

Gustavs Strenge / Cordelia Heß (Eds.)

# ANTI-HEROES

Negations and Contradictions  
of the Heroic in the Medieval  
and Early Modern Baltic Sea Region



rombach  
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studies of the  
baltic sea region

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in the Medieval and Early Modern Baltic Sea Region

**ROMBACH WISSENSCHAFT  
STUDIES OF THE BALTIC SEA REGION**

Editors

Alexander Drost, Marie-Theres Federhofer  
and Clemens Räthel

**Volume 2**

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© Coverpicture: The brass plates attached to the sarcophagus of St Henry (made in Flanders in the late 1410s) in Nousiainen Church, depicting the killing of the bishop by Lalli. Photo by P. O. Welin, © The Finnish Heritage Agency.

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We were almost halfway through our project when the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine happened. This dramatic event led to the suspension of our cooperation, and it prompted us to look at the dark side of the heroic. The main ideas and topics of this book were developed during the workshop »The Role of the Anti-Heroes and Evil in the Construction of the Late Medieval Northern European Heroes« (Hamburg, 14-15 September 2023). This volume has been a collaborative enterprise, and we are truly thankful to the authors for joining this book project.

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Aarhus and Riga, January 2025



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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‹.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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;<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 Schenk 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.<sup>6</sup> It can even be argued that heroism is always dubious and controversial.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> Heroes frequently need to further themselves using opposition. As Stefan Berger put it, referring to 19<sup>th</sup> century nation-building, »national enemies were often overcome by national heroes and both [...] belonged firmly to the pantheon of Romantic national narratives.«<sup>12</sup> 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-136846](http://www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/fdl-136846) (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 Gözl: 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Stefanie Lethbridge 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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«. <sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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 Turkophile literary texts; the conqueror of Constantinople elsewhere was regarded as an enemy of Christendom.<sup>21</sup>

In recent scholarship on the heroic and the negation of the heroic in pre-modern 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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 Filefos 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.<sup>24</sup> 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«.<sup>25</sup> 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 Kopusov: »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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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 Pleszczyński/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 led 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 *Eirík 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, Eirík'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.<sup>28</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup> Grand Master of the Order (m. 1407–1410), and Heinrich von Plauen, 27<sup>th</sup> 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).<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> The role of heroes and their counterparts in the evaluation

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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.<sup>32</sup> 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

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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 constructiveness 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, and neither does their contradiction.

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## Chapter 1

### Indigenous counter-heroes and the »discovery« of Vínland

#### Introduction

Who lead the troops that defeated Thorfinn Karlsefni's Norse settlers in Vínland? Who invented the missile-throwing weapon they used to force the Norse to retreat from battle? Who were the children kidnapped in Markland and brought to Greenland, forced to learn Norse and to be baptized, who remembered the names of their parents and political leaders and brought them into the Norse collective memory?<sup>1</sup>

We know very little about the first Europeans who travelled to North America, and we know even less about the people they met there. There is a comprehensive memory culture of the Norse, but none regarding the indigenous peoples who were more or less welcoming to them. This is partially the fault of the so-called Vínland sagas, a couple of Old Norse texts from the 14<sup>th</sup> century describing events around 1000 CE. These texts have been rather over-discussed, mostly with the aim to bring them in accordance with the archaeological finds, and thus to prove Norse presence in North America – or from a postcolonial point of view, to criticize a perceived continuity of colonial practice from the Norse visits until today. But even though they are dreadful texts and their bias, even their racism, is obvious, they serve as the starting point for the construction of the Norse Greenlanders, and most prominently Leif Erikson, as heroes. And, much less debated than Leif, they also give the first written description of indigenous people in today's Newfoundland and Labrador, including some of their names.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Leif Erikson in particular became the subject, based on the medieval texts, of a comprehensive heroization in the context of Scandinavian settler colonialism in North America. This heroization, as well as that of other European »discoverers« of continents and areas that had been

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1 Several colleagues have read previous versions of this text and helped to improve it significantly with their comments. I would like to thank Christine Ekholst, Uppsala universitet, Solveig Marie Wang, Universität Greifswald, Jay Lalonde, University of New Brunswick, and Tim Frandy, University of British Columbia, for helpful comments on this text, as well as my co-editor Gustavs Strenga.

inhabited for ages, supports a narrative that ignores indigenous experience and history. The heroization of settlers simultaneously means the neglect of the traumatic experiences of colonialism by the colonized. For many of the heroic stories of the modern settlement of the Americas from a white perspective, indigenous peoples have found, created, and modelled counter-narratives with alternative heroes—the victory of Cheyenne and Lakota forces at Greasy Grass (Little Bighorn) in 1876 is a popular example, where the settlers promoted the defeated General Custer as a tragic hero, while chiefs Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull were selected as heroic representatives of the victorious joint tribes.

Replacing a hero with a counter-hero is a well-proven strategy to tell the same, well-known story from a different perspective, highlighting the other side in a conflict, overthrowing the established narrative of good and bad, winner and loser. The assignment of moral qualities, and even the roles of hero and counter-hero, are subject to change over time and with different political and social contexts, as we argue in the introduction to this book. Morally-ambiguous protagonists of a heroic narrative are not an exception, but rather to be expected over the course of time and with changes in the moral and political values of societies. Thus, the same narrative produces different adaptations and interpretations. The counter-hero can represent the people previously forgotten or oppressed by hegemonic historiography—not because they were a much nicer or better person than the criticized hero, but simply in order to turn the narrative around and make the oppressed people and perspectives visible. This aspect of the relation between hero and counter-hero makes the dynamics interesting for postcolonial readings of heroic narratives that were created in different phases of colonialism, as part of the legitimization strategies of colonizers and settlers, or as pejorative descriptions of the colonized. All of these aspects apply to the *Vínland sagas*, and to many of their modern readings.

In this context, it is meaningful to explore alternative readings of the medieval sources, to point out the moral ambiguity—or straightforward lack of morals—of the Norse protagonists, and the political implications of the later processes in which a hero was picked from the medieval sources. But contrary to many other white ›heroes‹, Leif has not (yet) become a focal point in indigenous resistance and counter-narratives, nor has he sparked the need for counter-heroes. (A statue in Iceland commemorates Leif's sister in law Gudrid and her baby son. This has been criticized as an example of white

feminism, which targets narratives of the male hero but fails to acknowledge Indigenous perspectives.)<sup>2</sup>

In the following chapter, I will examine two trajectories: first, the absence of an indigenous counter-hero to Leif and the potential for one in the Vínland sagas, and second, the process of Leif's heroization, not least as a counter-hero to Christopher Columbus. With a re-reading of the Vínland sagas with a focus on indigenous agency and actors, as well as a historicisation of the heroization of Leif, this chapter adds to a decolonisation of our knowledge about the past in relation to European heroes, their moral ambiguities, and the indigenous people who often are neglected in the narrative. However, it is always difficult to make an *argumentum ex silentio*. The absence of indigenous resistance against the heroization and commemoration of Leif Erikson can have multiple reasons, one of them maybe simply the lack of significance of this narrative for indigenous communities, in comparison to other, much more urgent colonial memory practices. Nevertheless, the differences between this case and the narratives of violent contact in Northern Europe and the Baltic may shed light on the principles of creating counter-heroes. As is evident in the Baltic and Finnish cases, explicated in the chapters by Tuomas Heikkilä in this book and Gustavs Strenga elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, the counter-narrative follows the original narrative closely: the moment of contact, the violent conflict, the participants in the conflict. By drawing on the original hagiographic narratives of missionary martyrs and inventing counterparts to these, they re-affirm the significance of the narrative itself. This may be the main reason why Leif Erikson's heroization has not yet been met with significant resistance from indigenous communities: this would mean buying into the narrative of »discovery«, assigning significance to a short-lived intervention by a group of people to a long-standing network, and thereby reaffirming a Eurocentric view on the nature of pre-colonial communities in North America/Turtle Island.

While the heroization of Leif Erikson has been criticized from various directions, indigenous resistance against this heroization has never taken the shape of a counter-narrative with the presentation of a counter-hero—in stark

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2 Christopher Crocker: »The First White Mother in America«: Guðriður Þorbjarnardóttir, Popular History, Firsting, and White Feminism, in: *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 30 (2023), pp. 1–28.

3 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.

contrast to the narrative strategies in Finland and the Baltic countries. The reasons for this are not, as will be shown, to be found in the medieval sources, but rather in the complicated and fragmented history of Newfoundland and its inhabitants prior to colonization.

### Vínland – a place for heroes?

Generations of scholars, adventure seekers and white supremacists have looked for evidence of the Norse in North America—with often absurd results.<sup>4</sup> A significant amount of research has been undertaken both regarding the Norse settlements in Greenland and the connected attempted settlement in North America.<sup>5</sup> While most scholars have believed the North American endeavour to be short-lived—as described in the Vínland-Sagas—recent dendrochronological results from structures in Greenland suggest that the Norse may have continued visiting Newfoundland or Labrador for more than 100 years due to the lack of timber in Greenland.<sup>6</sup>

The only place where it is possible to situate the written sources in an actual landscape, and thereby connect it to contact between the Norse and indigenous peoples and presence, is L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland, where a Norse settlement was excavated in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> This was received with excitement by Vínland enthusiasts, who had attempted to bring the written sources in accordance with the land for quite a while.<sup>8</sup> This enthusiasm, particularly in North America, has been criticized recently—because of the thin connection between the Vínland sagas and the excavation

4 Shannon Lewis-Simpson: *Vinland Revisited, Again: On ›Theories, Scuttlebutt, Crossed Fingers‹*, in: Anne Pedersen/Søren Sindbæk (eds.): *Viking Encounters. Proceedings of the Eighteenth Viking Congress, Aarhus 2020*, pp. 565–583.

5 Daniel Bruun: *The Icelandic Colonization of Greenland and the Finding of Vineland*, Copenhagen 2016; Gwyn Jones: *The Norse Atlantic saga. Being the Norse voyages of discovery and settlement to Iceland, Greenland, and North America*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1986; Robert McGhee: *Contact between Native North Americans and the Medieval Norse: A Review of the Evidence*, in: *American Antiquity* 49 (1984), pp. 4–26.

6 Lísabet Guðmundsdóttir: *Timber Imports to Norse Greenland: Lifeline or Luxury?*, in: *Antiquity* 97 (2023), pp. 454–471.

7 Helge Ingstad/Anne Stine Ingstad: *The Viking discovery of America. The excavation of a Norse settlement in L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland*, St. John's 2000.

8 For a comprehensive criticism of the entanglements of the Vínland sagas as settler colonialism in Newfoundland, see Jay Lalonde: *›There Is a Strong Leaven of the Old Norse Blood in Nearly All of Us‹: Settler Colonialism and the Vínland Mythology on the East Coast of North America*, in: Heß, Cordelia/Wang, Solveig Marie/Wolf, Erik (eds.): *Colonial Entanglements*

site, and because of the Viking frenzy it sparked alongside presumed Viking artifacts all over North America, particularly in places where Scandinavians settled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> While L'Anse aux Meadows has remained the only material find demonstrating a Norse presence in North America, it is far from evident that this was the actual place where a person named Leif Erikson and his siblings spent some winters. None of this matters for processes of heroization, though.

Today, the excavation site is a historical site of the state of Canada, prominently featured in material promoting tourism, and thereby also the myth of a thousand years of white presence in North America. Scholars have frequently pointed out the mythological and constructed character of this historical continuity, but it seems that the scarce ruins and the lack of specifics about the landscape rather help the mystification. »The site is a more or less empty stage for a millennial mystery«, as Claire Campbell puts it.<sup>10</sup> It was not, however, empty at the time of the arrival of the Norse. The website of Parks Canada says in 2022:

The Norse were only one of several groups who lived at L'Anse aux Meadows. Aboriginal peoples have used the site as far back as 6000 years ago, probably because of its rich marine harvest, and its close proximity to Labrador. The tools and campgrounds of as many as five or six distinct groups have been identified at the site. Prominent among them are the Dorset people who had their camps on the southern shore of the bay, more than two hundred years before the Norse. Curiously enough, none were there during the century of the Viking explorations.<sup>11</sup>

Many museums, especially those holding collections from colonial contexts, have begun comprehensive efforts of decolonization: hiring indigenous curators and counsellors, conceptualising exhibitions differently, giving center stage to indigenous voices and their narratives, and questioning established narratives.<sup>12</sup> At L'Anse aux Meadows, these attempts are dire—not least because the Dorset culture does not exist anymore. In general, the indigenous history of Newfoundland is poorly documented for the period around 1000

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and the Medieval Nordic World. Norse Colonies and Indigenous Peoples, Berlin 2025, pp. 235–256.

9 Gordon Campbell: Norse America: The Story of a Founding Myth, Oxford 2021.

10 Claire Elizabeth Campbell: Nature, Place, and Story: Rethinking Historic Sites in Canada, Montreal 2017, p. 25.

11 Parks Canada Agency: Aboriginal Sites. L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site, 19.11.2022, parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/nl/meadows/culture/sites (23.7.24).

12 See for example Kerstin Barndt/Stephan Jaeger: Introduction: Museums, Narratives, and Critical Histories, in: Kerstin Barndt/Stephan Jaeger (eds.): Narrating the Past for the Present and Future. Museums, Narratives, and Critical Histories, Berlin 2024, pp. 1–22.

CE. In the area where contact with the Norse occurred, there was no continuous indigenous settlement by one group, according to the material finds. Several First Nations have lived on the island over the past 1000 years, sometimes in conflict with each other. Some of them do not exist anymore. The Dorset, inhabiting the Eastern Arctic between 500 BCE and 1000, in some areas 1500 CE, have been replaced for unknown reasons by Inuit or Proto-Inuit in the same area; the Mi'kmaq and Beothuk had been in conflict for centuries, and the Beothuk have disappeared at some point in the 19th century due to the changes posed on their home area by white settlers.<sup>13</sup> The history of peoples in the area shows that the brief encounter with the Norse was not a central concern and most likely left no traces in the collective memory of any of them. Both Dorset and Beothuk have disappeared, in different periods and for different reasons, and since these two groups are the most likely to have met the Norse in Newfoundland and Labrador, any collective memory of the meeting will likely have disappeared with them. This raises the question of which group would have developed a narrative tradition about the brief and probably not very interesting contact with the Norse, and who would develop a counter-hero?

### Vínland in the written sources

The Vínland sagas form a very small part of the entire corpus of Icelandic sagas. They are most commonly classified as historiographic texts. Scholars have tried to reconstruct their production, which in most cases is assumed to have taken place much earlier than the oldest surviving manuscripts. For the two narratives about the settlement of Greenland and Vínland, scholars have assumed a 13<sup>th</sup> century origin, while the manuscripts stem from the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> Thus the narratives were created and/or written down between 250 and 350 years after the actual events—pointing towards the significance of the colonization of the North Atlantic for the clerical elites of Late Medieval Iceland, but not exactly toward very accurate representations of the events. Often material sources and archaeological finds can help reconstruct an alternative

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13 Lisa Rankin: Towards a Beothuk Archaeology: Understanding Indigenous Agency in the Material Record, in: Fiona Polack (ed.): *Tracing Ochre. Changing Perspectives on the Beothuk*, Toronto 2018, pp. 177–198.

14 All quotes in this chapter follow the edition: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson: *Eyrbyggja saga – Brands Þátr Örva – Eiríks saga rauða – Grœnlendinga Saga – Grœnlendinga Þátr* (Íslenzk fornrit 4), Reykjavík 1957.

version of medieval events, such as has been done regarding Inuit-Norse relations in Greenland.<sup>15</sup> But the difficulties posed by the source situation on Newfoundland, with migrant or partly nomadic societies who have been expelled from the island several times, cannot be used as an excuse to reproduce the bias of the medieval Norse sources, in which indigenous people appear mainly as collectives with at best mysterious features, but without names, voices, and protagonists.

Recently, there have been attempts to bring indigenous knowledge and storytelling in dialogue with western written sources. As important as the validation of indigenous knowledge in an academic system which traditionally values only written sources by Western people is,<sup>16</sup> this dialogue does not work very well regarding medieval sources. Reasons for this are the different structures and narrative aims of the texts, as well as their different concepts of time and space. Relying on comprehensive mnemonic practices, indigenous storytelling often carries educational and didactic purposes.<sup>17</sup> Oral traditions that have been preserved in written form have often been collected by ethnographers or other scholars with a colonial gaze on the informants. Also the fact that the stories themselves have changed in the colonial contact must be considered. The contact between Inuit and Norse peoples in Greenland, for example, is portrayed in a series of stories written down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which are the subject of intensive scholarly debate. They were reported and illustrated by Aalut Kangermiu (1822–1896), in Danish known as Aron fra Kangeq, written down and published in a colonial context and probably heavily edited by all people involved in the process of codification of indigenous storytelling.<sup>18</sup> However, for the Norse-Indigenous encounter in North America, the sagas are the only surviving narrative source.

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15 Kirsten A. Seaver: *The Frozen Echo. Greenland and the Exploration of North America, ca. A.D. 1000–1500*, Stanford 1996; Thomas W. N. Haine: *Greenland Norse Knowledge of the North Atlantic Environment*, in: Hudson, Benjamin T. (ed.): *Studies in the medieval Atlantic*, New York 2012, pp. 101–121; see also Cordelia Heß: *Rassismus im Norden? Eine postkoloniale Spurensuche in Grönland und Sápmi, ca. 980–1500*, Berlin 2025.

16 Michael Evans/Adrian Miller/Peter J. Hutchinson/Carlene Dingwall: *Decolonizing Research Practice: Indigenous Methodologies, Aboriginal Methods, and Knowledge/Knowing*, in: Patricia Leavy (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., Oxford 2020, pp. 263–281.

17 Jo-ann Archibald|Q'um Q'um Xiim: *Indigenous Storytelling*, in: Philippe Tortell/Mark Turin/Margot Young (eds.): *Memory*, Singapore 2018, pp. 233–241.

18 Kirsten Thisted: *On Narrative Expectations. Greenlandic Oral Traditions about the Cultural Encounter Between Inuit and Norsemen*, in: *Scandinavian Studies* 73 (2001), p. 253.

Recent readings of the sagas have pointed out their situatedness in the Christian periphery and the attempts of the Icelandic clerical elites to re-center themselves in relation to the archbishopric in Nidaros.<sup>19</sup> An understanding of the relation between different peripheries and centers in Northern Europe is central for the descriptions of the Other in the sagas, ›barbarians‹ and generally non-Christian people. With this in mind, the description of the ›discovery‹ of North America is not a discovery and rather yet another story of adventurous Icelanders, their seafaring skills, and a society on the verge of adopting Christianity. The perspective of a Christian society and elite looking back at their ancestors before conversion shapes the characters of the story's protagonists: brave, but morally ambiguous at best because they still lacked the true faith. But the Vínland sagas have most often not been read as products of a peripheral elite and their self-consciousness, but as more or less faithful descriptions of Icelandic-Greenlandic travels and encounters. On the other hand, scholars have also discussed the ›indigenous‹ elements in the Icelandic-Old Norse sagas, specifically elements from the pre-Christian period and how they may have merged with Christian influences.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the question of indigeneity in the context of Norse *landnám* in the North Atlantic is an interesting one.

Scholars have discussed which of the sagas relies on the most accurate oral traditions and can thus be deemed as the closest representation of actual events. For my argument, these debates are irrelevant, since the heroization of Leif Eriksson, starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, predates all of these scholarly debates with the publication of the saga texts, and at the point when the heroic narratives were created and popularized, the sagas were more or less taken as accurate descriptions of the events.

Heroization is a common—and perhaps the most striking—feature of many of the historiographic sagas, even though the moral superiority of the heroes is debatable. Many of them are structured according to the life events and deeds of men or women, much like the *Gesta* in Latin historiography of a somewhat earlier period. Narrative influences from Latin hagiography are

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19 William H. Norman: *Barbarians in the Sagas of Icelanders. Homegrown Stereotypes and Foreign Influences*, New York 2021.

