective. It does, however, point towards the significance of heroes and their negations for approaching cultural systems.

If we look at the production of heroes from a *longue durée* perspective, it becomes obvious that the assumed common cultural system does not exist. Previous configurations of the heroic belong to cultural systems that are alien to us and only accessible via language, a semiotic system equally mysterious and in need of interpretation. With the gap between interpreter and system, the unquestionably positive image of the hero also disappears: their moral and heroic qualities have always been up for debate depending on the angle from which people have looked at them. One society's hero is another society's villain. The depiction of people as heroic or villainous primarily emerges in historical situations where a reduction of a complex situation is needed: the hero and the villain both serve to reduce complexities. Portraying Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin as complete opposites of hero and villain helps to reduce the complexities of the political situation in Ukraine, the status of the Ukrainian nation and democracy, and is used to mobilize opposition against the villain, Russia, personified by Vladimir Putin.[24] This is not to say that there are any moral doubts or ambiguities about the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine, but the situation is nevertheless more complicated than the opposition of hero and villain suggests, especially if the two poles are taken as personifications of entire nations and their armies. The ambiguity of the situation can be illustrated by the Russian point of view, with Putin as the hero and Ukrainians portrayed as villains, signified by the ultimate evil ›Nazi‹.[25] The ease with which we adopt one interpretation and dismiss the other points towards the cultural and moral system in which we live—the fact that there is an opposite point of view points towards the fact that there is at least one different cultural and moral system from which people can argue.

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24 Małgorzata Zachara-Szymańska: The Return of the Hero-Leader? Volodymyr Zelensky's International Image and the Global Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, in: Leadership 19 (2023), no. 3, pp. 196–209; Liisi Laineste/Anastasiya Fiadotava: Heroes and Villains in Memes on the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine, in: Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore 90 (2023), pp. 35–62.

25 Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe/Bastiaan Willems: Putin's Abuse of History: Ukrainian »Nazis«, »Genocide«, and a Fake Threat Scenario, in: The Journal of Slavic Military Studies 35 (2022), no. 1, pp. 1–10; Nikolay Koposov: »The Only Possible Ideology«: Nationalizing History in Putin's Russia, in: Journal of Genocide Research 24 (2022), no. 2, pp. 205–215; Arseniy Kumankov: Nazism, Genocide and the Threat of The Global West. Russian Moral Justification of War in Ukraine, in: Etikk i Praksis – Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics 1 (2023), pp. 7–27.

If we take this example back to the medieval period, enemies in war did exactly the same. They tried to simplify a complex political situation by portraying individuals or collectives from ›their‹ side as heroes, and the other side as villains.[26] Knowing the outcome and later developments, we can see that the Teutonic Order was not standing on morally undisputed ground when they vilified the Grand Duke Vytautas.[27] They were arguing from a situation in which the territory of the Order had been reduced dramatically by lost wars, their religious and political legitimation had been targeted within a trial at the Council of Constance, and opposition in the Prussian towns was growing.

Medieval text production

While modern heroes are often looked at as if they existed in a pre-constructed form, the focus on medieval heroes gives us a chance to focus on the actual moment of production of the heroic—and its negations. Traditional source criticism already gives us the tools necessary to reflect on the modes of production of the texts, their authors and biases, and the historical circumstances of their coming into existence. In this process, the hero comes down to earth, so to speak—it is obvious and undisputed that medieval chronicles and hagiographies argue from a specific angle and on the basis of a certain worldview in which the expansion of Latin Christianity is the undisputed basis of civilization. In the chronicles from the East, the spread of Greek/Orthodox Christianity is the moral role model and the Latin Christians are seen as a growing threat. Within these two larger blocks, a lot of different viewpoints are possible and are expressed depending on the authors and commissioners of the texts: urban chronicles have a different focus and political angle than those written for a specific religious order or for the territorial lords of the same towns, the king or archbishop. While there was a basic common cultural ground, namely their affiliation with Christian world, all other aspects of reli-

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26   Kristin Skottki/Mike Horswell (eds.): The Making of Crusading Heroes and Villains: Engaging the Crusades, vol. 4, London 2021; Paweł Kras: The Imagined Communities of Heretics: Constructing the Identity of the Religious Enemy in the Late Middle Ages, in: Andrzej Pleszczynski/Joanna Aleksandra Sobiesiak/Michał Tomaszek/Przemysław Tyszka (eds.): Imagined Communities: Constructing Collective Identities in Medieval Europe, Leiden 2018, pp. 364–387.
27   See the chapter of Gregory Leighton in this book; Giedrė Mickūnaitė: Making a Great Ruler: Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania, Budapest 2006.

gious, political, and cultural belonging were up for debate and construction depending on the viewpoint and the historical situation.