20 See Séamus Mac Mathúna: *The Question of Irish Analogues in Old Norse-Icelandic Voyage Tales in the Fornaldarsögur and the Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus*, in: Matthias Egeler/Wilhelm Heizmann (ed.): *Between the Worlds: Contexts, Sources, and Analogues of Scandinavian Otherworld Journeys*, Berlin 2020, pp. 283–345.

also clearly visible in the construction of the saga heroes.<sup>21</sup> However, the later heroization of Leif Erikson is not exactly a given in the Vínland sagas. On the contrary, several people fill more pages in the sagas and are also more relevant to the development of the settlement and the travel to Vínland, as will be shown. *Grænlandinga saga* is the older of the two texts, handed down in *Flateyjarbók*, a manuscript of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. It starts with the colonization of Greenland by Eirik rauða, his family and his followers of 30 ships, of which 14 reached Greenland and formed the first settlement. *Grænlandinga saga* is not centered around a single person, but the entire first generation of Greenlandic Norse and their consecutive travels to Vínland: Eirik, his sons Leif, Thorvald, and Thorstein, his daughter in law Gudrid and her husband Karlsefni, and his daughter Freydis. They all consecutively travel to Vínland, with varying success and varying kinds of interactions with the inhabitants. Vínland is described as a plentiful region from which the Greenlanders return with profit—though the natural resources they bring home and the trade with the inhabitants remains unclear. *Grænlandinga saga* is mostly concerned with the whereabouts and actions of the Greenlanders, while the inhabitants of the newly-found islands are portrayed in the narrative as mere disturbances. The Greenlanders make no attempt to meet the autochthonous population for trade or information exchange. The first trip and »discovery« of the land, however, is attributed to Bjarni, a Norwegian who lost his way on the route to Iceland. He and his companions are hit by Northern winds on their way to Greenland and see land, »landit var ófjöllótt ok skógi vaxit, ok smár hæðir« (had no mountains but was full of forest, and with small hills), and they sail on, and then another land strip, »vera slétt land ok viði vaxit« (flat and heavily vegetated), and a third one, »en þat land var hátt ok fjöllótt ok jökull á« (and that land had high mountains and glaciers on it),<sup>22</sup> which they also dismiss because Bjarni's information about what Greenland looked like differed from this.

The narrative of Bjarni's travels, whose descriptions of the lands he found match the descriptions of later Greenlandic travels to North America, has no parallel in the other Icelandic texts.

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21 Siân Elizabeth Duke: *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature*. Studies in Old Norse literature, Cambridge 2017.

22 *Grænlandinga saga*, in: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (ed.): *Eyrbyggja saga - Brands Þátr Örva - Eiríks saga rauða - Grænlandinga Saga - Grænlandinga Þátr*. Íslenzk fornrit 4. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1957, pp. 241–269; id. chapter 2: Bjarni Herjólfsson leitar Grænlands.

*Eiriks saga rauða*, as the name suggests, is more about Eirik and his family than about Vínland.<sup>23</sup> The settlement of Greenland after Eirik's exile from Iceland and the fate of the following generations form the center of the narrative; Bjarni is not mentioned. Leif is introduced as an adventurer who spends time at the royal court in Norway, becomes a Christian and brings the new faith to Greenland, falls in love with a high-born woman on the Hebrides and has a son with her, and discovers Vínland by accident when sailing from Norway to Greenland. His first and only encounter with the islands in the west is brief. They take samples of wheat, grapes, and trees and set off to Greenland. The next party cannot find Vínland but returns to Greenland. A few winters later Thorfinn Karlsefni and two other Icelanders decide to try again, and they succeed, stay for a winter, and meet the inhabitants. Later, the Norse are defeated in battle.

It should also be mentioned that the travel groups did not consist only of Norse people. According to *Grænlandinga saga*, Leif's foster father Tyrkir, a German, was there as well (his name means »Turkish«). He is described as weird looking, »not much of a face«, but »clever with his hands«. While in Vínland, he is separated from the group and comes back speaking German and rolling his eyes, but in excellent humour, since he found grapes and vines.<sup>24</sup> *Eiriks saga rauða* mentions an enslaved or unfree Scottish couple, Haki and Hekja, who were given to him by Olaf Tryggvason because of their ability to run fast. They are marked out by their strange clothing called *bjafal* and are sent to land, coming back with grapes and wheat.

The weirdness of the non-Norse travel companions plays a significant role in the narrative. The narrators dwell on these descriptions and model them in contrast to the Norse, their language, clothes, and customs. The indigenous people they meet later are thus only a bit further on a spectrum of perceived cultural and linguistic foreignness.

Vínland sagas is not an actual description of the focus of these two Old Norse texts, in which the Greenlanders' travels to Vínland are parts of a larger narrative about the Norse colonies in Greenland. The heroization of Leif and his trips can hardly be seen as founded in the medieval texts.

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23 *Eiriks saga rauða*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 195–237.

24 *Grænlandinga saga*, cap. IV, p. 252.

## Indigenous people in the Vínland sagas

The Vínland sagas follow established patterns of Othering known from Latin historiography in their description of people who are not Norse, and who live on the edges of the world known to the Norse.<sup>25</sup> Greenland is already a liminal space, in which moral and social orders are fluid and debatable. Vínland, just like Greenland, becomes subject to the Greenlanders' aggressive methods of *landnám*, the naming of places, the recognition of potential places for settlement.

According to *Grœnlendinga saga*, Leif and his crew never met any Indigenous people but spent the winter on uninhabited land. Thorvald, the next traveller, set out to find traces of human habitation but found only »a wooden grain« on one of the islands west of Vinland.<sup>26</sup> Inside the mouth of two fjords, his crew found three skin-boats with eight people under them, one of which escaped, the rest were killed. Scholars have pointed this and other acts of violence against the indigenous peoples out as reasons for the later hostile relations and as evidence for a colonial mindset of the settlers<sup>27</sup>—however, given the amount of violence that occurs among the settlers, especially in Freydis' party, this should probably not be over-estimated despite the deadly result for the victims. The Norse operated in a region filled with magic and needed miraculous help to save themselves: Thorvald and his group saw some »humps« (noðkurar) in the distance and concluded that there must be settlements, which they did not approach.<sup>28</sup> A mysterious sleepiness came over them all, until a disembodied voice woke them up, because a lot of skin-boats were approaching. Thorvald advised his men to row away and fight as little as possible, and after the indigenous combatants shot a number of arrows at them, they left again. Only Thorvald died of one of the arrows.

In *Eiríks saga rauða*, the indigenous people mainly feature as collectives. A first interaction seems promising: Karlsefni, Snorri, Bjarni and the majority of

25 Tatjana N. Jackson: The Far North in the Eyes of Adam of Bremen and the Anonymous Author of the *Historia Norwegie*, in: Carol Symes (ed.): *The Global North. Spaces, Connections, and Networks before 1600*, Leeds 2021, pp. 70–99.

26 »Þeir fundu hvergi manna vistir né dýra. En í eyju einni vestarliga fundu þeir kornhjálm af tré. Eigi fundu þeir fleiri mannaverok ok fóru aftur ok kómu til Leifsbúða á hausti.« *Grœnlendinga saga*, p. 255.

27 Geraldine Heng: *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2018, p. 261.

28 »Þeir drepa hina átta ok ganga síðan aftur á höfðann ok sjást þar um ok sjá inn í fjörðinn hæðir noðkurar, ok ætluðu þeir þat vera byggðir.« *Grœnlendinga saga*, p. 256.

the original party had decided to sail south and had found a place they called Hop.

Early one morning they noticed nine hide-covered boats and the people in them waved wooden poles that made a swishing sound as they turned them around sunwise.<sup>29</sup>

The Norse decided to answer what they read as a peace sign with a white cloth:

The others then rowed towards them and were astonished at the sight of them as they landed on the shore. They were short in height with threatening features and tangled hair on their heads. Their eyes were large and their cheeks broad. They stayed there a while, marvelling, then rowed away again to the south around the point.<sup>30</sup>

When people with hide-covered boats later arrive to the Norse camp, much attention is given to the trading practices: they come and offer pelts and get cloth in return, which they wrap round their heads. The Norse do not have enough cloth to satisfy the demand and hand out smaller and smaller pieces. The visitors to the camp become terrified by the sounds made by a bull which the Norse had brought, and row away until three weeks later, when they return in large numbers, waving their sticks counter-sunwise and attacking. The following battle shows the technical advantage of the autochthon people: they have catapults, they throw a large black object with the help of poles, which makes a threatening noise and frightens Karlsefni and his men, who they decide to flee. They leave the pregnant woman Freydís behind, who takes up a sword from a fallen man and smacks it on one of her naked breasts. At this sight, the attackers leave.

Different approaches to specific resources are an important feature of the portrayal of the indigenous people. After the battle, they find the axe of a dead Norse and happily try it out on wood and stone—when it breaks from the stone, they consider it worthless and throw it away. The lack of appreciation of iron weapons is completely incomprehensible to the Norse, as is the excitement over red cloth and milk products. While these descriptions certainly

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29 »Og einn morgunn snemma er þeir lituðust um sáu þeir níu húðkeipa og var veift trjánnum af skipunum og lét því líkast í sem í hálmþústum og fer sólarinnis.« Eiríks saga rauða, p. 227.

30 »Þá reru þeir í mót ok undruðust þá, sem fyrir váru, ok gengu á land upp. Þeir váru svartir menn ok illiligir ok höfðu illt hár á höfði. Þeir váru mjök eygðir ok breiðir í kinnum. Dvöldust þeir of stund ok undruðust þá, sem fyrir váru, ok reru síðan brott ok suðr fyrir nesit.« Ibid., p. 227.

are no faithful observation of indigenous practices, they still point towards a different system of use of resources in the indigenous communities, in which the Norse products hold value completely different from the one they assign to them.

There are two indigenous individuals described in more detail in this instance: first, a woman who visits Gudrid and her newborn in the Norse hut. The woman is »wearing a black, close-fitting tunic, she was rather short and had a band round her chestnut-coloured hair. She was pale, and had the largest eyes that were ever seen in any human's head.«<sup>31</sup> She communicates with Gudrid by repeating the introductory sentence the latter says to her.

The second individual is the »tall and handsome« man whom Karlsefni believes to be the leader of the indigenous warriors. When one of his men kills someone with one of the Norse axes, he looks at the axe and throws it away into the water—a stupid act from the Norse perspective. The previously quite successful indigenous warriors subsequently flee to the woods and are not seen again.<sup>32</sup>

*Eiríks saga rauða* also provides names for at least a few of the indigenous people. On their way back from Vínland, Karlsefni and his crew meet a group of five people in Markland. Three escape, but the Norse manage to steal the two children. These two children, who were baptized and forced to learn Norse, talk about their parents, whom they call Vethild and Ovaegi. They also name two kings of their home country, Avaldamon and Valvida—this episode will be discussed in more detail below.

The descriptions of indigenous people in the Vínland sagas have rightfully led to a debate on medieval racism and white supremacy. While I am not convinced that this mirrors the actual contact between the Norse and the Dorset around 1000, the textual evidence speaks for itself and for the condescending attitude of 13<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic clergy towards the non-Christian inhabitants of North America and Greenland (for whom they used the same derogatory term).<sup>33</sup> There are all of the typical narratives familiar from much later sources

31 »Þá bar skugga í dyrin og gekk þar inn kona í svörtum námkyrtli, heldur lág, og hafði dregil um höfuð, og ljósjörp á hár, fölleit og mjög eygð svo að eigi hafði jafnmikil augu séð í einum mannshausi.« *Grænlandinga saga*, p. 262.

32 »Nú hafði einn þeira Skrælinga tekit upp öxi eina ok leit á um stund ok reiddi at félagu sínum ok hjó til hans. Sá fell þegar dauðr. Þá tók sá inn mikli maðr við öxinni ok leit á um stund ok varp henni síðan á sjóinn, sem lengst mátti hann. En síðan flýja þeir á skóginn, svá hverr sem fara mátti, ok lýkr þar nú þeira viðskiptum.« *Ibid.*, p. 263–264.

33 Kirsten A. Seaver: »Pygmies« of the Far North, in: *Journal of World History* 19 (2018), No. 1, pp. 63–87.

about colonial contact: the inhabitants of the land-to-be-settled are described as ugly, incomprehensible, and uncivilized, and their trading practices are seen as naïve, as is their disrespect of Norse products and resources. Their excellence in battles is attributed to foul play.

But the *Vinland sagas* also hold the potential of indigenous counter-heroes: there are the successful leaders in battle, and the unnamed magicians, and the named robbed children, their parents and kings.

### Indigenous heroes

With a growing visibility of and concern for the indigenous peoples of North America, hard-won by generations of political resistance and struggles, the visibility of indigenous heroes is growing as well—even though the specificities of the North American debate have a tendency to neglect the experiences of indigenous peoples, both within the memory of the settler societies and within anti-racist discourse.<sup>34</sup> While Black History Month, for example, has been celebrated in the US and Canada since the 1970s, Canada has celebrated a national Indigenous History Month (June) only since 2009.<sup>35</sup> Institutionalized events like these have increased the visibility of indigenous history in North America significantly. Along those lines, a specific discourse on indigenous heroes is yet to emerge. However, most popular media portraying indigenous heroes do not look further back than the 1800s in their search for heroes; in any case, not before the time of colonial contact.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, they often follow the bias of the written sources produced by the colonizers. Popular are, for example, anti-colonial resistance fighters such as Louis Riel, Métis and leader in the Red River rebellion in 1869/70, or prominent leaders in battles such as Sitting Bull. These heroes come not only with a documented story, but also with photographs that seem to be important for

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34 See Kevin Bruyneel: *Settler Memory. The Disavowal of Indigeneity and the Politics of Race in the United States*, Chapel Hill 2021.

35 Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada: About National Indigenous History Month, 25.3.2024, [www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1683124800202/1683124846095](http://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1683124800202/1683124846095) (23.7.24).

36 See for example: The Canadian Encyclopedia, Category: Indigenous Leaders, 2024, [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/browse/people/communities-sociology/leaders-activists/indigenous-leaders](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/browse/people/communities-sociology/leaders-activists/indigenous-leaders) (23.7.24); the graphic novel »This Place«, telling North American history from an indigenous perspective; Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm/Sonny Assu/Brandon Mitchell, et al. (eds): *This Place. 150 Years Retold*, Winnipeg 2019.

the heroization<sup>37</sup>—this holds especially true for the lists of indigenous heroes created by the governments of settler states such as Canada or Australia. Their indigenous heroes are constructed according to the very same principles as white heroes, and testified by in the sources available and legitimized by white societies. Within a more comprehensive postcolonial approach to the semantics of heroism, the concept itself must be questioned—are indigenous heroes the same as European heroes? As with many other social categories, the hero entails a certain understanding of the world, of leadership, or of societies, which may not at all resonate with these concepts in colonized societies.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, heroes from indigenous storytelling are difficult to place in time and space.

In indigenous storytelling, the main character is often not a hero in the Western sense of the concept, probably mostly because the morals encompassed in the latter are not the same. Western heroes often signify a specific form of masculinity, bravery, success without the help of family or friends, and also betrayal of enemies in order to achieve a goal. Many indigenous narrative traditions feature other moral qualities as desirable, and see the model »lonesome hero leaves his village in order to conquer and return with a prize« as suspicious. An example of this is Barre Toelken's interpretation of the Navajo story »The Sun's myth«, in which a chief ignores advice by his wife and leaves his duties in the village in order to reach the sun. His continuous selfish decisions to go for what he is not supposed to take result in him destructing several villages, including his own. The elements of this story are similar to Western hero stories: the male hero, a long and strenuous journey to reach his goal, his intimate connection with the sun reached by raping her granddaughter and uninvited moving into their house, and lastly, the swift return home with a shiny object he took as parting gift. But unlike in Western heroic narratives, his actions do not lead to a happy return and gratefulness of the ones he left behind, but in bloodshed and murder and

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37 See for example the site by the Canadian government: Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada: Indigenous trailblazers, 16.5.2023, [www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1559226684295/1559226709198](http://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1559226684295/1559226709198) (23.7.24); »Aboriginal heroes«, a similar website by the Australian government featuring Aboriginal fighters for freedom: Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, Government of Western Australia: Aboriginal heroes, 2017, [www.dlgsc.wa.gov.au/docs/default-source/aboriginal-history/right-wrongs-too/kit-part-4-aboriginal-heros.pdf?sfvrsn=95290ac4\\_2](http://www.dlgsc.wa.gov.au/docs/default-source/aboriginal-history/right-wrongs-too/kit-part-4-aboriginal-heros.pdf?sfvrsn=95290ac4_2) (23.7.24).

38 See the exploration of concepts such as ancestry, friendship, gender, and leadership in: Carsten Levisen: *Postcolonial Semantics: Meaning and Metalanguage in a Multipolar World*, Berlin 2024, pp. 106–154.

ultimately, in his humbling and loneliness.<sup>39</sup> If this can be taken as typical for differing determinations of the heroic, even though the Navajo live in an area far from the North Atlantic East coast, it may signify a general scepticism towards male heroes acting alone, or heroes acting without the support of their community in general.

Many North American indigenous groups also feature a prominent counter-hero in their stories, a trickster of dubious morals but supreme cunning, often appearing in the shape of an animal, but easily moving between the visible world and the spirit world. The ambiguity of the trickster lies in their role as both troublemakers and protectors.<sup>40</sup> Anthropologist Harold Scheub has, in a comparative approach to African and medieval Northern European narrative traditions, defined the trickster as the incarnation of the heroes' two antagonistic desires, the productive and the destructive.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the trickster in many North American indigenous stories seems not so different from many central characters in the sagas – even Leif Erikson simultaneously brings Christianity to Greenland and leaves a noblewoman alone with their offspring.

The phenomenon of heroism within indigenous communities and storytelling has not yet been researched properly. It seems that the features and functions of heroes, and their negation, the trickster, are similar to those in Western cultures and narratives: moral ambiguity, cunning, success, and failure alike are presented as didactic tales for how societies work. The difference lies not so much in the person of the hero, but in the moral system they are supposed to embody, and the lessons to be learned from them. I lack the knowledge of and experience with indigenous storytelling to have a scholarly or general opinion on the potential of a counter-hero to the *Vínland* sagas in these narratives. With the current state of research, this knowledge needs to be preserved and made accessible, as far as is culturally appropriate to share with a wider, non-indigenous community.

Taking the examples from Northern and Eastern Europe, in which no separate or new narratives were created, but rather an inversion of the Western narratives, the indigenous heroic potential in the *Vínland* sagas can be

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39 Barre Toelken: *The Anguish of Snails: Native American Folklore in the West*, Utah 2003, pp. 113–121.

40 Amanda Robinson: Trickster, in: *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 5.4.2018, [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/trickster](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/trickster) (23.7.24).

41 Harold Scheub: *Trickster and Hero: Two Characters in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*, Madison 2012, pp. 196–197.

assessed too. Finding indigenous counter-heroes in them is difficult, but not impossible. The Norse tendency to label all inhabitants of the islands west of Greenland as *skraelingar* and to portray their actions mostly as collective actions—rowing, trading, fighting, disappearing—makes it hard to make out individual heroes. However, there are some people who stand out even in the heavily biased sagas.

First, the woman who enters Gudrid's tent and repeats her saying »My name is Gudrid.« In contrast to the other indigenous people, she is described as beautiful, with a long tunica, a headband, and large dark eyes. Geraldine Heng has used this interaction as a counter-narrative to the masculine incapability of communication under the title »Women Make a Difference«: the two women, one of them nursing her baby, the other quietly entering the room, disturbed by the outbreak of violence and the language of weapons and war outside.<sup>42</sup> I am not equally convinced that this is how we should read the woman's visit in Gudrid's tent—maybe she wanted to steal the baby or kill the mother and the Norse did not understand the threat she was posing. Just assuming that a woman-to-woman-meeting with a baby involved would lead to a peaceful encounter seems to attribute presumed ›female‹ qualities to the actors that developed in entirely different cultural and historical circumstances. But undoubtedly, the mysterious woman in Gudrid's tent is one of the few individuals to be distinguished in the Norse sources. It is interesting that she has not received more attention in the feminist re-telling of the Norse heroic story, which took place in Iceland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which cast Gudrid as »the first white mother in America«,<sup>43</sup> ignoring Gudrid's nameless visitor just as much as the heroization of Leif ignores indigenous actors.

The next potential hero is the »tall and handsome man« whom the Norse identify as the leader of the indigenous warriors, and who throws the axe into the water after one of his men used it to kill a Norse man. Even this act may be interpreted as a representation of a value system different from the Norse's: the deadly material is not seen as fitting weapon for the indigenous, who are used to fighting with different tools, and the metal is seen as dangerous and suspicious even if it kills the enemies. The description of this person stands in contrast to the presumed wish to buy weapons from the Norse, which Karlsefni forbids—maybe even this wish was a Norse projection, relying on the experience that processed iron and weapons were scarce in

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42 Heng: *The Invention of Race*, p. 285.

43 Crocker: »The First White Mother«, p. 6–8.

the Greenlandic colony, while the indigenous people were completely happy without weapons made of metal.

The saddest but most comprehensive information about indigenous peoples in the sagas comes from the episode of the stolen children of Markland.

They had southerly winds and reached Markland, where they met five [natives]. One was bearded, two were women and two of them children. Karlsefni and his men caught the boys but the others escaped and disappeared into the earth. They took the boys with them and taught them their language and had them baptized. They called their mother Vethild and their father Ovaegi. They said that kings ruled the land of the [natives]; one of them was called Avaldamon and the other Valdidida. No houses were there, they said, but people slept in caves or holes. They spoke of another land, across from their own. There people dressed in white clothing, shouted loudly and bore poles and waved banners. This people assumed to be the land of the white men.<sup>44</sup>

Forced into the language and religion of their Norse kidnappers, the children act as chroniclers of their homeland, naming their parents and the political leaders of their people, and even giving information about other lands they know of beyond what the Norse call Markland. The sagas do not tell us what happened to these children when they came to Greenland, but even in this short episode, it becomes clear that the Norse value the information the children have to share about their lost home.

This episode has not received as much attention as the other ones in the Vínland sagas testifying to the Norse practices of kidnapping and slavery. In a postcolonial perspective, it resonates terribly with the situation of indigenous children not only in North America, but worldwide: forced into white families, religion and education. This has been repeated so many times since that kidnapping around the year 1000 that these two would seem perfectly suitable figures of identification for many generations of indigenous peoples worldwide – even though the context of the sagas themselves should prevent us from interpreting this kidnapping as a prefiguration of later colonial relations. The motive of kidnapping and being sold into slavery is a common theme in the Icelandic sagas as well as other written sources from the same area and

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44 »Höfðu þeir sunnanveður og hittu Markland og fundu Skrælingja fimm. Var einn skeggjaður og tvær konur, börn tvö. Tóku þeir Karlsefni til sveinanna en hitt komst undan og sukku í jörð niður. En sveinana höfðu þeir með sér og kenndu þeim mál og voru skírðir. Þeir nefndu móður sína Vethildi og föður Óvægi. Þeir sögðu að konungar stjórnðu Skrælingjalandi. Hét annar þeirra Avaldamon en annar hét Valdidida. Þeir kváðu þar engi hús og lágu menn í hellum eða holum. Þeir sögðu land þar öðrumegin gagnvart sínu landi og gengu menn þar í hvítum klæðum og æptu hátt og báru stangir og fóru með flikur. Það atla menn Hvítramannaland.« Eiríks saga rauða, pp. 233–234.

period, and thus it rather reflects a fear within a marginalized society than an act of colonial dominance.<sup>45</sup> But historical accuracy does not play a major role in other processes of heroization either. And the children of Markland are the only name-given indigenous people in the sagas, who function as bearers of information and a tradition from the North American East coast. They are victims of a violent act, but also prominent indigenous figures in a narrative tradition which otherwise does not see individuals in the indigenous groups.

### The heroization of Leif Erikson

With all of these aspects from the textual evidence of the Vínland sagas in mind, the heroization of Leif Erikson seems even more puzzling. The majority of memorial practices takes place not in Canada and Newfoundland, where the Norse reportedly visited, but in the Midwest of the US, where Scandinavians settled from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on. Critical discourse of these practices has grown over the past few decades, mainly in Canada.<sup>46</sup> The structure of Leif's heroization is relatively simple and shows several aspects well known from other hero narratives of the era of national romanticism: the actions of a larger group of people are personified by one figure, whose morally doubtful actions are ignored in favour of one central act. The process of heroization also ignores previous travels (Bjarni Herjulfsson) and other members of the ship company (Leif's brother and other name-given travellers) and attributes the »discovery« to the one with a family heritage of discovery. Leif's father already »discovered« Greenland, and Leif was reportedly a newly converted Christian and a missionary, with good connections to the Norwegian king. Leif himself does not do much while in Vínland besides obsessively naming places. The unsuccessful nature of the Norse settlement is ignored, too—Leif returns to Greenland quickly, and only the second party stays a few winters and have their encounters described. Leif's opponents remain nameless.

But the material and textual evidence plays only a subordinate role in the heroization of the Norse »discoverers«. Even before L'Anse aux Meadows was excavated, the Norse were celebrated as the first Europeans to discover the

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45 See Heß, *Rassismus im Norden?*, pp. 150–152.

46 Christopher Crocker: *What We Talk about When We Talk about Vínland: History, Whiteness, Indigenous Erasure, and the Early Norse Presence in Newfoundland*, in: *Canadian Journal of History* 55 (2020), pp. 91–122.

New World, starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>47</sup>: there are about 15 statues in various parts of the US celebrating Leif Erikson. There is even an official Leif Erikson Day in the US on the federal level, which was celebrated for the first time in 1929; since 1935, the holiday has been proclaimed by the US president annually. In Canada, Leif Erikson Day is a holiday in the province of Saskatchewan and unofficially celebrated by many immigrant communities. The feast day, October 9, is the date on which the first ship from Scandinavia arrived in the harbour of New York in 1825 – in lack of any more concrete information from the sagas on when the Norse arrived.<sup>48</sup> In North American memory culture, Leif is used as personification of several groups of European settlers, ignoring historical background and sources. He stands, simultaneously, for Scandinavian immigration (even though he was Norse Greenlander or Icelander), and for Anglo-Saxon Protestant immigration. His statue in Iceland, on the other side of the Atlantic, is meant to signify the adventurous nature of Icelanders. The problems that the Nordic countries usually have with heroes from the pre-Reformation period due to their Catholicism, which tends to fit badly into Protestant heroic qualities, are ignored here.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, official and unofficial celebrations of Leif Erikson are to be found both on the national and on the communal level in the US. Migrant communities of Scandinavian descent have appropriated Leif as the first member of their community to settle in North America. Starting from the communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin, the federal government of the US took up the opportunity to use Leif as a token for Nordic immigration—in contrast to immigration from South and East Europe, which was seen as less desirable by the still dominant WASP culture. LEIF, the Leif Erikson International Foundation, sets a clear beginning for the heroization and lists 19 statues, many of them erected with the NGO's financial help, most of them in various US states:

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- 47 The publication of this collection has been instrumental in this process: Carl Christian Rafn: *Antiquitates Americanae sive scriptores septentrionales rerum ante-columbianarum in America = Samling af de i nordens oldskrifter indeholdte efterretninger om de gamle nordboers opdagelsereiser til America fra det 10de til det 14de aarhundrede / editit Societas regia officinae antiquariorum septentrionalium, Hafniae 1837.*
- 48 The White House: A Proclamation on Leif Erikson Day, 2023, 6.10.2023, [www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/10/06/a-proclamation-on-leif-erikson-day-2023/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/10/06/a-proclamation-on-leif-erikson-day-2023/) (23.7.24).
- 49 Torgrim Sneve Guttormsen: Valuing Immigrant Memories as Common Heritage: The Leif Erikson Monument in Boston, in: *History and Memory* 30 (2018), p. 79.

1838. The Norse Sagas about Leif's discovery of America were translated into English, and American immigrants discovered Leif Erikson's contribution to history.<sup>50</sup>

One of their activities is engraving the names of Scandinavian first-generation immigrants to the US into the modern rune stones surrounding the statue in Seattle, Washington, thereby creating a connection between the first reported »Scandinavian« to set foot on transatlantic shores and several thousand immigrants from all Nordic countries who came in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The LEIF foundation presents Leif Erikson as a personification of the Scandinavian immigrant, and a factor for immigrant identification and identity. But the story is more complicated.

Vínland and Leif Erikson have fascinated a substantial number of North Americans—for different reasons, from different political directions, and to differing intensity over the decades. The recent anthology »From Iceland to the Americas« discusses various aspects of the relationship between Scandinavia and North America, deriving its information from the Vínland sagas.<sup>51</sup> The contributions testify to the immense significance that the Norse held and still hold in popular culture, memory practices, and political discourse mainly in the US, and to a lesser extent in Canada. From children's books to statues to far-right utopias, Vínland has served as an alternative vision of colonized North America—a better version of Columbus' discovery.

### Leif vs Columbus

Regarding heroes and anti-heroes, the relation between Leif Erikson and Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) is particularly interesting. The North American celebration of Christopher Columbus within the national memory culture of the US, and the recent condemnation of this celebration because of Columbus' significance for genocide in the Americas, are examples of contestations of the discovery narrative.<sup>52</sup> This criticism of the Columbus-discovery-narrative has been formulated in popular research at least since the 1950s—not necessarily from the perspective of indigenous peoples, but nevertheless as a criticism of Columbus' and other travellers' function in

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50 Leif Erikson International Foundation: LEIF, [www.leiferikson.org/index.htm](http://www.leiferikson.org/index.htm) (23.7.24).

51 Tim William Machan/Jón Karl Helgason (eds.): *From Iceland to the Americas. Vinland and Historical Imagination*, Manchester 2020.

52 National Museum of the American Indian: *Unlearning Columbus Day Myths: Celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day, 2024*, [americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/columbus-day-myths](http://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/columbus-day-myths) (23.7.24).

European expansionism and colonialism. But the heroization of Leif from the mid-1800s on was, in many ways, a counter-narrative to the wide-spread celebration of Columbus as the discoverer of the Americas, and thereby a replacement of one narrative with another, remaining within the framework of European discovery. Even before the discovery of the site at L'Anse aux Meadows, and increasingly after, the *Vínland-Sagas* were used to question the popular view of Columbus' discovery while maintaining a positive view on settler colonialism in general.

The connection between the failed Norse settlement in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century and Scandinavian immigration starting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is only one, probably the least politically challenging part of the heroization of Leif Erikson. The official and federal support for this points towards a wider context: the Norse settlement as a European claim to North America even before the beginning of settler colonialism. Leif Erikson as a person, in all his legendary vagueness, also fits into many legendary or imaginary parts of national memory culture: a person of white Nordic descent, a Viking explorer, a subject of the stable Protestant constitutional monarchies of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which have been very successful in presenting themselves as benevolent colonial masters, if active in colonialism at all. All in all, a more positive point of reference than Christopher Columbus—Italian, Catholic, travelling on Spanish ships, supported by less desirable immigrant groups.

Leif Erikson as a simplified hero is surrounded by a plethora of memorial practices, not all of which center him, but which form a larger field of *Vínland* narratives. The complex is employed by different social and political groups, of which the Scandinavian immigrants probably are the least problematic. Unsurprisingly, white supremacist groups also employ Leif Erikson and *Vínland* imagery: the *Vinlander's Social Club*, a neo-pagan skinhead group, use a >vinland flag< (white contoured Nordic cross on green background, originally designed by the Gothic metal band Type O Negative, but now used widely in far right circles); another group is called *Keystone State Skinheads* (a reference to one of the alleged contact objects, like the fake Kensington runestone), and the manosphere activist Jack Donovan, among others, is active in a Virginia-based group called »Wolves of Vinland«. <sup>53</sup> The heroization of Leif is accompanied with or even replaced by the creation of *Vinland* as an

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53 Matthew Scribner: Critiquing Columbus with the *Vinland Sagas*, in: Tim W. Machan/Jón K. Helgason (eds.): *From Iceland to the Americas: Vinland and Historical Imagination*, Manchester 2020, pp. 61–76.

imaginary place, in which an all-white/Nordic population re-connects to their heritage and masculinity.

Columbus's heroization as the »discoverer« of the Americas has been criticized ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and debates continue about Columbus Day (celebrated in several US states and South American countries on October 12) and statues of Columbus. The criticism has targeted two aspects: primarily, Columbus' violent relation to indigenous people, and his role in the European expansion in general. This criticism comes from indigenous peoples worldwide, from postcolonial theorists and activists, and from governments seeking a more inclusive memory culture. Secondly, Columbus' ethnicity and religion were seen as a stain on European supremacy, as he came from the Catholic South European kingdoms, which were deemed less desirable immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States. This aspect has been brought forward by nativists, a direction in US politics since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that opposes various immigrant groups (Catholic, Jewish, Asian, Hispanic) and favours the descendants of the earliest Calvinist and Puritan colonizers. The initial resistance to the celebration of Columbus Day by anti-Catholic and nativist groups mirrors this opposition—for example, the Ku Klux Klan was opposed to celebrating Columbus Day, surely not because of their criticism of the European discovery narrative and lack of indigenous perspective.<sup>54</sup>

#### Conclusion: Structures of narrative resistance

The so-called Vínland-sagas, composed in Iceland in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, describe the Icelandic settlement of Greenland and a much-debated journey further west undertaken by these Norse Greenlanders. In two partly overlapping, partly differing versions, at least three consecutive expeditions from Greenland are described, all of them ending in defeat in battle against the local population. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these narratives have been used for a heroization of one of the named Norse travellers, Leif Erikson, in North America. This heroization started before the only archaeological evidence of a Norse presence was found, L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, and it developed with only loose relations to the medieval texts: Leif Erikson was promoted as the first European to have set foot on a new continent, the first »discoverer«, and thereby a figure of identification for Scandinavian settlers in the USA and Canada, for an apologetic narrative of white settler

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54 Ibid.

colonialism, and other commemorative practices. While the other ›hero‹ of colonial contact, Christopher Columbus, and his heroic image have become the target of comprehensive criticism from primarily indigenous activists, Leif Erikson has been much less debated—active forgetting seems the most successful strategy for dealing with this hero. This seems to happen despite the continuous proclamation of Leif Erikson Days by US presidents: in 2016, the Chicago Tribune reported having difficulties finding any schools in the Chicago area where the days was commemorated in any way.

Vikings in general proved to be good counter-heroes to Christopher Columbus. Surrounded by masculine warrior imagery and mythology, asking no permissions and showing no remorse, it was easy to forget that their visit in North America was short, unsuccessful, and ended quickly, probably due to encounters with the inhabitants of the land. Replacing Columbus with Leif Erikson as the first ›discoverer‹ thus reproduced the Eurocentric view on colonization.<sup>55</sup> The same goes for the far lesser-known Thorfinn Karlsefni, who stayed three winters at least in North America, according to the *Vínland sagas*, and who is shown as a statue in Philadelphia for example, but also together with Leif in a relief series of »Ozeanbezwinger« from the 1930s on a building in Bremen, Germany (which also features Columbus).

A personification of the broader process of ›discovery‹ and colonization seems necessary for establishing a memory culture. An individual character, a name, and a fate aid storytelling, and a statue for »the anonymous Viking« would probably seem less heroic than the ones imagining Leif's and Karlsefnis' features and clothing. The Leif Erikson International foundation does not only list a timeline of the erection of all Leif Erikson statues on their website, but also continues to donate statues to various places—in 2000, they paid for the erection of a Leif Erikson at his supposed homestead in Narsarsuaq, Greenland, and in 2018, a bust of Leif was unveiled on the Hebrides, another place he visited according to the sagas. They do not have plans for further statues.<sup>56</sup>

Replacing Columbus with Leif Erikson does not re-write the narrative of heroic European discovery, and thus also Leif Erikson could be subject to criticism. This also happens, but in a much smaller scale than for Columbus. In some cases, a complete erasure of Viking heroism was desired: in 2018, people threw the Karlsefni statue in Philadelphia into the Schuylkill River after

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55 Ibid., p. 73.

56 Leif Erikson International Foundation: LEIF Shilshole Statue Project: Frequently Asked Questions, [www.leiferikson.org/StatueFAQ.htm](http://www.leiferikson.org/StatueFAQ.htm) (23.7.24).



Figure 1: Bernhard Hoetger: Leif and Karlsefni. Haus des Glockenspiels in der Böttcherstraße, Bremen.

having toppled it from its pedestal and beheading the figure. The anonymous iconoclasts left no explanation, but it should be mentioned that the statue had been the gathering point of Neo-Nazis on Leif Erikson Day. Its twin, located in Reykjavík, is still standing.<sup>57</sup> Maybe there are smaller local initiatives that are hard to find, but so far, there has been no attempt to dismiss Leif Erikson Day and its proclamation by the US administration, or to topple any of the Leif Erikson statues in the US. A Reddit thread from 2019 asked whether Leif Erikson would be a better-suited patron for a celebration than Columbus, based on the historical evidence for Leif's character and moral values—but without taking the dubious morals of colonialism into account.<sup>58</sup>

A number of political and narrative strategies are possible as responses to this simplified heroization. One would be to find alternatives to Leif, which would allow a focus on the aspects of cooperation and/or failure and thereby tell a different story of the European presence. The sagas name Bjarni, Thorfinn Karlsefni and Gudrid the Far-Travelled, as well as Leif's sister Freydis. All of them are described more in detail and the failure of their encounters is evident. Freydis in particular is described as a terrible person, stirring conflict and causing many peoples' death.

More generally, a focus on the failed character of the Norse settlement would be a good point for a counter-narrative that treats the historical relations in North America and Greenland more accurately: the Norse's inability to interact successfully with the locals, the unprovoked murder of indigenous peoples, the military defeat—all of these aspects are described in detail in the sagas.

A reading of the medieval sources with a focus on the indigenous people portrayed reveals a lot of potential for indigenous counter-heroes. While the sagas employ a racist language of othering, they cannot hide the fact that the indigenous populations are technically advanced, superior in battle, and generally better adapted to the region. The sagas, despite their heavy bias, also commemorate the names of political leaders of the people of Markland/Labrador, and bring forward the knowledge of the two children stolen by the Norse. Besides indigenous individuals who may represent a different

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57 Dan Stamm: Philly's Thorfinn Karlsefni Statue Toppled Into Schuylkill River, in: NBC Philadelphia, 3.10.2018, [www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/thorfinn-karlsefni-statue-schuylkill-river/191603/](http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/thorfinn-karlsefni-statue-schuylkill-river/191603/) (23.7.24).

58 Popular\_Target: What do we know about Leif Erickson's moral character?, in: r/history (Reddit thread), [www.reddit.com/r/history/comments/b2n2q5/what\\_do\\_we\\_know\\_about\\_leif\\_ericksons\\_moral/?rdt=45664](https://www.reddit.com/r/history/comments/b2n2q5/what_do_we_know_about_leif_ericksons_moral/?rdt=45664) (23.7.24).

value system than that which the Norse live—regarding the use of natural resources for example—the sagas also manifest a relation between Europeans and indigenous peoples of North America that, several centuries later, would become common: expelling parents, stealing children and forcing them into a Western culture, language, and religion. Even the exploitation of the indigenous knowledge of these children is recorded in this text.