The Icelandic sagas were written down in a Christian society, in which the clerical elite situated itself in relation to the centres of Christian culture—first the Norwegian archbishopric, then ultimately Rome. From this approach of re-centring the Christian periphery, they described their ancestors as not-yet-Christian, but ancestors nevertheless—a relatively unique viewpoint for the depiction of ›pagans‹ in Christian texts. This lead to the construction of heroes who lack all common moral ground: the Norse Greenlanders, as well as the Icelanders, murder each other on a daily basis, are traitors and liars, and still do not lack heroic qualities in the modern sense. Many of them stick out from the mass of early settlers of the islands in the North Atlantic, they manage to create power relations around them and most of all, they are worthy of the memory of generations to come, even though the moral system of the later generations has changed completely. The first Christian rulers, such as Olaf Tryggvason, are portrayed in a different light than *Eirik rauða*, the outlaw who not only discovered Greenland but convinced an entire generation of Icelanders to settle it together with him and accept him as their leader. In hindsight, the pagan heroes of the Icelandic sagas lack many of the qualities we would like to see in heroes – Freydis, Eirik's daughter, has an entire party of Greenlanders killed during a winter in North America after she lied about their alleged transgressions against her property, and kills their wives herself. Still, she belongs to a heroic family of settlers and entrepreneurs and is remembered for the riches she brings back.

The Latin hagiographic sources from medieval Scandinavia are less ambiguous regarding the moral system from which they argue. Still, they form the base for the complete re-negotiation of the roles of St. Henrik and Lalli. Produced for the propagation of King Erik IX. Jedvardsson (d. 1160) as a saintly *stirps regia* as well as for the construction of Henrik as the first bishop of the Finnish part of the realm—at a time when there was no bishopric to rule in that area yet, and would not be for another 150 years or so—the *Vita Sancti Erici* and *Legenda s. Henrici* construct the king and the bishop as brothers in arms for a common cause, the fight against the Finnish pagans. From the perspective of the 13th century Uppsala archbishopric, in which the texts were produced, this attribution of heroes and villains was fairly undisputed—as was the situation in which the vernacular *Piispa Henrikin surmavirsi* was composed by anonymous authors. They argued from the perspective of the Finnish peasantry, as Christians who still saw the Swedish as invaders, and gave Henrik's killer a name, a family and a motive for the

murder, which was the transgressions of the rules of hospitality and thereby a violation of the parallel cultural system the Finnish lived in and by.

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Prussia, the attribution of heroes and villains was due to the relation an author had to the territorial lord, the Teutonic Order. The historiographic works commissioned by the Order itself still portrayed the religious institution as an unquestioned hero, personified by the Grand Master: a righteous ruler, hard on their enemies and mild towards the ever-ungrateful population, a defender of Christianity and attempted ›mehrer des Reichs‹. However, instead of increasing the empire, both Heinrich von Plauen and Wolter von Plettenberg, the Grand Master and Livonian Master of the Teutonic Order respectively, could do no more than watch their empire decline.[28] The example of Prussia also shows how relatively easy it was to be portrayed as a hero if things were going well overall: Winrich von Kniprode (m. 1351–1382) and Konrad von Jungingen (m. 1393–1407)—the Grand Masters who conveniently died a few years before the fatal Battle of Grunwald (1410)—also emerge as heroes in the historiographic works not directly commissioned by the Order, but in the Annals of the anonymous Franciscan and Johann of Posilge's (c. 1340–1405) chronicle. Konrad's brother Ulrich, the 26th Grand Master of the Order (m. 1407–1410), and Heinrich von Plauen, 27th Grand Master until 1413, are soiled by the circumstances of their rulership: the defeat against the Polish-Lithuanian Union, the uprisings of the Prussian towns, and the only short-lived stabilization of the territory under heavy reparations to the Grand Duke of Lithuania Jogaila (r. 1377–1381, 1382–1401), later King Władysław II Jagiełło of Poland (r. 1386–1434).[29] Not only the emerging urban historiography of particularly Gdańsk (Danzig) shed a completely different light on the territorial lord, and subsequently, created different heroes, or the antithesis of the territorial lord as hero. Within the Teutonic Order, Heinrich was also seen as controversial. From the sixteenth century on, the portrayal of Wolter von Plettenberg as a hero only functioned through the consequent construction of ›the Russians‹ as his complete moral,