The principle of presenting a legendary counter-hero to the established heroic narrative was a feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism in populations that had no independent nation state of their own. The First Nations and Inuit of North America do not have a nation state of their own, nor is this a political goal for which they strive. Consequently, these groups did not go through similar developments of nationalism and national romanticism as European nations. Additionally, the historical populations of Newfoundland and Labrador have left few material traces, no written traces and since at least two of them, the Dorset and the Beothuk, have disappeared, it is unclear which community would be the bearer – or re-inventor – of a tradition of resistance against the Norse, or of a counter-hero to Leif. A reading of the Vínland sagas with a focus on indigenous agency and individuality can be one little step in the long process of decolonizing our knowledge about cultural encounters before Columbus.

Looking at the examples of »indigenous heroes« presented in popular culture and government representation, they closely follow the model of Western heroism. However, the narrative structures of many traditions of indigenous storytelling show a much more complicated relation to the hero of a story, situating them in a different social and cultural context and demanding different behaviour from them. The moral ambiguity of both failed heroes and tricksters reminds of the moral ambiguity so prominent in many of the Western heroes as well.

But there is yet another possibility as to why there is not much of a resistance against the heroization of Leif Erikson. Forgetting him may actually be not only the most effective political strategy, it may also be the most radical. Neglecting Leif Erikson and not granting him a counter-hero status means rejecting the colonial narrative altogether. And this, in return, tells us something about other counter-heroes and their significance for the communities that created them.

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## Chapter 2

# The National Murderer and the Shifting Sands of Finnish Historical Identity

### Introduction

The central figure of this article is Lalli, a semi-legendary figure in Finnish history.<sup>1</sup> According to a tradition traceable to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, he was the murderer of the Apostle of Finland, Bishop Henry, in mid-12<sup>th</sup> century. While the historical authenticity of Lalli, Henry, and the events surrounding them remains uncertain, the bishop and his murderer have been the dynamic duo of Finnish self-understanding for more than seven centuries.

Today, Lalli is far more important for the historical identity of Finns than his alleged victim. The fascination with Lalli transcends historical precision, as evidenced by the extensive discourse surrounding him in various online communities and social media discussions. A glance at the most popular Finnish online platforms reveals the most important features and ideas associated with him.

Firstly, Lalli is viewed as the earliest known defender of his homeland against foreign invaders, symbolizing a deep-seated sense of territoriality and resistance to external influences. Secondly, the narrative about Lalli is used to challenge the accounts of academic historians, particularly those that portray the arrival of Christianity in Finland as a benevolent process with a positive outcome or downplay the alleged existence of a pre-Christian proto-state in Finland.<sup>2</sup> Here, Lalli represents the voice of dissent and resistance against religious conversion. Thirdly, Lalli has been elevated to the status of a cultural icon and national hero. He embodies qualities of patriotism, resilience, and independence, traits that traditionally resonate with many Finns.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 For practical reasons and for simplicity, the term 'Finland' will be used in medieval context for the eastern part of the Swedish realm otherwise known as 'Österlandet'.
  - 2 On the historical construction of a medieval proto-state, see, e.g., Jalmari Jaakkola: *Suomen varhaiskeskiaika*, Helsinki 1938, *passim*.
  - 3 See Tuomas Heikkilä: Lalli. Kansallismurhaajan muotokuva, Helsinki 2022, pp. 13–18; Mikka Hujanen: »Suomen kuuluisin murha nosti piispa Henrikin suojelupyhimykseksi – mutta onko liki 900-vuotiaassa legendassa perää?«, in: *Ilta-Sanomat*, 19.01.2021, [is.fi/koti-maa/art-2000007748533.html](https://koti-maa/art-2000007748533.html) (03.06.2024). The latter reference is to a telling example com-

The enduring appeal of Lalli raises important questions about the fluidity of historical memory and identity construction. In this chapter, we shall follow Lalli's transformation from a shadowy historical figure described in negative tones to an important national symbol of Finnish resistance and independence. His evolution from a villain to a counter-hero in his own right demonstrates how history can be selectively interpreted and reimagined to serve contemporary purposes through the centuries.

In the following, I will explore the multifaceted nature of Lalli's role in Finnish identity. How was the murderer of the national saint canonized to be a vital part of the nationalistic narrative of the birth of Finland and Finnishness? What role did scholars, authors, artists, and politicians play in re-negotiating the morally ambiguous positions of Henry and Lalli? The topic of Lalli's change from a cursed villain to a respected counter-hero, and finally to an idolized and ridiculed anti-hero, is elucidated from three intertwined viewpoints: the visual arts, the belles-lettres, and the scholarly study of Lalli and Henry. This 3D-view then leads to a comparative analysis of the phenomenon of constructing layers of heroism around a disputed historical figure to serve varying societal needs.

## Historical Background and the Sources

The area of present-day Finland was among the very last parts of Europe to be Christianized during the Middle Ages. There is archaeological evidence of Christian burial practices from the early 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, but the adoption of the new faith was gradual, with the southern and coastal areas adopting Christianity first. In the most peripheral areas of the inland the Christianization took place later, partially even after the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

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binning the mentioned three aspects and can be found among the comments to an article about Henry and Lalli in *Ilta-Sanomat*, one of the leading Finnish tabloid newspapers on January 19, 2021: »Lalli puolusti omaansa. Oikein. Ei paljoa historiantunneilla kerrota, kuinka ristiretkeläiset hävittivät Suomenkin kansaa ja pyhiä paikkoja. Takaisin välimeren [!] rannalle, kuunsirpin seuraksi.« (»Lalli defended what was his. Rightfully so. Not much is taught in history classes about how the crusaders devastated the people of Finland and their sacred places. Back to the shores of the Mediterranean, in the company of the crescent moon.«)

4 In general, see Tuomas Heikkilä: The Christianization of Finland, in: Jens Peter Schjødt/John Lindow/Anders Andréén (eds.): *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North. History and Structures. Volume IV: The Christianization Process, Turnhout 2020*, pp. 1729–1744; Markus Hiekkänen: Burial practices in Finland, in: Bertil Nilsson (ed.): *Från hedniskt till kristet*.

The scarcity of sources has led scholars to formulate various hypotheses, ranging from nationalistic interpretations of a pagan Finnish proto-state prior to the arrival of Christianity to acceptance of the medieval view of Christianization through three Swedish crusades to Finland. The so-called »first crusade« in the 1150s is particularly historically questionable, but persistently regarded as a pivotal moment in Finnish history.<sup>5</sup>

The first crusade, attributed in medieval sources to the 1150s and led by St. Eric (d. 1160), the King of Sweden, and St. Henry, the Bishop of Uppsala, poses historiographical challenges. The suggested dates conflict with known aspects of Eric's life, and references to Henry in the episcopal see of Uppsala arise several generations later. The medieval legends of Eric and Henry describe the raid as a battle between pagans and Christians, although archaeological evidence testifies to the existence of Christian communities in Finland prior to the alleged date of the crusade.<sup>6</sup>

While the idea of connecting Finland to Sweden through three consecutive crusades is a construct of both medieval and post-medieval identity-building, the concept of a significant change taking place in the process of Christianization in mid-12<sup>th</sup> century aligns well with the overall picture outlined in Scandinavia. In the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, the principles of Gregorian reform reached Scandinavia, leading to the reorganization of existing Christian communities. Within this context, the idea of a raid to Finland serving both ecclesiastical and secular goals is fitting.<sup>7</sup> If one objective of such a raid was to organize the pre-existing Christian communities in Finland into parishes, there would probably have been an eminent cleric involved. Perhaps this is the historical core of the later character of Henry.

The ecclesiastical main source of Henry and Lalli is the Latin legend of the saint, composed in the commission of the Bishop of Turku in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. It constituted the medieval, »official« tradition, according to which Henry and the Swedish King Eric led a crusade to Finland in the 1150s. The

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Förändringar i begravningsbruk och gravskick i Sverige c:a 800–1200, Stockholm 2010, pp. 271–379.

5 On the historiographical importance of the »first crusade«, see Tuomas Heikkilä: *Sankt Henrikslegenden*, Helsinki 2009; Thomas Lindkvist: *Die schwedischen Kreuzzüge nach Finnland in der Geschichtsschreibung*, in: F. Petrick/Dörte Putensen (eds.): *Pro Finlandia*, Reinbek 2001, pp. 49–66.

6 Heikkilä: *Henrikslegenden*, pp. 43–52; Lindkvist: *Kreuzzüge*.

7 Heikkilä: *Christianization*; Christian Krötzel: *Pietarin ja Paavalin nimissä. Paavit, lähetystyo ja Euroopan muotoutuminen (500–1250)*, Helsinki 2004.

legend tells that Henry was killed not long after the successful crusade.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, he became a martyr saint and the heavenly patron of the diocese of Turku (Sw. Åbo), which covered the whole of *Österlandet*, the eastern half of the medieval Swedish realm. The narrative of the Finnish national saint and his assailant is elucidated through two primary sources: the Latin *Legenda s. Henrici*, written in Turku probably at the request of the local bishop in the late 13th century, and the Finnish orally-transmitted epic poem *Piispa Henrikin surmavirsi* (Death Psalm of Bishop Henry), likely of medieval origin but apparently younger than the legend.<sup>9</sup>

The Latin legend, motivated by church politics, provides an official account from the Christian perspective. It tactfully omits the assailant's identity, narrating how the blameless bishop sought to discipline a murderer, leading to the assailant brutally killing bishop Henry. The legend was written for religious veneration and ecclesiastical propaganda, providing its readers and listeners with the official answers to questions about the Christianization of the area and its annexation into the Swedish realm. Thus, it has been described as a creation story of Finland.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the legend, the vernacular Death Psalm offers a grassroots perspective, introducing specific details absent in the Latin legend, like the name of the killer, Lalli,<sup>11</sup> and that of his wife, Kerttu. Composed in the Kalevala meter, the epic poem was transmitted orally and recorded in writing only in the late 17th century, more than 500 years after the alleged events. The origin, dating, and trustworthiness of the poem have divided the opinions of scholars of history, literature, Finnish language, and folklore studies. The poem is generally dated to the Middle Ages, but it remains an open question how much historical information the inevitably very modified contents of the Death Psalm can offer to the study of Christianization of Finland or the authenticity of Henry and Lalli.<sup>12</sup>

8 *Legenda s. Henrici*, in: Tuomas Heikkilä (ed.): *Sankt Henrikslegenden*, Helsinki 2009, lectio 4.

9 *Legenda s. Henrici*; *Piispa Henrikin surmavirsi*, in: Martti Haavio (ed.): *Piispa Henrik ja Lalli*, Helsinki 1948, pp. 195–197.

10 On the legend, see Heikkilä, *Henrikslegenden*.

11 The first datable mentioning of his name can be found in a Finnish psalm in 1616: *Vanhain Suomen maan Pijspain ja Kircon Esimiesten Latinan kielised laulud ... Nyt Suomex käätöyd Hemmingild Mascun kirkoheralda*, Stockholm 1616.

12 A summary of various opinions: Heikkilä: *Lalli*, pp. 55–66; cf. hypotheses in: Mikko K. Heikkilä: *Heinien herrat*. Suomen historian pisin perinne, Sastamala 2022.

The Death Psalm, probably of medieval origin, remains in roughly a dozen written copies from the late 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their contents vary, and, e.g., none of the versions contains a scene describing the actual killing of the bishop. It was long thought by scholars that the whole range of the surviving versions had their origins in one superb initial form, repeated with such enthusiasm that the contents of the poem changed. According to this theory, the differences in content and form between the various versions reflect the popularity of the Lalli and Henry tradition and the evolution from one form to another. In the romanticized view of many scholars, the poem had originally been a magnificently artistic work, a fine example of how artistic poetry would have been created in Finland centuries before the first books were printed. In the words of the folklore scholar and a poet Martti Haavio, the Death Psalm is »magnificent, lively, colourful, impeccable in its overall design, rich in detail, refined in style and Kalevalaic in its poetic form«. <sup>13</sup>

The encounter between Henry and his murderer, portrayed differently in the legend and the Death Psalm, reflects the complexity of historical narrative construction. The legend, a polished and ecclesiastically-motivated account, contrasts with the varied and vivid expressions found in the Finnish Death Psalm, revealing a nuanced interplay between official history and grassroots perspectives. The challenges in interpreting the psalm emphasize the multi-faceted nature of the dynamic duo of Henry and Lalli in Finnish cultural memory and historical identity.

### Depicting the Embodiment of Evil and a National Hero

The late 13th-century Legend of St. Henry portrays the saint and his killer in stark contrasts, which are arguably more significant than the details of the bishop's martyrdom:

*In ministrum itaque iusticie et in sue salutis zelatorem funestus insiluit, ipsumque crudeliter trucidavit. Sic sacerdos domini, acceptabilis hostia divinis oblata conspectibus, occumbens pro iusticia, templum superne Iherusalem cum gloriosi palma triumphi feliciter introivit. Postmodum ille scelestus occisor ... letabatur cum male fecisset, et exultabat in rebus pessimis.*<sup>14</sup>

The wretched man therefore attacked the servant of justice and the guardian of his own salvation, and cruelly murdered him. Thus the priest of the Lord, offered as an acceptable sacrifice to the divine gaze, fell for the sake of justice and happily entered

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13 Haavio: Henrik ja Lalli, p. 214. In general, see Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 53–74.

14 *Legenda s. Henrici*, lect. 4–5, p. 264.

the temple of the heavenly Jerusalem with the glorious palm of triumph. Afterwards, that wicked murderer ... rejoiced in his evil deeds and exulted in his wickedness.

Originally, Bishop Henry and his alleged murderer Lalli represented the dichotomy of good and evil. Over time, the way they are viewed has evolved, always reflecting changes in Finnish society and identity. Originally, and from the viewpoint of the church and the faithful, the portrayal of Henry and Lalli was clear-cut. In a deliberately black-and-white world, Henry was depicted as a saintly figure, while Lalli was cast as the embodiment of evil.

Most of the inhabitants of Finland were illiterate until the late 1700s.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the history, but especially prior to widespread literacy, images served as the primary accessible medium for most individuals, fostering a tangible connection to their beliefs. A medieval churchgoer encountered images everywhere—in wall frescoes, altar carvings, paintings, and standalone statues—prompting the question: how was Lalli portrayed, and what did personified evil look like?

Medieval art described the martyr bishop as a celestial saint, contrasted with Lalli as a wretched wrongdoer, chastened by divine retribution. While there are some geographical differences in depictions of the two, medieval painters and sculptors typically depicted a small Lalli beneath the feet of magnificent St. Henry, thus emphasizing Henry's majestic stature over Lalli's pitiful smallness. There are dozens and dozens of such typical medieval examples, the earliest being from the early 1300s in Tuna church in Uppland, Sweden.<sup>16</sup>

In most medieval images, Lalli is wearing or showing a striking cap, usually bright red.<sup>17</sup> The original idea of the iconography may have been to remind the audience of the divine punishment meted out to the murderer. Legend has it that Lalli put the headdress of the killed bishop on his head, but when he tried to remove it, his scalp and hair came off with the cap.<sup>18</sup> Still, the red cap is linked to interesting cultural and historical contexts. In ancient Rome, a red Phrygian cap was the symbol of freed slaves, and, in fact, throughout

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15 E.g., Esko M. Laine/Tuija Laine: *Kirkollinen kansanopetus*, in: Jussi Hanska/ Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen: *Huoneentaulun maailma. Kasvatus ja koulutus Suomessa keskiajalta 1860-luvulle*, Helsinki 2010, pp. 262–267.

16 On the medieval imagery of Henry and Lalli in general, see Tuomas Heikkilä: *Vörndaden av Sankt Henrik i Svenska riket*, in Edgren, Helena/Talvio, Tuukka/Ahl, Eva (eds.): *Sankt Henrik och Finlands kristnande*, Finskt Museum 2006 (2007), pp. 101–126. On Tuna sculpture, see Stockholm, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet, *Ikonografiska registret*: »S. Henrik, Tuna«.

17 See Heikkilä: *Vörndaden av Sankt Henrik*, pp. 116–118.

18 *Legenda s. Henrici*, lect. 5.

the Middle Ages and beyond, the red cap was symbolically associated with resistance to slavery. Perhaps the most famous examples of the cap can be found in the French Revolution of 1789, during which the republicans wore it as a symbol.<sup>19</sup> The red *Make America Great Again* cap of the US Trumpists, is a modern-day example. Thus, Lalli's medieval red cap symbolically links him to a millennial continuum of red-necked freedom fighters.

In addition to highlighting the victory of the good over the evil, and to give the audience a concrete idea of the protagonists of the Finnish creation story, the images were direct symbols of power. In the 1400s, Lalli became part of the symbolism associated with the Bishop of Turku, the symbolic successor of St. Henry himself. For example, the seals of bishops Magnus II Olai Tavast (1412–1450) and Magnus III Nilsson Stjernkors (1489–1500) featured elaborate depictions of Lalli and Henry, and the printed *Missale Aboense* (1488) boasted a colourfully printed frontispiece with bishop Konrad Bitz and St. Henry in identical robes, with a very mean-looking Lalli underneath the saint's feet.<sup>20</sup>

With the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformation, the official veneration of saints declined gradually. The traditional balance of power between Henry and Lalli was not really contested by the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: the Bishop remained the saintly victim, and Lalli the murderer. Still, the Reformation played a pivotal role in altering the perceptions of the two. As there was no official place for saints in the Lutheran faith, Henry's halo began to slowly dim.

Even the episcopal seals representing the saint and his murderer were abandoned for simpler designs, emphasizing the incumbent officeholder rather than the continuity from St. Henry. Despite this, Lalli's bloody legacy persisted in Finnish ecclesiastical symbolism. The Turku Cathedral Chapter adopted a seal depicting the saint's severed finger, complete with the bishop's ring, after the Reformation. Even today, St. Henry's relic is still used in the Turku Cathedral Chapter's PowerPoint templates, notebooks, official papers etc., thus highlighting the endurance of the tale through centuries and religious reforms.<sup>21</sup>

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19 See Niko Noponen: Vapausmyssy ja tasavaltalaisuus, tai huomioita tonttulakin poliittisesta historiasta, in: Niin & näin (2016), No. 4, pp. 145–167, [netn.fi/sites/www.netn.fi/files/netn164-34.pdf](https://netn.fi/sites/www.netn.fi/files/netn164-34.pdf) (8.1.2025)

20 Reinhold Hausen (ed.): Finlands medeltidssigill, Helsinki 1900, Nr. 18–21, Nr. 23, Nr. 27; *Missale Aboense*, Lübeck 1488.

21 Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 106–107; Martti Parvio: Turun tuomiokapitulin sinetti. Eripainos juh-lakirjasta *In arce et vigilia* (1963): Seal of Turun tuomiokapituli, [heraldica.narc.fi/aineisto.html?id=1372&lang=en](https://heraldica.narc.fi/aineisto.html?id=1372&lang=en) (3.6.2024).