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28 Markian Pelech: Heinrich von Plauen (1410–1413), in: Udo Arnold (ed.): Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens 1190–1994, Marburg 1998, pp. 114–118; on Wolter von Plettenberg, see Norbert Angermann/Ilgvars Misāns (eds.): Wolter von Plettenberg und das mittelalterliche Livland, Lüneburg 2001; Juhan Kreem/Tiina-Mall Kreem: Von Livland über Westfalen nach Bayern und zurück. Die Wege der Porträts Wolter von Plettenberg, in: Roman Czaja/Hubert Houben (eds.): Deutschordensgeschichte aus internationaler Perspektive: Festschrift für Udo Arnold zum 80. Geburtstag, Ilmtal-Weinstraße 2020, pp. 151–166.

29 Udo Arnold (ed.): Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens 1190–1994, Weimar 2014, pp. 106–121.

religious and military opposite. Wolter's eventual qualities as a long-term ruler of Livonia were much less important than his victory in the Battle of Smolino—the Reformation being much less qualified for the construction of an antagonism than the Russian military forces.

Also a relatively unlucky king of Sweden in the fifteenth century, Karl Knutsson Bonde, needed an evil counterpart in order to be considered a hero. The anonymous author(s) of *Karlskrönikan* chose this well-proven narrative strategy of creating a figure of pure evil in order to disguise the more ambiguous qualities of the king on his way to the throne—again, a narrative attempt to decrease complexities in a historical situation in which the dynasty desperately needed to legitimize the union between Norway, Sweden, and Denmark as well as to quell the aftermath of the peasant rebellion known as *Engelbrektsupproret*. The peasants as a collective and as an emerging political force play a significant role in the *pas de deux* of the two noble adversaries, bringing out their best and worst.

With these medieval examples in mind, it becomes obvious that textual production and production of the heroic, as well as its contradictions, are intertwined yet separate processes. The figures emerging as heroes and/or villains a couple of hundred years later are loosely based on the medieval sources, but the original historiographic and hagiographic works also make exploring moral, political, and heroic ambiguity possible. There is never only one historical figure with the potential of becoming a hero, but the historical and social situations have a panorama of figures from which contemporary authors chose—while other authors, or later societies, can choose completely differently. Even though medieval Europe is often seen as a homogenic bloc of political entities under one sacred language and religious authority, there was still plenty of variety in cultural systems in which the heroic could be situated. Depending on the geographical location, the position within armed conflicts, or the sense belonging to a social or religious class or institution, moral ground can be chosen or dismissed.

Medieval Crisis, Modern Re-Evaluations

The figures presented in this volume fit into various configurations contradicting the heroic, but the contradictions oftentimes emerge only long after the events. In the period of the medieval source productions, in most cases relatively soon after the lifetime of the anti-hero, they served the aim of reducing the complexities of a relatively recent past in order to stabilize political and cultural relations in the still medieval present—the role of the Prussian

towns in relation to their territorial lord, or the ruling dynasty of the Kalmar Union, or the eastward expansion of the Swedish realm, or the level of civilization of the Icelandic elites. But in the centuries after the initial production of historiographic and hagiographic sources, the political situation changed, and so did the perception of the crisis that had produced the initial heroes. With this, a reinterpretation or reframing of the heroes seemed necessary.

Pivotal examples for this are the reinterpretations of the constellations during Christianization as have been observed for the Baltic nation states as well as Finland. In periods of nation building and nationalism, the heroes of the Christian (Catholic) faith become the bearers of a colonial rule, destroyers of native languages and customs, and agents of oppression. Their killers, originally nameless pagan evildoers, become protagonists of the emerging nations.[30] The idea of moral qualities which are supposed to be needed in a hero completely change with the shifting political situation. Why the same process has not happened regarding the indigenous people portrayed in the sagas and their anti-colonial agency needs to be evaluated, since the medieval texts are quite similar in their portrayal of the Western heroes and their omission of the indigenous counterparts—the latter remain nameless in the first sources but are given a story and an identity in the first vernacular adaptations of the story.

The perception of turmoil and crisis is pivotal in the changing constructions of heroes and their contradictions. Radical changes in the construction of heroes within the same narrative point towards radically changed political circumstances. As for medieval Prussia, the perception of crisis never left at least the German speaking minority in East Prussia, Poland and the Baltic countries (Latvia and Estonia). Until the most recent decades, the depiction of the Baltic crusades has been an object of bloody conflict between the modern nation states on these historical territories, encompassing questions about the Teutonic order and its rule, the societies it created, and the surrounding settlement processes.[31] The role of heroes and their counterparts in the evaluation

30 See the chapter by Tuomas Heikkilä in this book and Gustavs Strenga: From Bishop-Killer to Latvian National Hero: Imanta's Transformations from the Middle Ages to Nation-Building, in: Cordelia Heß/Gustavs Strenga (eds.): Doing Memory: Medieval Saints and Heroes and Their Afterlives in the Baltic Sea Region (19th–20th centuries), Berlin 2024, pp. 81–110.

31 Paul Srodecki: Krucjata, Wyprawa Krzyżowa, Krzyżowcy, Krzyżacy: A Short Outline of Polish Crusading Terminology and Crusade Rhetoric, in: Benjamin Weber (ed.): Crusade: The Uses of a Word from the Middle Ages to the Present, London 2024, pp. 42–56; Hartmut Boockmann: Der Deutsche Orden: zwölf Kapitel aus seiner Geschichte, München 1994, pp. 234–254; Anti Selart: Historical Legitimacy and Crusade in Livonia, in: Torben Kjersgaard

of this period has proven significant yet ambiguous. From a contemporary point of view, mourning the German presence in the area or condemning the antagonists of the Teutonic Order in the same fashion as the medieval sources seems not only outdated, but politically suspicious. The moral qualities described in the medieval sources have not changed, but our need to apply contemporary moral judgement to them has. Erich Weise (1895–1972), member of the NSDAP and archivist in occupied Poland until 1945, filled his post-war studies about the Teutonic Order and Poland-Lithuania with the same hatred he and many other Germans brought into the occupation of the territories lost in 1410 and in 1945. His judgements about the Polish-Lithuanian Union must be read in the light of his participation in, and apologism for, the war of destruction in Eastern Europe and Russia. Even Weise's source edition of the controversy between the two parties at the Council of Constance is filled with the need to declare the Teutonic Order as the moral victor, as if that would have changed the outcome of WWII.[32] His and others' rants projecting a perceived moral injustice in the post-war period onto the medieval sources seem ridiculous today, with the ultimate acceptance of the Eastern borders of Germany and the reunification fulfilled, but at the time, they fit the moral matrix from which Weise and the entire German *Ostforschung* operated: the right of Germany to expand at least into the boundaries of the medieval territory of the Teutonic Order, and then further. The fervor of these battles has, for the most part, lost its interest for scholars and politicians today. But the example of Prussia vividly shows how much the idea of the heroic changes with different political frameworks.

An aspect basically absent from the medieval sources but evident in contemporary views on the historical examples is the almost complete absence of women from the stories, and consequently, the function of the heroic narratives for the construction of masculinity. There are no women unless they are heroes, and without examples of female heroes, the heroic is masculine by definition. The definition of heroic qualities as masculine, and the integration of moral ambiguity into the definition of the heroic, is not made explicit in the medieval texts—and neither in the majority of heroism studies—but formulated implicitly through the absence of female heroic figures and qualities. In the Vínland-Sagas, there is the potential of a counter-narrative, with

Nielsen and Iben Fonnesberg-Schmidt (eds): Crusading on the Edge. Ideas and Practice of Crusading in Iberia and the Baltic Region, 1100–1500, Turnhout 2016, pp. 29–54.