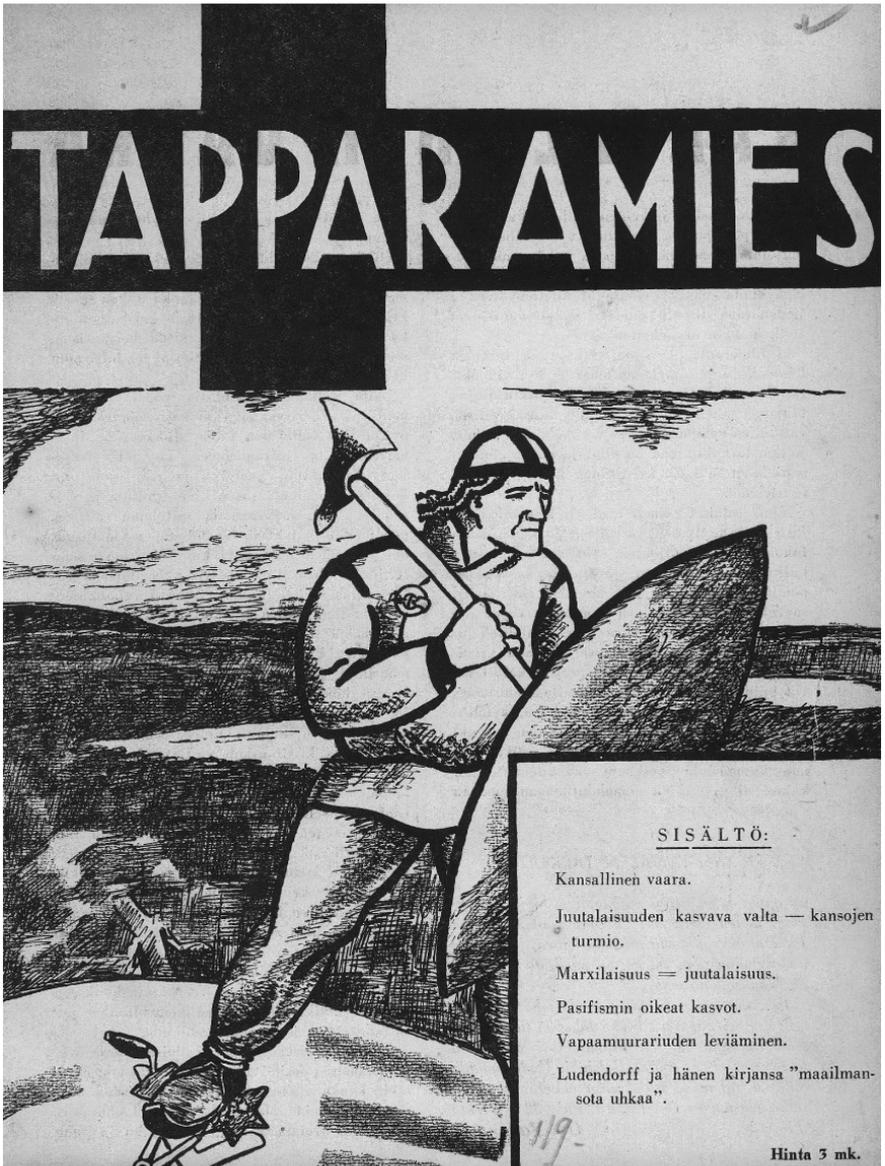


Figure 2: During the interwar period, Lalli was a widely embraced symbol of the far right. On the cover of *Tapparamies* magazine, a heroic figure guarding Finland from its enemies tramples upon the symbols of Judaism, and Freemasonry.

The area of present-day Finland had been a part of the Swedish realm since the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries, but this changed in 1809, as Finland was annexed to Russia as an autonomous Grand Duchy. Although the political context was new, Finns were allowed to keep their old (Swedish) laws, and Western (Lutheran protestant) religion. Consequently, the Grand Duchy was a curious creation that was on one hand a part of the Russian empire but also differed from it significantly. The status quo was an excellent breeding ground for nationalistic ideas that were much *en vogue* in early- and mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Finns were inspired to emphasize their language and to seek their own unique history and historical identity.

With the rise of nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, cultural interest in the past began to shift, and Lalli began to be depicted in a new way. When the sculptor Erik Cainberg (1771–1816) decorated the ceremonial hall of the Turku Academy with reliefs depicting Finnish history in 1813–1816, he put Lalli on an equal footing with Henry, the two being equal players in the imagery describing the creation story of Finland. The same setting was repeated in the huge mural painted by Robert Wilhelm Ekman (1808–1873) in the choir of Turku Cathedral in 1854, showing the saint baptising Finns. Even Lalli is present in the background, in a handsome suit looking suspiciously at the saint.<sup>22</sup>

There was more to come. Robert Wilhelm Ekman's nephew, the young painter Karl Anders Ekman (1833–1855), depicted Lalli as a dynamic peasant hero in his 1854 watercolour. His pale hair falling handsomely, he lunges at the fearful bishop with his axe. The dynamic action of the work has appealed to generations: in the National Museum's current permanent exhibition a copy of Ekman's work greets visitors in the very first room, thus giving the bishop-murderer the symbolical ownership to the oldest layer of Finnish history.

The most celebrated Finnish artist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Albert Edelfelt (1854–1905), painted his own Lalli in 1878, when he was living in Paris, but was enthusiastic about the inspiring themes emerging from Finland's history. The artist's original idea was to depict Lalli's dumbfounded horror after his deed, but the finished work was ultimately more of an expression of

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22 Derek Fewster: *Visions of Past Glory. Nationalism and the Construction of Early Finnish History*, Helsinki 2006, pp. 64–91; Fredric Ekman: *Beskrifning om Al-Fresco-Målningen i Åbo Domkyrkas Högchor*, Åbo 1854.

proud self-esteem. A wild and mischievous-looking Lalli, dressed in peasant's clothes, is depicted at the moment when he has just killed his opponent.<sup>23</sup>

The paintings of the national romantic artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century foreshadowed the future. The cultural circles and scholars of the emerging independent nation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century wanted early role models, going as far back in history as possible. The foreign bishop Henry was no match for the proto-Finn Lalli. One of the most important illustrators in the history of young independent Finland was Aarno Karimo (1886–1952), a painter who had tried his hand at an officer's career. In the 1920s and 1930s, he wrote and illustrated the thoroughly nationalistic *Kumpujen yöstä* book series, explaining the Finnish history through the centuries, which deeply influenced several generations' understanding of Finland's past.<sup>24</sup> The Lalli depicted by Karimo is sturdy and upright, a blond Viking-like swordsman who does not hesitate to defend the inviolability of his home. He no longer has any trace of the wretchedness or ridiculousness of the murderer depicted in the medieval ecclesiastical art. He is a man you would not want to meet on a frozen lake in January, but who was a handsome figure to lead the history of his people.

According to the medieval tradition, Köyliö, a small community in Satakunta in southwestern Finland, was the home of Lalli.<sup>25</sup> Nowhere is he as important a historical figure as there. Since 1950, coat of arms of Köyliö municipality was adorned with a bishop's mitre and an axe, an obvious reminder of the local big bang. A statue of the municipality's most famous son was a long time in the making in Köyliö, but the project repeatedly ran up against a moral dilemma: is it appropriate to honour a murderer? As the official municipality pondered the statue project decade after decade, the local bank took action and finally commissioned a statue of Lalli. The work was entrusted to Aimo Tukiainen (1917–1996), who had already sculpted several national greats, and was unveiled in 1989. Tukiainen cleverly solved the problem of honouring the posthumous memory of the murderer: Henry

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23 Edelfelt's brief to his mother Alexandra Edelfelt 17.11.1877: Albert Edelfelt: LÖRDAG D. 17 NOVEMBER 1877, in: Maria Vainio-Kurtakko/Henrika Tandefelt/Elisabeth Stubb (eds.): Albert Edelfelts brev. Elektronisk brev- och konstutgåva, Helsinki 2014–, edelfelt.sls.fi/brev/298/lordag-d-17-november-1877/ (06.03.2024). The first sketch of the work: Albert Edelfelt: Luonnos maalaukseen Piispa Henrikin kuolema, 1877, kansalliskallio.fi/fi/object/437253 (06.03.2024).

24 Fewster, *Visions of Past Glory*, pp. 338–345.

25 See Aarno Maliniemi: Suomen keskiajan piispainkronikan n.s. Palmköldin [sic!] katkelma. Uudelleen julkaissut Aarno Maliniemi, in: *Xenia Ruuthiana*. Suomen kirkkohistoriallisen seuran toimituksia XLVII., Helsinki 1945, p. 387.

was omitted from the sculpture altogether, drawing attention away from the murder to the strong person of Lalli. The national hero holds a spear in one hand, and in the other he holds a broken lock as a sign of the wrongs he has faced. On his belt hangs an iconic axe.<sup>26</sup>

In the 2000s, artists' perception of the national murderer Lalli has received new, softer tones. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland celebrated, somewhat unhistorically, its 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Finland in 2005, Lalli was there, but treated humorously. The celebrations included the publication of paper dolls of Henry and Lalli. In the drawings by Erkki Kiiski (b. 1961), the paper assassin is far from fierce, and can be dressed in a variety of funny outfits, including a Finland jersey from the imaginary 1155 World Ice Hockey Championships. His paper-thin arsenal includes an axe, a spear, a bow and arrow, a shovel, a bottle of vodka, traditional mustard, and a sneaker.<sup>27</sup>

### Lalli on the Pages of Fiction

Fictional literature is a mirror of the thinking and ideas of its time. Not surprisingly, Lalli has been present in Finnish literature since its very beginnings. He killed bishop Henry in the oldest literary work written on Finnish soil, the Latin legend of St. Henry, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, for a long time, Finland's most famous murderer was only a minor character in his own story: in the Middle Ages, his role was to martyr bishop Henry. As was the case in the visual arts, it was only with the advent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that literature began to take on new forms and audiences, and Lalli stepped out of the shadows and into the limelight.

The very first wave of fiction in Finland in the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century attempted to understand why Lalli killed the bishop. In 1854, Axel Gabriel Ingelius (1822–1868) brought Lalli onto the stage in a play, where Lalli is met with understanding. Ingelius' portrayal features Lalli, who is blinded by grief as his daughters become estranged from him due to their conversion from paganism to Christianity.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Lalli ends up slaying the bishop preaching the new faith. In 1859, historian Georg Zachris Forsman's

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26 On the discussion, see Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 122–124.

27 Helena Rummukainen (ed.): *Kirkko Suomessa 850 vuotta. Kristillisten kirkkojen juhluvuosi 2005*, Helsinki 2006, p. 49, attachment 7.

28 Jukka Sarjala: *Poettinen elämä. Biedermeierin säveltäjä-kirjailija Axel Gabriel Ingelius*, Helsinki 2005.

(1830–1903) novella *Pohjan-piltti* aimed to introduce a broad audience to Finland's grand—and invented—medieval past. Forsman crafted the narrative around the understanding of Lalli's actions within a nationalistic context, emphasizing Finnishness and independence. Curiously enough, Forsman's work also features a Finnish-born 15th-century bishop, Magnus (II Olai Tavast 1412–1450), who absolves Lalli of his evil deeds posthumously.<sup>29</sup> Following suit, Evald Jahnsson's (1844–1895) 1873 play *Lalli* continued the nationalistic theme, portraying Lalli as the leader of Finnish troops against an overwhelmingly Christian enemy. Ultimately, Lalli dies as a victim of treachery, yet before his demise, he manages to envision a bright and free future for the Finnish people, an obvious message to the audience.<sup>30</sup>

The traditionally cursed figure of Lalli was molded from a villain into a counter-hero to correspond with the needs of nationalistic thinking as early as the mid-1800s. More was to come in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as independent Finland eagerly searched for its history. The Christianisation of the country, and in particular Henry and Lalli, were enduring themes in Finnish literature. Lalli was seen as living through a period of transition between the old and the new in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, similar to that of the writers and the general public of the early 1900s. But whereas Lalli's »Finnishness« was defeated in the struggle against foreign powers, it would now flourish in independent Finland. Alongside the general interest, the contradictory personality of Lalli, familiar from folklore, also provided an opportunity for psychologising. What was going on in the mind of the murderer? Was he thinking of the interests of his people or just personal revenge?

These were some of the topics relevant to the most celebrated Finnish playwright of his time, Eino Leino (1878–1926), in his version of *Lalli*. In his play, Leino wrote of the righteous and modest Lalli. The rest of his family converted to Christianity without much trouble, but Lalli just wanted to live in seclusion and peace, according to the customs of his ancestors. His neutrality annoyed both the pagans and the Christians led by the hard-hearted Henry. According to the bishop, »this people is a bully and a stubborn people, whose head must be trampled on like the head of a snake.«<sup>31</sup> Finally, Lalli, possessed by conflicting nationalistic expectations and personal motifs, ends up killing the bishop.

29 Y. K. [Yrjö Koskinen = Georg Zachris Forsman]: *Pohjan-piltti*, Helsinki 1859.

30 Evald Ferdinand Jahnsson: *Lalli. Murhenäytelmä viidessä näytöksessä*, Helsinki 1873.

31 Eino Leino: *Lalli. 4-näytöksinen näytelmä*, in: Eino Leino: *Naamioita. Toinen sarja*, Helsinki 1907, p. 108.

While it was first and foremost the Finnish-speaking and -loving political and cultural circles who were keen to highlight Lalli as an early national hero, there were literary contributions from the side of the Swedish-speaking authors in Finland, as well. For socially-aware Arvid Mörne (1876–1946), writing in 1914, both the bishop and his killer represented a ruthless ruling class. Lalli was a sinister big-shot who led the Finnish armies. Henry, on the other hand, was anything but saintly, a knight rather than a bishop, and he had no hesitation in tempting his opponent's wife Kerttu to commit adultery with him. In the end, both Kerttu and Henry were killed by Lalli.<sup>32</sup>

The encounter between Lalli and Henry, national and international, has been a recurring theme in Finnish literature since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and it would be easy to list one example after another. Still, for the inter-war period it suffice to highlight the spirit of the time through the fates of one work, Arvid Järnefelt's (1861–1932) *Lalli*, published posthumously in 1933. Interestingly, the book is based on the idea of the transmigration of souls. Järnefelt, in real life an aristocrat embracing the ideas of Leo Tolstoy (1844–1910), describes himself in the book as the reincarnation of Lalli, through whose eyes the author recalls the past struggle between Christianity and paganism in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. As a whole, the work emphasises Christianity and pacifism, but also opposition to the institution of the Church. No wonder that the public, which had expected a national heroic story, was stunned by the work. The political left praised Lalli's anti-religiousness, while the right was puzzled by his treatment of the national hero.<sup>33</sup>

When Järnefelt's *Lalli* was adapted into a play, corrective measures were taken. Now the protagonist was more in tune with the audience's wishes than in the original. The Finnish Playwrights' Union and Eino Krohn (1902–1987), a professor of aesthetics, praised the play, saying that »[as a] protagonist, Lalli corresponds to the image of a Finnish strongman«, that »the author ... has portrayed Lalli as strong, ambitious and ideological« and that »the basic idea is ... Lalli's national aspirations«. <sup>34</sup> Much according to the general tone of time, the play ends with a vision of a pagan follower of Lalli:

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32 Arvid Mörne: Den helige Henricus, Borgå 1914.

33 Arvid Järnefelt: *Lalli*, Porvoo 1933; Merja Ragell: »Oikeata Lallin historiaa ei ole vielä kirjoitettu«. Suomen ensimmäisen ristiretken hahmot aatteellisten ambiitioiden taistelutanteilla 1907–1934, Helsinki 2020, pp. 183–197.

34 Toivo Hovi [Lauri Kettunen]: *Lalli Lallonpoika*. Pakanuuden ja kristinuskon murroskautta esittävä 6-näytöksinen lukudraama, Lohja 1960, pp. 5–6.

Hän [Lalli] palaa takaisin vielä. Mutta jollei palaa, hänen henkensä elää sukupolvesta sukupolveen. Se leimahtaa liekkiin, konsa sorto ja kurjuus uhkaa, ja sen johtamana käy kansan tie kärsimysten kautta suuruuteen.<sup>35</sup>

He [Lalli] will come back again. But if he doesn't, his spirit will live on from generation to generation. It flames into a flame, threatened by oppression and misery, and leads the people through suffering to greatness.

After the defeat of the Second World war against the Soviet Union, the substantial changes taking place in Finnish society began to affect the popularity of Lalli. Politically, the traditional right-wing nationalism was considered improper, and urbanization undermined the significance of an invented peasant hero. Just like in the visual arts, for the authors of the post-war generations the counter-heroic figure of the national murderer has become an anti-hero that is mostly described in a humorous tone.

Regardless of his declining status, Lalli is still a well-known character for almost all Finns in the 2020s. As the audience has a certain pre-understanding of his figure, he is an easy-to-use anti-heroic figure to characterize villains and losers in books and films alike. E.g., in *Aku Louhimies*' (b. 1968) 2013 movie *8-pallo*, Lalli is a small-time criminal gang boss and drug dealer, capable of extreme violence and terrorizing everyone close to him. On the other hand, in the 2021 movie *Peruna* (director Joonas Tena, b. 1965), giving a satirical picture of a small Finnish village in the late Middle Ages, Lalli is a working man with below-average intellect, performing his everyday work duties as—the local hangman.

### Scholars and a Hero in the Making

As a historian, it would be easy enough to let the cultural circles take the blame for creating Lalli a hero. However, in Lalli's case, the scholarly contribution to this change from killer to admired figure has been equally significant. Scholars of national sciences often pick their subjects from the currents of ideas of their own time, and societal nationalistic enthusiasm and researchers' interest in historical Lalli have gone hand in hand.

Zachris Topelius (1818–1898), professor of history at the only university of Finland, Helsinki, and an influential author, played a significant role in shaping the image of Lalli. In his extensive popularizing works *Finland framställt i teckningar* (1845) and *Maamme kirja* (1875), he drew upon folklore and

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35 *ibid.*, p. 101.

religious legends to depict Lalli in a dark and mythical, but not necessarily negative light.<sup>36</sup> His writings contributed to the enduring image of Lalli as a central figure in Finnish historical consciousness, and some of them were used in school education until mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, many present-day Finns still share the essentially Topelian 19<sup>th</sup>-century nationalistic and romantic view of the oldest history of Finland.

The construction of Finnishness by Topelius and his colleagues was deeply rooted in research but filtered through the nationalist lens of the era. It is important to note that this was not a deliberate distortion of history, but rather an interpretation guided by the prevailing nationalist spirit. Scholars, driven by national fervor, sought and found cultural elements and figures from the past that were incorporated into the national narrative. These selections often included semi-historical figures, local folklore, and poetry, which were generalized into a shared cultural heritage.

The circles of Finland were small, and many scholars were also politically active. Thus, research results were directly transferred to nation-building—or politics led the researcher to seek certain answers to certain questions. It is not surprising that most of Finland's leading scholars of history, archaeology, and folklore in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century wanted to unravel the mysteries of Lalli and Henry. For example, folklorists Kaarle Krohn (1863–1933), Väinö Salminen (1880–1947), and Martti Haavio (1899–1973), linguist Heikki Ojansuu (1873–1923), historian Jalmari Jaakkola (1885–1964), and archaeologist Juhani Rinne (1872–1950) were keen to study Lalli.<sup>37</sup> What they all had in common—in addition of them all being leading figures in their fields—was their belief in the historicity of bishop Henry and his murderer, and their hopeful desire to prove it beyond any doubt. Thus, while conducting research, they were simultaneously building a nationalist myth of Lalli, making him a counter-hero. The beginning of the nation's history yearned for the drama that the confrontation between the pair provided. If Lalli had not existed, he would have had to be invented.

Typical of the research tendency of the time, the scholars of the young independent Finland paid special attention to just one of the two main sources describing the encounter between the bishop and his killer: the vernacular Death Psalm. The scholarly interest in the vernacular poem was a continu-

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36 Zacharias Topelius: *Boken om vårt land*, Helsinki 1875; Zacharias Topelius: *Finland framställt i teckningar*, in: Rainer Knapas/Jens Grandell (eds.): *Zacharias Topelius Skrifter* 12, Helsinki 2011 [1845].

37 Heikkilä: *Lalli*, pp. 67–72.

ation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fascination with *Kalevala*, the vernacular Finnish national epic put together and published in the 1830s. Despite *Kalevala* fulfilling the need of the nation to have its own mythology, the world of *Kalevala* with its supernatural events was too fairy-tale-like to be placed directly on the timeline of history. Lalli and Henry, set in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, were better suited to the historical dawn of Finnishness.

Since the tale of Lalli and Henry was supposed to be true, and since the Death Psalm was imagined as an expression of the ancient wisdom of the people, it was all the more important for scholars to try to determine the original, magnificent contents of the Death Psalm. Heikki Ojansuu, writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, thought to identify the introductory part of the poem to represent its oldest layer. Seppo Suvanto (1918–2008) believed at the end of the century that this section was a later addition, and that the scenes leading towards the death of the bishop were the most original content. Martti Haavio argued that it was impossible to reconstruct the original version in detail, but that the poem was originally a narratively-complete work. Contrary to the current consensus of folklore scholars, linguist Mikko K. Heikkilä followed Haavio's contextual reconstruction and the old idea of a single grand original form as late as 2016 and 2022. All the mentioned scholars dated the poem to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, most preferring a date older than that of the Latin legend of St. Henry, written between late 1270s and early 1290s.<sup>38</sup>

Recent Finnish research into folk poetry has distanced itself from the nationalistic ideas that have clearly guided research on the Death Psalm in the past. Most current folklorists no longer believe that folk poetry like the Death Psalm would originally have been a flawless work of art that deteriorated over centuries. The changes within the tradition are thought to be so diverse that it is practically impossible to make definitive conclusions about their age or what has been added, removed, combined, or changed based solely on the content of the poems. Thus, the traditional goal of researchers of the Death Psalm loses its foundation. According to the current best understanding, the known verses of the Death Psalm may have been forged collectively over a long period of time.<sup>39</sup> Dating a supposed original version of the Death Psalm

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38 Haavio: Henrik ja Lalli, p. 209, pp. 220–223; Seppo Suvanto: Ensimmäinen ristiretki – tarua vai totta?, in: Linna, Martti (ed.): Muinaisrunot ja todellisuus, Helsinki 1987, p. 151; Heikkilä: Heinien herrat, pp. 125–151; Heikki Ojansuu: Piispa Henrikin surmavirren historiaa, in: Suomi IV: 19, Helsinki 1917, p. 56.

39 Kati Kallio/Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen/Senni Timonen/Irma-Riitta Järvinen/Ilkka Leskelä: Laulut ja kirjoitukset. Suullinen ja kirjallinen kulttuuri uuden ajan alun Suomessa, Helsinki 2017, pp. 49–50; Tuomas M. S. Lehtonen: Spoken, Written, and Performed in Latin and



merciless to Lalli. The vernacular tradition gives an understandable reason for the evil deed, but at the same time condemns the guilty to punishments many times more severe than the ecclesiastical legend. It doesn't contain the social criticism that many later scholars searched for in it.<sup>40</sup> It does not stand up against ecclesiastical taxation or anything else. It is simply a folk tradition that emphasises the punishment for murder. Everything else is a colouring added to the narrative by the scholars from their own point of view.

For 19th-century scholars, the murder of Henry did not pose a moral dilemma but was easily justified within a nationalistic framework. Hence, despite his evil deeds, Lalli himself became a hero. Although nationalist scholarly and cultural circles did not consider the murder itself acceptable, Lalli's dark heroism was—from a nationalist perspective—emphasized by the fact that he committed the grave sin of murder to defend his own people.

### National Murderer and the Body Politic

In a certain sense, Lalli was already a political figure in the Middle Ages, as he symbolized the conquered paganism laying at the feet of triumphant bishop Henry. But it was only with the rise of national awareness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that he gained political importance of his own.

As we have already seen in the fields of culture and scholarship, 19<sup>th</sup> century Finland experienced an interesting transformation of historical identity that was marked by the active construction of a national past and the utilization of history as a tool for nation-building. Since the 1850s, we can follow a development that transformed Lalli from a mere bishop's murderer to a symbol of ancient Finnish wisdom. Finnish scholarship and culture as a whole romanticized Lalli's paganism, and started to represent it as the untouched essence of Finnish original and inalienable identity. This was very much in line with the wider European scholarly circles of the time, which wanted to see pagan beliefs as authentic expressions of the people's collective consciousness.<sup>41</sup>

In the case of Finland, the construction of the past during the 19<sup>th</sup> century finally resulted in the retelling of Lalli's story as a national hero. Abstract

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40 Kimmo Katajala: *Suomalainen kapina. Talonpoikaislevottomuudet ja poliittisen kulttuurin muutos Ruotsin ajalla (n. 1150–1800)*, Helsinki 2002, pp. 93–99.

41 See, e.g., Linas Eriksonas: *National Heroes and National Identities: Scotland, Norway and Lithuania*, Frankfurt 2004; Stefan Berger: *The Power of National Past: Writing National History in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe*, in: Stefan Berger (ed.): *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, London 2016, pp. 30–62.

national concepts require symbols, and the personification of Finland began in tandem with the reshaping of Lalli's image. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, »Finland« was increasingly depicted anthropomorphically, as a beautiful young maiden in visual arts, literature, and discourse.<sup>42</sup> Initially, this maiden had clear international influences in her clothing and appearance, reflecting Western connections. However, as Finnish nationalism gained momentum, she started wearing national costumes. With Russia's tightening grip on Finland's autonomy in the 1890s, the once-confident maiden transformed into a vulnerable girl.<sup>43</sup> Who better to protect this damsel in distress than the national heroes from the past, with Lalli leading the way?

Finland gained its independence from Russia in 1917. It was after the Finnish Civil War (1918) that Lalli's significance reached its zenith. The Civil War was won by the »Whites« representing right-wing bourgeoisie values. They were mostly of peasant background, and the nationalistic idea of Lalli as a free, wealthy peasant leader defending his own beliefs and property fit the new rulers' agenda. Thus, the early years of Finnish independence saw Lalli being celebrated as a national symbol. White Finland's national poet, V. A. Koskenniemi (1885–1962), composed a poem titled *Leijonalippu* (»The Lion Flag«, the lion can be found in the Finnish coat of arms), in which Finnish heroes safeguarded the nation's flag throughout the centuries. In the forefront of these heroes stood Lalli who was positioned as part of the gallery of national greats, alongside other militant figures from the past.<sup>44</sup>

By this point, the traditional power dynamics between Henry and Lalli had been upended, as exemplified by a satirical article in *Ampiainen* journal from 1920. The article humorously suggested that Lalli should receive a medal for his merits, be promoted to at least the rank of reserve major of the Finnish army, and have a monument erected in his honour.<sup>45</sup>

In the late 1920s, an extreme right-wing organization called the *Suomen Lalli-liitto* (Lalli League of Finland) emerged, drawing inspiration from Lalli's name. This choice of name symbolized the league's agenda, which was rooted

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42 Cf. Kristina Jöekalda: Mothers of the Land: Baltic German and Estonian Personifications of Virgin Mary to the Epic Linda, in: Cordelia Heß/Gustavs Strenga (eds.): Doing Memory: Medieval Saints and Heroes and Their Afterlives in the Baltic Sea Region (19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> Centuries), Berlin 2024, pp. 43–80.

43 Aimo Reitala: Suomi-neito. Suomen kuvallisen henkilöitymän vaiheet, Helsinki 1983, pp. 86–105.

44 V. A. Koskenniemi: Elegioja, Porvoo 1917; Martti Häikiö: V. A. Koskenniemi. Suomalainen klassikko, 1, Helsinki 2010, pp. 138–139.

45 Klio: Kunnia sille, jolle kunnia tulee!, in: *Ampiainen* 17.1.1920, pp. 4–5.

in the romanticized ancient history of Finland. They aimed to replace the non-Finnish lion in Finland's coat of arms with a Finnish bear and change the capital's name to Sampola, after the miracle machine *sampo* mentioned in the national epic *Kalevala*. The league's political stance was anti-communist, promoting genuine Finnishness, and even contemplated a coup d'état.<sup>46</sup>

Although the league dissolved after just one year, Lalli has been a favorite of nationalist right-wing movements from decade to decade. Many recent, short-lived political parties of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, like *Suomi—Isänmaa*, *Suomi nousee—kansan yhdistyy*, *Isänmaallinen Oikeisto*, and *Isänmaallinen kansanliike*, have emphasized a grand Finnish past rooted in *Kalevala*-like narratives. In more recent years, similar organizations such as *Suomen Sisu* and the *Kansallinen Vastarintaliike* have emphasized Finland's great national past. In this company, Lalli is an admired idol.<sup>47</sup>

The concept of Lalli as an ancient Finnish hero and the notion of the righteousness of his deeds are deeply ingrained and are often used without much further consideration. *Suomalaisuuden liitto* (Finnish Association), a cultural organisation aiming to awaken and strengthen national awareness and mindset, received negative attention in the summer of 2001 when its magazine, *Suomen Mieli*, declared in an article that »...A free Finn does not submit to injustices: he does as Lalli did and kills his oppressors.« The article was critically discussed even in the parliament. The association, in turn, objected to *Aamulehti* newspaper's interpretation, which claimed that »The Finnish Association thirsts for blood! Fresh blood of Swedish-speaking Finns.« As a result, the association drafted a response attempting to demonstrate that Lalli was not a murderer but rather a defender of his freedom and property. The response was not published, and the Finnish Association also lost its complaint to the Council for Mass Media in Finland.<sup>48</sup>

In the 2020s, none of the organizations that pledge allegiance to national fervor mention Lalli as a direct inspiration. Instead, they idealize the »great Finnishness« constructed in the late 1800s and projected onto the Middle Ages. Longing for past glory is typical of nostalgic populism, which simplifies society and politics into a battlefield between the virtuous people and the evil elite.<sup>49</sup> In this black-and-white imagery, Lalli naturally represents the eternal

46 Oula Silvennoinen/Marko Tikka/Aapo Roselius: *Suomalaiset fasistit. Mustan sarastuksen airuet*, Helsinki 2016, pp. 131–137.

47 See Anttonen: *Myytin historiaa*, p. 119.

48 Heikkilä: *Lalli*, p. 34, with further references.

49 Antto Vihma: *Nostalgia. Teoria ja käytäntö*, Helsinki 2021, pp. 178–180, pp. 185–191.

voice of the people. He is easily placed in the nostalgic, lost Finnish national paradise of imagination.

In recent decades, the slogans of parties such as the Finnish Rural Party and the True Finns Party have expressed a yearning to return to the lost everyday paradise. Still, it seems that Lalli has lost his previous significance as a political symbol.<sup>50</sup> Although the nostalgic themes associated with Lalli are present in Finnish politics and populism, in 2020s globalized and urbanized Finland, Lalli is no longer a figure whose name is necessarily influential. The once-powerful Lalli has aged and been sidelined from everyday politics.

### Evolution from Villain to Counter-Hero to Anti-Hero

Finnish scholars, writers, and artists have traditionally focused on constructing national history and local culture, and consequently considered the story of the encounter of Henry and his killer Lalli as both national and unique. On a closer look, it is neither. When the focus is shifted from Finnishness and local history, direct international comparisons are easy to find. While Finnish medieval history has only one murdered bishop, there were nearly ten examples in other parts of the medieval Swedish realm, and thousands of bishops were killed during the Middle Ages in whole western Europe.<sup>51</sup> Although Lalli's evil deed was a locally unprecedented event, the murder of the bishop was by no means exceptional in the broader European context.

The same story repeated itself in other areas converted to or influenced by Christianity during the High Middle Ages. The newly converted regions had a particular need for martyr saints: the new faith required exemplars and symbols. In recently-Christianized areas, a local martyr saint could easily be elevated to a national symbol. Martyrs were among the most venerated saints—so why settle for less? Consequently, e.g., Bishop Gellert of Hungary (d. 1046) and Bishop Adalbert of Bohemia and Poland (956–997) were brutally

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50 Cf. Pertti Anttonen: *The Finns Party and the Killing of a 12th-Century Bishop: The Heritage of a Political Myth*, in: *Traditiones* (41) (2012), No. 2, pp. 137–149.

51 See Nils Blomkvist/Stefan Brink/Thomas Lindkvist: *The kingdom of Sweden*, in: Nora Berend (ed.): *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, Cambridge 2007, p. 188; Natalie Fryde/Dirk Reitz (eds.): *Bischofsmord im Mittelalter – Murder of Bishops*, Göttingen 2003; cf. Sini Kangas: *The Image of 'Warrior-Bishops' in the Northern Tradition of the Crusades*, in: Carsten Selch Jensen/Stephen Bennett/Radosław Kotecki (eds.): *Christianity and War in Medieval East Central Europe and Scandinavia*, Amsterdam 2021, pp. 57–74.

killed and became, first, local Christian heroes, and later figures of nationalistic importance. Both are widely known examples across Europe.

When considering celebrated killers of local bishops, points of comparison relevant to the Finnish Lalli can also be found closer than Hungary, Bohemia, or Poland. Not only Finns, but also Latvians and Estonians lacked a distinct history at the outset of their »national awakening« in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was in these areas that the figures who fought against Christianization in the Middle Ages became national heroes with the rise of nationalism. While the Finns had their cherished Lalli, the Estonians honoured Lembitu, and the Latvians idolized Imanta.<sup>52</sup>

Substituting a traditional hero with a counter-hero is an age-old way of recounting a familiar tale from an alternative angle, shedding light on the opposing faction in a conflict and challenging the conventional dichotomy of hero and villain. The counter-hero serves as a voice for the marginalised or overlooked, who are often sidelined by dominant historical narratives, aiming to shift the narrative paradigm and bring visibility to previously silenced voices and perspectives. This is why nationalism in various countries brought forth medieval counter-heroes.

In Latvia, intellectuals of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries faced the task of identifying or claiming a medieval figure as a hero for their nascent nation, seeking someone who had undertaken symbolic and heroic deeds. Imanta, a pagan warrior, emerged as a candidate for this role. The *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* recounts the death of the second Livonian bishop, Berthold, at the hands of Imanta during a battle in 1198.<sup>53</sup> Imanta does not feature in any other medieval records, and his presence in collective memory prior to the modern era is virtually non-existent. Imanta's elevation as a hero occurred slightly earlier than in Finland, during the Enlightenment period, through theatre plays and literary works first authored by Baltic German intellectuals—and later embraced by the Latvian national movement *against* the local Baltic German elite. He came to embody the Latvian struggle for freedom in the Middle Ages, representing the people's resistance against foreign conquest,

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52 Gustavs Strenga: From Bishop-Killer to Latvian National Hero: Imanta's Transformations from the Middle Ages to Nation-Building, in: Heß/Strenga (eds.): *Doing Memory*, pp. 81–112; Anti Selart: Lembitu: A Medieval Warlord in Estonian Culture, in: *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana* 29 (2021), No. 1, pp. 3–14.

53 Leonid Arbusow/Albert Bauer: *Heinrichs Livländische Chronik*, Hannover 1955, II, 6, p. 10.

much like Lalli in Finland. As in Lalli's case, culture played a pivotal role in Imanta's elevation as a national hero.<sup>54</sup>

The same pattern was repeated in 19<sup>th</sup> century Estonia. Even here, it was the *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* that offered the building blocks for a hero symbolizing an emerging national awareness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The chronicle mentions Lembitu, an Estonian chieftain who killed Catholic priests in 1212.<sup>55</sup> From the 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalistic viewpoint, ancient Estonians of the early 13<sup>th</sup> century heroically defended their freedom and native religion, but unfortunately had to surrender to German invaders and the Catholic Church. Thus, Lembitu was a freedom fighter whose role gained even more importance during and after the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920). Exactly like Lalli and Imanta, Lembitu has been celebrated through various artistic media including literature, opera, and visual arts, thus establishing a deep-rooted connection between Lembitu and Estonian cultural and historical identity.<sup>56</sup>

In all three cases—Lalli, Imanta, and Lembitu—the counter-heroism of a bishop-killer emerged as a nationalistic response to the longstanding tradition wherein the ecclesiastical and temporal elites initially wrote and subsequently claimed ownership of medieval sources and historical narratives. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the emergence of the indigenous Finnish hero Lalli held symbolic significance both in ancient history and in the modern era. He claimed a place in history and the national narrative for the non-elite majority that needed heroes of their own.

When the non-elite Finnish people was, quite non-historically, projected into the obscurity of Middle Ages, they naturally needed a leader. Although medieval sources provide no information about Lalli's social status, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a desire to perceive him initially as a local magnate and later as some sort of leader of a Finnish proto-state. Chroniclers and later scholars, authors, and journalists claimed to know that Lalli was a nobleman, knight, count, or otherwise highly respected figure.<sup>57</sup> Again, the same pattern repeats itself with the nationalistic construction of Imanta and

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54 On Imanta's creation as a national hero, see esp. Strenga: Imanta.

55 Heinrichs Livländische Chronik, XV, 9, p. 99.

56 Selart: Lembitu, p. 5.

57 U. Örnhielm: *Historia Sveonum Gothorumque ecclesiastica*, Stockholm 1689, p. 462; Harry Lönnroth/Martti Linna (eds.): *Johannes Messenius: Suomen riimikronikka*, Helsinki 2004, [28], p. 52, p. 176; Johannes Peringskiöld (ed.): *Johannes Messenius: Scandia illustrata*, Stockholm 1700-1705, X, p. 4. See Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 38–39 for a summary of the discussion and further sources.

Lembitu. Imanta was portrayed as an elder, i.e. a leader of his people by Latvian authors and poets, and Lembitu, who was mentioned as a leader of Estonians in the *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, became a king-like figure in the works of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonian culture.<sup>58</sup>

Interestingly, the fate of Lalli also follows the same pattern as Imanta and Lembitu in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. During the last generations, all three heroes have witnessed their heroism dimming, and their idolized counter-heroism has slowly turned into anti-heroism. Lately, Imanta and Lembitu are treated playfully in their respective homelands,<sup>59</sup> and Lalli—in addition to still being an idol to some—is certainly a figure with carnivalistic traits in today's Finland. Lalli can be bought as a doll or a paper doll, there are TV sketches, comics, and whimsical songs about him, even schoolchildren have the tradition of celebrating the arrival of spring around his statue in Köyliö.

In fact, the arc of the story of all three priest-killing heroes has descended to the point that their historicity has been questioned, although there are differences in this regard between countries. In Latvia, researchers have considered Imanta a fictional character since the 1920s.<sup>60</sup> In Estonia, Lembitu has been regarded as a historical figure, to the extent that the state funded a research project to search for his relics (his skull) in the Polish museums and archives where, according to the the 20<sup>th</sup> century legend, they were once spotted.<sup>61</sup>

In Finland, questioning the historical validity of Lalli has sparked considerable controversy since 2005, when I mentioned in passing in my study on the Latin *Legend of St. Henry* the obvious fact that we cannot be entirely certain about the historical existence of the saint.<sup>62</sup> The public backlash was strong. If Henry were not real, then his killer, Lalli, would also need to be erased from the ranks of national heroes. The media portrayed a tantalizing confrontation: the deep knowledge of the people versus the fantasizing ideas of scholars in their ivory towers. The sentiment among the people was clear: while few would mourn Henry's disappearance from the pages of history, there was a strong desire to hold onto Lalli until the end. An editorial in

58 Strenga: Imanta, pp. 83–88; Selart: Lembitu, p. 5.

59 Strenga: Imanta, pp. 104–105; Selart: Lembitu, pp. 6–8.

60 Strenga: Imanta, pp. 102–103; Per Bolin: Between National and Academic Agendas: Ethnic Policies and 'National Disciplines' at the University of Latvia, 1919–1940, Huddinge 2012.

61 Selart: Lembitu, pp. 7–10; Anti Selart/Mihkel Mäesalu: Die estnischen Kopfpfäger in Polen. Eine Archivreise, in: Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte 14 (2019), pp. 197–205.

62 Tuomas Heikkilä: Pyhän Henrikin legenda, Helsinki 2005, p. 9, pp. 53–54.

*Helsingin Sanomat*—the biggest Finnish newspaper—succinctly captured the emotions: »Do not take Lalli away from us.«<sup>63</sup> Leading figures of the Evangelical Lutheran and Catholic churches also rushed to affirm their belief in both Henry and Lalli.<sup>64</sup> Their response, like many others, was characterized more by emotion than historical expertise.

Many historians also opposed the idea of Henry and Lalli as mythical constructs. Typically, these were scholars focused on entirely different topics, often from distant disciplines, relying mainly on tradition as their argument.<sup>65</sup> The insistence on clinging to the bishop and his murderer speaks to the forces of tradition and nationalism that still influence the supposedly objective world of academia.