32 Erich Weise: Die Traktate vor dem Konstanzer Konzil (1414–1418) über das Recht des Deutschen Ordens am Lande Preußen, Göttingen 1970.

female protagonists shaping the interaction between Norse Greenlanders and indigenous peoples differently. The most prominent female figure, however, is not Gudrid, the only Norse who speaks with an indigenous (female) person, but Freydis, heroic only in her destructiveness and disrespect for social norms and successful for it. In the narrative production about St. Henry and Lalli, the latter only becomes a fully-formed character because of the actions of his wife, Kerttu, equally absent from the Latin historiographic tradition but, in the vernacular texts, the original motivation for the murder. It is Kerttu who accuses Henrik of having violated the rules of hospitality, and Lalli acts accordingly. The female actions stipulate the male heroic qualities, they bring them out without being granted any participation in the heroism themselves.

In the texts about and from the Teutonic Order, the absence of women is almost ridiculous. They create the idea of Prussia, Livonia and the towns as imagined political entities in which only masculine actions and qualities exist: the celibate Knight brethren ruling over their masculine kingdoms, mirrored by the town councils, in which women only are given the role of mourning their husbands killed in political struggles. Again, the female exists only to bring out the masculine heroic qualities, if at all.

In historical hindsight, we know that the societies that have created these heroic narratives and their changing interpretations were not entirely masculine, and that the heroic narratives thus contribute to the stabilisation of patriarchal structures. A consequence of the situation of these narratives in times of turmoil and crisis is that masculinity has always been in crisis, and has always needed stabilisation in the form of heroism attributed primarily to men, or to women adapting to male ideals and standards in order to be validated in a male-coded system.

Heroic contradictions

The making and changing of heroes is both a cultural and a historical process, an aspect that has not played any considerable role in the growing research on cultural figurations of the heroic and their typology. But the historicity of heroes can highlight important aspects of heroes and their significance for the societies creating them. Most heroes were actual people at one point. Their heroization starts and becomes visible in the source production about them: medieval chronicles and hagiographies, sometimes accompanied by administrative sources documenting the person, or letters and communication in which contemporaries described the person not with the intent to make them a hero, but rather to complain about them, to report something they

have or have not done, or to warn others of them, among other mundane intents. Already in these moments of source production lies the nucleus of ambiguity and contradictions of the heroic—no one is a plain hero from the start.

In contrast to contemporary sociological typologies, the historical examples of heroes and anti-heroes must be read as intrinsic parts of a cultural system that is not evident, but is a semiotic system that needs to be deconstructed. The application of contemporary moral standards to historical figures is misleading, but the analysis of the historical shifts in judgment about these figures can help with this deconstruction.

In this volume, we have collected contributions that focus on the first moments at which medieval heroic figures and their negations become visible—during their lifetime, shortly thereafter, or as the first written evidence of their existence and collective memory. The examples are aimed at showing the historical circumstances in which heroization, positive or negative, begins: the situations of crisis and instability, the function of the written texts and their attempts to intervene into the troubled present, the negotiations between practical knowledge about a person and literary or historiographic adaptations of them.

In addition to the moment of birth of the hero, the examples in this book also show how these initial documents and drafts of the heroic are adapted, changed, and turned around in later generations and centuries, according to changing political and historical circumstances. The person remains the same, described or imagined in the first contemporary texts about them, but whether they are seen as heroes or villains changes over time. The *longue durée* perspective on the creation, destruction, and re-formulation of heroes also shows gaps in the creation of the heroic. Counter-narratives are created, explored or ignored; collectives of people do or do not change their attributes and imagined collective character traits; the same story is told from a different perspective and the roles of hero or villain reversed in the process.

The moral ambiguity extant in human nature in general, and also in the construction of the heroic, is highlighted by these examples of historical change in the perception of heroes and their contradictions. The contradictions can be situated within the heroes themselves and be detected by later generations, or they can come out of changed historical circumstances and lead to the detection of alternative heroes. In the examples from Prussia and Livonia, the groups maintaining the memory of protagonists of the Teutonic Order as heroes despite the radical changes in the political situation rather

point towards a desperate attempt to deny the obvious ambiguity of the heroic.

In sum, the examples of medieval heroes from Sweden, Finland, Prussia, and Livonia, and their treatment over time, do not add much to a potential typology of negations of the heroic. Instead, they show the historical constructedness of both heroes and negations. In the long-term historical perspective, with changing historical circumstances and enduring basic material about the people involved, the question of whether one is a hero, a counter-hero, anti-hero, or anything in between becomes obsolete: they are all shades of the heroic, constructed differently in different societies with different needs. The hero does not exist, end neither does their contradiction.

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