### Does Lalli have a Future?

Today, most Finnish historians believe that there is some historical basis behind the figure of Lalli, which has been molded to fit various narratives over time, making it practically impossible to discern the historical truth beneath these layers. Despite the doubts and reservations of the scholars, 71% of Finns stated that they still consider Lalli a historical figure in a poll in 2020.<sup>66</sup> What insights does the enduring faith of Finns in Lalli, juxtaposed with his humorous portrayal in contemporary culture, offer regarding the significance of the national murderer in the historical consciousness of Finns in the 2020s?

The narrative tradition surrounding the murder of a clergyman often provides a folk perspective on the clash between secular and ecclesiastical elites and their power struggles.<sup>67</sup> These tales typically depict a confrontation between a local magnate and a priest, and similarly, Lalli has for centuries been interpreted as a representative of the Finnish upper class. In practice, all source materials related to Lalli—Latin legends and ecclesiastical art, folklore, and other folk traditions—fit into a narrative where he represents an older, fading way of life, while Henry embodies a new, foreign, and triumphant elite. Likewise, the folk accounts of Lalli's death at the hands of a swarm of mice are

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63 *Helsingin Sanomat* 23.4.2005, A2.

64 E.g., *Turun Sanomat* 22.4.2005, 11; *Ilta-Sanomat* 22.4.2005; *Kaleva* 28.5.2005.

65 See Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 46–47.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

67 Ulf Palmfelt: *Prästdråpssågen – ett tittrör ned i Kalmarunionens sociala strider*, in: *Tradisjon* 15 (1985), pp. 38–40.

a local variant of a pan-European narrative explaining periods of transition in power.<sup>68</sup>

In a broader context, Ulrich Bröckling has aptly described heroes, counter-heroes, and anti-heroes as indicators of problems within a society, and stories about them as tools of historical crisis management of a community.<sup>69</sup> Just like in the case of Lalli—or Imanta or Lembitu, for that matter—a simplistic heroic narrative reduces complex conflicts to an easily-understandable binary clash between good and evil, white and black, light and dark, light and shadow, that are represented by polarized single persons. In a binary story, it is us and our hero against ›them‹. In Lalli's case, the juxtaposition of the good and familiar traditions on the one hand, and the strange, unfamiliar ideas on the other, have been of special significance. This is a red thread that can be seen in the whole tradition of Lalli and Henry, since the earliest remaining sources in the 13<sup>th</sup> century until the latest social media posts. Whereas the original ecclesiastical tradition saw the murderer and his values as bad, it is now the murderer who safeguards the Finnish traditions.

An over-simplification of a conflict into a heroic story facilitates taking a stance and choosing one's side in a clash. The need for a hero is especially pronounced during times of turbulent transitions, and they are particularly taken up by groups under stress. In the oldest, religious version of Lalli's story, written during the transition to Christian values, he was a villain, needed in order to create a background for the Christianization of Finland and its annexation to the Swedish realm. Later, in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalistic awakening and in the young, right-leaning, and violent independent Finland, he became a freedom fighter, a counter-hero.

What is the role of Lalli today? Despite being celebrated for his defiance against external authority and perceived as a champion of the common people, the murder of Henry challenges conventional notions of heroism. Thus, he can certainly be understood as an anti-hero due to the morally ambiguous nature of his actions. On the other hand, in addition to Lalli, the heroes of Finnish history include several other violent young men who found themselves at odds with the law but aligned with moral righteousness, as understood by the non-elite.

Of these nationalistic heroes known to the majority of Finns even today, we may mention Jaakko Ilkka (d. 1597), a late 16<sup>th</sup> century leader of a peasant

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68 Heikkilä: Lalli, pp. 172–177; Jacek Banaszkiwicz: Die Mäuseturmsage, in: The Symbolism of Annihilation of an Evil Ruler, *Acta Poloniae Historica* 51 (1985), pp. 5–32.

69 Ulrich Bröckling: *Postheroische Helden. Ein Zeitbild*, Frankfurt 2020, 17, pp. 78–87.

uprising triggered by heavy taxation and social injustices. Eugen Schauman (1875–1904), in turn, assassinated the Russian governor-general of Finland in 1904, as a protest against the oppressive policies during Russian rule in Finland. Bobi Sivén (1899–1921) served as the chief of police in Repola municipality after Finland's independence. When Finland was forced to cede Repola to Soviet Russia in the Treaty of Tartu in 1921, Sivén committed suicide in protest. Vilho Koskela was a fictional Finnish model soldier in the novels *Täällä pohjantähden alla* («Under the North Star») and *Tuntematon sotilas* («The Unknown Soldier») by the author Väinö Linna (1920–1992). The lives of these anti-heroes ended violently and miserably: Lalli died due to a divine punishment; Ilkka was beheaded; Schauman committed suicide; Sivén followed his example; Koskela was shot by Soviet invaders.<sup>70</sup>

Many Finns still consider these dead men martyrs of the national cause today, and they are both counter-heroes due to their actions and anti-heroes because they broke the law and morals of their society. This goes to show how even the role of an anti-hero can be important for the collective historical identity. In contrast to the clear-cut moral distinctions often associated with traditional heroes and villains, anti-heroes challenge and subvert these norms for a greater cause. They might operate outside the boundaries of the law or exhibit traits that defy societal expectations, yet their narratives often explore the complexity of human nature and the blurred line between good and evil.<sup>71</sup>

One recurring topic in the novels and plays written about Lalli in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was his return, or even resurrection, when the country needs him again. The same idea is still alive and well in the social media debates of the 2020s, where Lalli's symbolic return is frequently vowed to redress various national grievances.<sup>72</sup> The return of a medieval hero when they are needed is a familiar idea all over Europe. In Latvia, Imanta lay dormant under a Blue Mountain, French folklore waits for the return of Charlemagne (d. 814), the English for the reappearance of King Arthur. In Germany, the belief persists that Frederick Barbarossa (d. 1190) sleeps beneath the Kyffhäuser mountain, and the Danes believe that Holger Danske, a medieval knight, lies dormant beneath Kronborg castle, awaiting a new era. The Finnish epic *Kalevala*, put together from folklore, concludes with similar themes: the local hero Väinämöinen departs from modern life feeling disheartened, yet he

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70 Heikkilä: Lalli, p. 31, p. 74.

71 Ulrich Bröckling: Antihelden, in: Ronald G. Asch/Achim Aurnhammer/Georg Feitscher/Anna Schreurs-Morét (eds.): *Compendium heroicum*, Freiburg 2019.

72 Heikkilä: Lalli, p. 137, pp. 140–142.

promises to return when he is needed once again. In religious ideologies, the anticipation of a messiah often forms an integral part of the overarching belief system.<sup>73</sup>

Today, Lalli has been tamed. However, for most Finns he is still among us, lurking behind the scenes. While he no longer serves as a suitable political role model officially, he is an idol and symbol, and serves as a convenient historical weapon in polarized social media discussions. In the realms of visual arts and literature, Lalli's life, choices, and death remain rather popular subjects, albeit often approached with gentle humour rather than seriousness. To follow Ulrich Bröckling's idea of national heroes as indicators of societal problems, does the current status quo of Lalli reflect a society without very serious, polarizing conflicts?

The dichotomous mindset of ›us‹ versus them, rooted in confrontation, has always existed, and will continue to do so. As debates emerge in the forthcoming decades regarding the authentic Finnish identity and way of life, or a yearning for a monocultural Finland, Lalli will surely raise his axe once again. The character and story of Lalli, symbolizing the encounter between the new and the old, innovation and tradition, familiar and foreign, is well-suited to simplify collisions and cultural conflicts in the future. As long as the new is perceived as a threat and foreign cultures as competitors, future generations will have their own Lallis.

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73 E.g., Knut Görich/Martin Wihoda (eds.): *Friedrich Barbarossa in den Nationalgeschichten Deutschlands und Ostmitteleuropas (19.–20. Jh.)*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2017; N. J. Higham: *King Arthur, Myth-Making and History*, London 2002; Knud Togeby: *Ogier le Danois dans les littératures européennes*, København 1969; Strega: *Imanta*; Andrejs Pumpurs: *Bearslayer*, trans. Arthur Cropley, Adelaide 2007.

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### Chapter 3

#### Segmented memory. The (Anti-)Heroizations of Grand Master Heinrich von Plauen (1410–1413) from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

Heinrich von Plauen (1370–1429) is a fascinating example of the fluidity of heroes and their antagonists, and of the social conflicts in which their image is created. The Grand Master of the Teutonic Order (1410–1413), disposed of by a faction within the Order, was defamed as a superstitious heretic and brutal tyrant in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. He became a hero only in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the national-liberal and conservative historical images of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was the saviour of the Order's state in Prussia and a visionary statesman born too soon. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century he was gradually forgotten. Our chapter explores the genesis and ambivalence of this (anti-)heroic figure. It examines the location and layers of his (anti-)heroization and the narrative logics developed in stories written about him.

Heroes cannot be separated from the discursive construction of conflicts. We draw on heroes as indicators for societal problems with discursive value for the analysis of narratives and the framing of social crises and conflicts.<sup>1</sup> With the example of the Grand Master we will show that the same (anti-)heroes could be adopted and used as indicators for different conflicts. This requires a focus on the situational appropriation of discourse motifs and on shifts in narratives. By connecting the ›genealogy‹ of the layers of the (anti-)heroization with concrete micropolitical conflicts, we seek to understand the complexity in the constant reinterpretations of Heinrich von Plauen.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Ulrich Bröckling: *Postheroische Helden. Ein Zeitbild*, Frankfurt am Main 2020, p. 17; examples from Gdańsk are presented in Philipp Höhn: *Taken objects and the formation of social groups in Hamburg, Gdańsk and Lübeck*, in: Lars Kjær/Gustavs Strenga (eds.): *Gift-giving and materiality in Europe, 1300–1600. Gifts as objects*, London 2022, pp. 219–248. Already Hans Prutz: *Die Katastrophe des Danziger Bürgermeisters Conrad Letzkau*, in: *Altpreußische Monatsschrift* 3 (1866), pp. 617–618 showed that the historical narratives about Heinrich consisted of several layers.
  - 2 In the sense of Michel Foucault: *Archäologie des Wissens*, in: Michel Foucault: *Die Hauptwerke*, Frankfurt am Main 2008, pp. 471–699, here pp. 617–684. This method is used by Volker Weiß: *Die autoritäre Revolte. Die neue Rechte und der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Hamburg 2017, p. 12.

To anticipate the result: What at first glance appears to be a clear line in the reception of history in the context of the national ›invention of tradition‹ of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is, at second glance, a network of situational daily political interventions in which Heinrich was used to legitimize the respective conflict positions of different actors with different interests at different times. These instrumentalizations of alleged heroes and antiheroes build on the situational uses of history in the pre-modern era, but shift them into new arenas of conflict in the respective time in which the stories about them were retold. In line with this, we focus on narratives that should not only to be seen as expressions of a ›Zeitgeist‹ (such as ›nationalism‹), but also as an expression of conflicting interpretations and situational conflict.

## The Plot

Heinrich von Plauen was elected Grand Master of the Teutonic Order in 1410, following the disastrous defeat of the Order's forces by the Polish-Lithuanian army at the Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald, in which the Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen (1360–1410) was killed. As Commander of Schwetz, Heinrich organized the defence of Marienburg Castle, stabilized the Order's rule and concluded the First Peace of Toruń (1411), which was accompanied by heavy financial burdens due to the obligation to pay high ransoms to the Polish King Jagiełło. In 1413, he was deposed by a faction within the Order led by the Supreme Marshal (*Ordensmarschall*) Michael Kűchmeister. Heinrich was appointed Commander (*Komtur*) of Engelsburg and in 1414 imprisoned as an alleged traitor, as was his brother, the former Commander of Gdansk, who played a crucial role in the historical narratives about the former Grand Master. In 1422, after Kűchmeister's deposition, the Grand Master was appointed as Procurator (*Pfleger*) in Lochstätt, where he died in 1429.<sup>3</sup>

Heinrich von Plauen was ascribed a crucial role in accounts of the history of the Teutonic Order; as most authors from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards drew a line between the immediate consequences of the Battle of Tannenberg and the decline of the Order's rule. This decline culminated in open war between the Order and the Prussian Confederation (*Preußischer Bund*), which had united in 1440 around the larger towns of the Order's lands and the noblemen from

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3 For his biography see Markian Pelech: Heinrich von Plauen. (9. XI. 1410 – 9. X. 1413), in: Udo Arnold (ed.): Die Hochmeister des Deutschen Ordens 1190–2012, 2nd Edition, Weimar 2014, pp. 118–122.

Kulm region, and paid homage to the Polish king in 1454 after declaring the lordship of the Order void. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the stories of Heinrich von Plauen correlated with the historical narrative of the fate of the state of the Teutonic Order,<sup>4</sup> in which the defeat at Tannenberg appeared as the turning point that bore decline and disintegration. Some later stories saw Heinrich as a tragic hero, who could at best slow the decline, while others saw him as an anti-hero who turned the rule of the Order into a tyranny, causing the open rebellion of the estates.

Three points from Heinrich's reign illustrate his rise, height, and decline and its fatality for the history of the Order's state. These events were prioritized differently in the various texts from different periods. However, they are the basic elements around which the respective appropriation of the subject matter took place:

- (1) Heinrich von Plauen's investiture, the defence of Marienburg Castle and his election as Grand Master;
- (2) the internal conflicts in the Order's territory, focussing in particular on the violent conflicts with alleged rebels or traitors (depending on the interpretation);
- (3) Heinrich's deposition in 1413.

It is above all the second aspect that became crucial for the authors to negotiate their respective contemporary conflicts and problems. It is also the most controversial point regarding the evaluation of Heinrich von Plauen as hero or anti-hero. This chapter concentrates on this aspect, even though many of the texts we examine also deal with his investiture and deposition.

Our focus lies in particular on three murders in Gdańsk. In 1411, shortly after the Order had taken back control over the city, which had paid homage to the Polish king in 1410, the Gdańsk mayors Conrad Letzkau, Arnd Hecht, and Letzkau's son-in-law Bartholomäus Groß, a councillor, were killed at the Teutonic Order's castle in the city. The murder was most likely carried out at the instigation of the Grand Master's brother Heinrich, the local commander. These events were probably the result of conflicts which had arisen because of the town's submission to the Polish king in 1410 before submitting once again to the Order at the beginning of 1411.<sup>5</sup> The role of the commander in the

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4 Paradigmatic in Michael Burleigh: *Prussian Society and the German Order. An aristocratic corporation in crisis c. 1410–1466*, Cambridge 1984.

5 Hans Prutz: *Die Katastrophe des Danziger Bürgermeisters Conrad Letzkau*, in: *Altpreußische Monatsschrift* 3 (1866), pp. 597–629.

texts is ambivalent. Sometimes he appears as an adjunct and executive arm of his brother, sometimes as a depraved, violent brute, sometimes as a demonic counterpart to him.

The stories about the murder are thus associated with the heroisation, discrediting, and demonisation of other actors. In the 600 years of making the Grand Master a hero or anti-hero, Conrad Letzkau gains particular importance. Compared to Arnd Hecht, who was often described as a fierce protagonist of commercial and republican urban freedom, Letzkau was attributed modesty in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Letzkau was also seen as a martyr for the unity of the fatherland. Thus, he became the bourgeois counterpart of Heinrich von Plauen.

### Medieval and Early Modern Texts

If we investigate medieval sources, the events, which became so important in the historiography on Prussia and the state of the Teutonic Order in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, are not very well documented. What appears as a story of treason and tyranny in the texts around and after 1800 can only be reconstructed vaguely based on a patchwork of sources, which contain situational arguments of conflicting factions.<sup>6</sup>

#### Sources from the 1420s

There are three traditions of the sources dealing with the events of 1411 from the 1420s and 1440s:

- (1) The earliest historiographical account is found in a continuation of the chronicle of Johann von Posilge (in research often entitled as *Fortsetzung*). These annals were based on intimate knowledge of the sources in the archive and chancery of the Grand Master.<sup>7</sup> The continuation gives a detailed account of the events in Gdańsk, in which the murder of the magistrates is legitimated as a punishment for an alleged rebellion of the

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6 Günter Ketterer: Die Hanse und der Deutsche Orden unter den Hochmeistern Heinrich von Plauen und Michael Kuchmeister (1410–1420), in: *Hansische Geschichtsblätter* 90 (1972), pp. 19–20, footnote 17.

7 *Chronike des Landes von Prussin*, in: *Repertorium Fontium* 6, 395 ([www.geschichtsquellen.de/werk/3112](http://www.geschichtsquellen.de/werk/3112) (31.5.2024)); Arno Mentzel-Reuters: *Deutschordenshistoriographie*, in: Gerhard Wolf/Norbert H. Ott (eds.): *Handbuch Chroniken des Mittelalters*, Berlin 2016, pp. 301–336.

burghers.<sup>8</sup> It also recounts the reign of Heinrich as a whole and his deposition in 1413. Here, we see the first traces of a defamation of Heinrich as a superstitious character who broke the principle of consensus of the Order and waged war with Poland.<sup>9</sup> These defamations, however, do not focus on the events from Gdańsk.

- (2) Sources that were written in the context of the conflicts between the Polish King and the Order at the Council of Constance (1414–1418) likewise avoid these events from Gdańsk. Several letters written by members of the family von Plauen and their friends to participants of the Council complain about the deposition of Heinrich and did also not mention the murders. The line of justification used by the Teutonic Order was that Heinrich and his younger brother had allied themselves with the Polish king and were thus traitors.<sup>10</sup> In the conflicts at the council, the party around K $\ddot{u}$ chmeister also referred to unlawful murders committed by the former Grand Master and his partisans. They did not thematize the events from Gdańsk in 1411, but concentrate on the murder of the Livonian nobleman Johann von Dolen.<sup>11</sup>
- (3) A few sources exist that refer to individual conflicts in which the events of 1411 were mentioned; for example the *diffidatio* of the Sp $\ddot{u}$ ttler of the Elisabethenspital, who accused members of the council of Gdańsk (among them Letzkau and Hecht) of having him robbed and accused him of being a church robber.<sup>12</sup> In the 1420s, Johann Westfal, the second husband of Letzkau's daughter and Gro $\ddot{u}$ \mathring{s}'s wife Anna, sued for compensation on

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8 Erich Strehlke (ed.): *Scriptores Rerum Prussicarum* (hereafter SRP), vol. 3, Leipzig 1866, pp. 277–399, here pp. 326–327. See also the letter of Heinrich von Plauen to the counts of Hoya from 1412 (Ludwig von Baczko: *Geschichte Preussens*, vol. 3, Königsberg 1794, p. 151). There might have been a grain of salt in the accusations that at least Letzkau and Hecht were involved into secret negotiations with the Polish king. See Toeppen, Max (ed.), *Acten der Ständetage Preussens unter der Herrschaft des Deutschen Ordens* (hereafter ASP), vol. 1, Leipzig 1878, p. 157.

9 SRP 3, 334–335.

10 Erich Weise (ed.): *Die Staatsverträge des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen im 15. Jahrhundert*, vol. 1, Königsberg 1939, pp. 88–91; Jürgen Sarnowsky (ed.): *Virtuelles Preussisches Urkundenbuch* ([www.spaetmittelalter.uni-hamburg.de/Urkundenbuch/](http://www.spaetmittelalter.uni-hamburg.de/Urkundenbuch/) (31.5.2024; hereafter PrUB)) 1415.05.12.a (1415); PrUB, JH I 2251 (1415); PrUB 1415.09.21 (1415); PrUB, JH I 2272 (1415); PrUB, JS 100 (1416–1418); PrUB, JH I 2304 (1416).

11 PrUB, JH I 2290 (1416); PrUB 1416.02.07 (1416); PrUB 1416.02.07.a (1416).

12 SRP 4, 391–392, footnote 4, 399.

behalf of their children for money that the two Heinrichs had allegedly taken from them. In 1425, this dispute was settled.<sup>13</sup>

In the sources from the 1410s, the events of 1411 and the reign of Heinrich play a part in how different parties communicated their conflicts. The sources can only vaguely be used to reconstruct these conflicts. For our question it is relevant that we don't find any traces of a heroization or antiheroization, or even a coherent narrative account on the person of Heinrich. Neither Heinrich von Plauen, nor his later counterpart Conrad Letzkau, are described as antiheroes or heroes. Great deeds are seen as episodal histories (the defense of the Marienburg is sometimes attributed to saints, e.g.<sup>14</sup>), but they are not depicted as part of a heroic biography.

#### Sources from the 1440s and 1450s

In the 1440s, the commemoration of the murders came back as part of the list of grievances, the *gravamina* of the forming estates against the Order. The estates provided the rising tensions between the Prussian Confederation and the Order with a longer history by framing local conflicts as part of a macro-conflict and by delegitimizing the Order's rule as tyranny. In the immediate context of the escalations which led to the outbreak of open war in 1454, the Prussian Estates and its members wrote several *gravamina* that included the murder of 1411.<sup>15</sup> In these texts, the murder was seen as a tyrannical and unchristian act, by which Heinrich von Plauen the Younger, the commander of Gdańsk, acted in tacit agreement with his eponymous older brother. Confronted with these complaints, the Order collected historical memories, such as the testimony of a member of the Order, who had allegedly lived in the city as a young schoolboy. He described the murder as a legitimate punishment for the three magistrates who had not only feuded against a bailiff of the Order in Dirschau but also acted against the will of the urban council.<sup>16</sup>

The conflicting parties were likely not sure on how to integrate the vague commemoration of the murders from 1411 into a coherent narrative of the

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13 SRP 4, 394–395, footnote 3; Geheimes Staatsarchiv Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (hereafter GSTA SPK) XX. HA, OBA, no. 4231, 4506.

14 SRP 3, 316–317.

15 SRP 4, 473; 486–487. For the process at Friedrich III's court see Maximiliane Berger: *Der opake Herrscher. Politisches Entscheiden am Hof Friedrichs III. (1440–1486)*, Ostfildern 2020, pp. 107–177.

16 SRP 3, 486–488, footnote.

conflict. In negotiated between 1452–1454 before Emperor Frederik III., Hans von Baysen, later leader (*gubernator*) of the Prussian Confederation, proposed in 1452 that the Grand Master should come to an agreement with the towns. On the diets, he said, they debated about old conflicts and murders, about which the Grand Master knew as little as the burghers.<sup>17</sup> This was probably a hint at the estates' complaints about the murders of 1411 mentioned in the gravamina of the estates – and, furthermore, a more or less ironic hint, since these old stories were not the crucial point in the disputes between both sides. It indicates also that the knowledge of the parties concerning the prehistory of the formation of the *Preußischer Bund* was fragile.

The respective gravamina of the *Bund* and the Order consist of a patchwork of different conflict episodes, which were woven into a general narration of the conflict either as just resistance against a lord who had turned into a tyrant, or as unjust rebellion. The arguments brought up by different conflicting actors could be taken up and modified by other actors. The same can be seen concerning the accusation that Heinrich von Plauen had been involved in several murders in 1410 and 1411. At the Council of Constance 1414–1418, the Order adopted the claims of the archbishop of Riga regarding the murder of the Livonian nobleman Johann von Dolen. By delegitimizing Heinrich as a cruel murderer, this could strengthen the Order's position in its conflicts with the relatives of the deposed Grand Master. In the 1450s, however, this claim was brought up by the estates, which included the murder of Johann von Dolen in their lists of grievances.<sup>18</sup> The grievances turned this claim now against the Order by depicting the Grandmaster as a prototype for the members of the corporation.

### Sources from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

A coherent narrative about the events of 1411 is only to be found in later texts. Authors from the 19<sup>th</sup> century primarily used these texts, probably because they contained many of the details these authors missed in the medieval sources.

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17 ASP 3, no. 252, p. 502. For comparable arguments brought up by the representatives of the Order see ASP 4, 112–188. For a closer look onto the sources from the 15<sup>th</sup> century see Philipp Höhn/Georg Jostkleigrewe: Anti-heroes in the making. War and urban identity in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Gdańsk, in: Jesus A. Solorzano Telechea/Jelle Haemers/Philipp Höhn (eds.): War and City in Medieval Atlantic Europe (and beyond). Consequences, Resilience and Collective Memory (forthcoming).

18 SRP 3, pp. 486–488, no. 3.

In general, the historiographical tradition from Gdańsk can only be dated back to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup>

- The compiled manuscript by the Gdańsk burgher Bernd Stegmann (of whom little is known) dates back to the 1520s, but in part draws on older sources that are difficult to date and to reconstruct. Some of the text passages relevant for this article might date to the 1490s.<sup>20</sup> They give an insight into the ways in which the elites of Gdańsk memorized and interpreted their urban history and framed new conflicts with the Order, which had never accepted the belonging of Gdańsk to the Polish Kingdom.
- The same is true for the often-discussed chronicle of Prussia, written at the same time by the Dominican Simon Grunau (ca. 1470–1533/1537); this chronicle draws on the Gdańsk tradition, but has a clear focus on Prussian *Landesgeschichte*.<sup>21</sup>
- The account of the events in Caspar Schütz's (ca. 1540–1594) *Historia rerum Prussicarum*, published in 1592, is based on both texts. Schütz started working in the service of Duke Albrecht of Brandenburg (1490–1568) and later as a scribe in Gdańsk. He followed the narrative of the former texts but added many details on which the authors from 19<sup>th</sup> century relied.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1520's, when Grunau's and Stegmann's texts were written, Gdańsk's elites were confronted with internal conflict in the context of the Reformation and involved into new conflicts with the Order, whose last Grand Master introduced the Reformation in Prussia in 1525. The Catholic authors probably wrote the story of a strong urban community, Catholic and under the rule of the Polish king, that had fought its autonomy against the Order, which was portrayed as tyrannical but also as heretical.<sup>23</sup> Again, the murder was seen as

19 Cordelia Heß: Nigra crux mala crux. A comparative perspective on urban conflict in Gdan-  
sk in 1411 und 1416, in: *Urban History* 41 (2014), pp. 566–567.

20 SRP 4, pp. 366–383; Julia Moździen: Gdańska kronika Bernta Stegmanna (1528). Die  
Danziger Chronik Bernt Stegmanns (1528), Toruń 2019, pp. 13–40; see also id.: ›Merke  
auff lieber leser wy woltadt gelonet wirt mit arge‹. Die Danziger Chronik Bernt Stegmanns  
(1528) als Beispiel bürgerlicher Moralliteratur, in: *Jahrbuch des Wissenschaftlichen Zen-  
trums der Polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien* 8 (2017), pp. 110–111; Mentzel-  
Reuters: *Stadt und Welt*, pp. 99–107; Udo Arnold: *Geschichtsschreibung im Preußenland bis  
zum Ausgang des 16. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutsch-  
lands* 19 (1970), pp. 94–95.

21 Marlon Bäumer: Verräter, Ketzler und Tyrannen. Der ständische Widerstand in der  
Preußischen Chronik von Simon Grunau, in: *Preußenland NF* 11 (2020), pp. 64–104.

22 Caspar Schütz: *Historia rerum Prussicarum*, Zerbst 1592, pp. 112–118.

23 Mentzel-Reuters: *Stadt und Welt*, pp. 113–114; Bäumer: *Verräter, Ketzler und Tyrannen* pp.  
71–73; for the Reformation in Danzig see Slawomir Kościelak: *Religion in Gdańsk in the*

part of a long conflict; its historiographic treatment, however, was a reaction to more recent conflicts of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, which had little to do with the conflicts from the 1410s.

Many of the elements of the story on which the texts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century built were not part of the earliest accounts, or were only later brought into a coherent narrative form. The Order's gravamina against Heinrich von Plauen included the complaint that he asked »false prophets« for advice while he ignored the consent of the important local officials (*Gebietiger*) of the Order – a narrative that legitimized his deposition. Later sources (among them especially Grunau) adapted this accusation by suggesting that Heinrich was not only superstitious but even held sympathies for heretics, especially with the Hussites.<sup>24</sup> Grunau's method is typical for re-narration of the same episodes and biblical motives from the 1410s to the 1520s, which were adapted to very different conflicts and problems.

Even in the 1450s accounts from the urban side, which were based on the accusations against the Grand Master and his brother brought up first by the Order, neither was depicted as an anti-heroic character. Stegmann's, and to an even greater degree Grunau's, texts demonized von Plauen as heretic, unchristian, treacherous, tyrannical and arrogant. Still, they didn't depict him and his brother as individuals but – following the gravamina of the 1450s – as prototypical members of the Order who transformed the rule of the Order into a tyranny. In this light, one must state that, while the texts deal with heroic transgressions and even more with anti-heroic episodes that illustrate conflict, there are no (anti-)heroes.

Some historians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century lamented the missing interest of medieval authors for their own time's extraordinary men and their character.<sup>25</sup> The premodern authors selected however specific parts of a history that allowed them to narrate conflicts in a particular way with reference to the political discourses of the time concerning unrest, rebellion, and resistance against tyranny.<sup>26</sup> In this setting, these sources followed a narrative structure in which characters appeared as types. They were not interested in biographical sketches. The conflicts narrated in the premodern sources are conflicts

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Middle Ages and Early Modern Times. From St. Adalbert's Mission to the Reformation Victory, in: Beata Możejko (ed.): *New Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Poland and Prussia*, London 2017, pp. 93–96.

24 Mentzel-Reuters: *Stadt und Welt*, p. 114; Bäumer: *Verräter, Ketzler und Tyrannen*, pp. 91–92.

25 e.g. Heinrich von Treitschke: *Das deutsche Ordensland Preußen*, Leipzig 1862, p. 6.

26 Heß: *Nigra crux mala crux*.

between collectives and corporations, between a religious order, an urban community, and the emerging estates. As Ahasver von Brandt has noted, the urban sources tended to see the urban councils acting as collectives, not as individual actors.<sup>27</sup> If the sources name individual positive deeds such as those done by Conrad Letzkau, who according to Grunau snuck through enemy territory to recruit support for the endangered Order from the princes of the Empire,<sup>28</sup> they do not present these as extraordinary heroic actions but as examples for good practice as a member of the council (loyalty and courage). If they mention actions such as the murders, these episodes function to demonstrate the evil of the antagonist – the Order – and its representatives. The texts teach moral-didactic lessons, such as how to act in conflict. Stegmann explains that Letzkau's example would illustrate that noblemen in general should not be trusted: the reader should learn how good deeds would be rewarded with malice. If there are villains in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>-century documents, they represent types: the von Plauen family, e. g., stands for the tyranny of the Order's rule, but also for falsehood, bad Christian faith and treachery.

Concerning the positively-connoted antagonists of the evil protagonist in Grunau's and Stegmann's texts, neither Conrad Letzkau, nor his daughter Anna who confronts the commander with his brutal murder, appear as heroes; they are martyrs instead.<sup>29</sup> The sources written since the 1450s describe in detail the wounds of the murdered and their defaced bodies. Grunau and Stegmann illustrate how badly the commander treated Anna. Grunau even suggests that Anna was murdered (which can hardly be concluded from the other sources).<sup>30</sup> According to Stegmann, the victims were martyrs who died for the urban community. Because their community was protected by God, the murder was followed by divine punishment. Just as the crucifixion of Christ happened during the Holy Week, so did the mayors'; just as the crucifixion was followed by the destruction of Jerusalem, so was the Plauens'

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27 Ahasver von Brandt: *Geist und Politik in der lübeckischen Geschichte*. Acht Kapitel von den Grundlagen historischer Größe, Lübeck 1954, p. 56.

28 Max Perlbach et al. (eds.): *Simon Grunau's Preussische Chronik*, vol. 2, Leipzig 1889, pp. 9–13; SRP 4, pp. 374–378.

29 Ronald G. Asch: *Märtyrer (Christentum, Frühe Neuzeit)*, in: Ronald G. Asch et al. (eds.): *Compendium heroicum*, Freiburg 3. Mai 2018. DOI:10.6094/heroicum/maertyrer-chr-fnz (31.5.2024).

30 Perlbach: *Grunau's Preussische Chronik*, p. 13.

crime followed by the destruction of the Orders' castle in Gdansk 43 years after the murder.<sup>31</sup>

What we see here are thus not heroes or antiheroes, but exempla for good and bad behavior, prototypes for specific social groups. This changes around 1800.

### Texts from the Enlightenment and National Romantic

Around 1800, the first texts were written that featured a biographical heroisation of Heinrich von Plauen and Conrad Letzkau. This coincided with changes in literature and historiography. After 1800, the individual and his fate gained more and more prominence in literature. Extraordinary men, heroes, made history, thus fulfilling the *Weltgeist's* commands (though often not intentionally). Tacit understandings of heroes which come close to Hegel's idea appear in mostly all texts from the ›long 19<sup>th</sup> century‹.<sup>32</sup> Seen as a Hegelian hero, von Plauen appears as an extraordinary, misunderstood man and a visionary who cannot be judged by the same moral norms that count for normal men.

### Texts around 1800

The texts dealing with the von Plauen brothers around 1800 were at the intersection between literature and the first forms of institutionalized academic history writing. This makes it difficult to ascribe them to one field – more so as the authors wrote both tragedies and historical works. There are four important authors to have named here:

- Ludwig von Baczko (1756–1823), was born, lived, and died in Königsberg. He wrote a history of Prussia (between 1793 and 1800), as well as a »patriotic tragedy« about Conrad Letzkau (1791).<sup>33</sup>
- August von Kotzebue (1761–1819) was one of the most prominent dramatists and writers of his era. Seen as a symbolic figure of the restoration by

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31 so only in Stegmann's text (SRP 4, p. 377).

32 Georg W. F Hegel: Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Frankfurt am Main 2014 (14th edition), pp. 45–48.

33 von Baczko: Preußische Geschichte; id.: Conrad Letzkau, Bürgermeister zu Danzig. Ein Trauerspiel in fünf Akten, Königsberg 1791.

the German National movement, he was murdered by Karl Ludwig Sand in 1819.<sup>34</sup> While living in Estonia, a province of the Russian Empire, he also wrote a history of Prussia (1808) and a tragedy about Heinrich von Plauen (1805).

- The Romanticist Joseph von Eichendorff (1788–1857) also wrote a tragedy about Heinrich von Plauen (1830) and a book about the reconstruction of the Marienburg (1844), which had started shortly after 1800 on behalf of the Prussian kings Friedrich Wilhelm III and Friedrich Wilhelm IV.<sup>35</sup>
- Johannes Voigt (1786–1863), professor for Medieval History at the University of Königsberg since 1823 and head archivist of the University, also wrote a history of Prussia in which he gave a detailed account of the events of 1411.<sup>36</sup> Voigt became a doyen for the regional history of Prussia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which explains why his works were widely discussed.

Most authors follow the plots from Grunau, Stegmann and Schütz. They discuss the texts from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with which at least Baczko, Kotzebue and Voigt were familiar, only to fill the gaps.<sup>37</sup> Many of the additions that the authors from the 16<sup>th</sup> century made are further elaborated and newly contextualized. Caspar Schütz, for example, had invented the figure of the commander's jester – a person telling the truth by office, who had warned the urban magistrates coming to the castle of the coming murder (which caused a third mayor, not mentioned in the earlier sources to return, so that he escaped).<sup>38</sup> Baczko and Kotzebue adopted the jester and his warning into their histories of Prussia.<sup>39</sup> In Baczko's tragedy, this jerk, Milidewo, even becomes the ambivalent antagonist of the commander Heinrich. He is a Lithuanian or old Prussian magnate who has been taken prisoner and whose wife, also a prisoner, is the commander's mistress. Together they arrange the murder of the magistrates by poisoning a violent faction within the Order, which slaughters the magistrate. The knights are characterised by their excessive and

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34 August von Kotzebue: *Preußens ältere Geschichte*, 4 vols., Riga 1808; id.: *Heinrich Reuß von Plauen oder die Belagerung von Marienburg*, Leipzig 1805.

35 Joseph von Eichendorff: *Der letzte Held von Marienburg*. Trauerspiel, Berlin 2015 (first published 1830); id.: *Die Wiederherstellung des Schlosses der deutschen Ordensritter zu Marienburg*, Berlin 1844.

36 Johannes Voigt: *Geschichte Preussens, von der ältesten Zeit bis zum Untergange der Herrschaft des Deutschen Ordens*, 9 vols., Königsberg 1827–1839.

37 e.g. Baczko: *Preußische Geschichte*. vol. 3, p. 46.

38 Schütz: *Historia rerum Prussicarum*, p. 117.

39 Baczko: *Preußische Geschichte*. vol. 3, p. 44; Kotzebue: *Preußens ältere Geschichte*. vol. 3, p. 142.

aggressive sexuality (this is probably an adaptation of the Prussian complaints about assaults on women by the Order). Though portrayed as a ›noble savage‹, Milidewo takes his revenge for his enslavement and that of his wife: he thus provokes »civil war« – i.e., the conflict between the townspeople and the lord of the land.<sup>40</sup>

While the depiction is very much based on the sources from the 16<sup>th</sup> century marked by the views and preferences of a Gdańsk elite, there are fundamental differences between the earlier texts and those of the period around 1800. One involves scope: in his tragedy, Baczeko focusses on the events of 1411 and on Conrad Letzkau, whom he portrays as a modest man, looking for a moderation in the escalating tensions between the Order and the bourgeois town. Conrad's antagonist is the wild, excessive, and sexually deviant rapist commander. Baczeko doesn't even mention the eponymous Grand Master but sees the commander as a symbolic figure for tyranny. In contrast, Kotzebue and Eichendorff don't mention Letzkau in their tragedies; instead, they focus on the Grand Master as their tragic hero, highlighting the successful defense of the Marienburg and his deposition in 1413. For them, it is rather the Polish king and the disloyal factions within the Order who are the hero's antagonists.

In their historical writings, the interpretations of Heinrich von Plauen and of the events of 1411 differ fundamentally between an enlightened urban-republican (Baczeko) and a ›Borussian‹ interpretation (Kotzebue and Voigt). A common theme, however, is their concern with what they see as the fatal division of the ›fatherland‹ – be it ›German‹ Prussia or later Germany tout court.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, the events of 1411 become a field of negotiation for the formation of national ›imagined communities‹.<sup>42</sup>

Baczeko interprets the killing of the three mayors as the result of a confrontation between the reign of the Order, which was increasingly developing into a despotic monarchy, and the free, economically ambitious city republic, in which there were factional conflicts between a party loyal to the Order and a party around Letzkau, who insisted on urban autonomy.<sup>43</sup> In both of his texts, Baczeko adopts from Schütz that the hangman of Elbing was

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40 id.: Conrad Letzkau, preface.

41 *ibid.*: preface: Baczeko sees his work following the national interest. What he means is however Prussia, not Germany.

42 Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991.

43 Baczeko: *Preußische Geschichte*. vol. 3, pp. 41–42.

present, but refused to kill the mayors without a judgement, which was later done by the drunken knights of the Order.<sup>44</sup> With this anecdote, Baczko underlines that the Order had become a tyranny. His heroes – Letzkau and the moderate knight Huldrich, who tries to prevent the Komtur's excesses of violence<sup>45</sup> – appear as reflected and cautious actors.<sup>46</sup> Baczko invokes a *contrat social*. For him, the main opposition is between slavery and freedom. With these key concepts, he connects the accusations from the older sources with concepts from the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. His play ends with an appeal from Groß's widow to her son to uphold the memory of the ›martyrs‹ and to avenge the ›fatherland‹ when the time has come.<sup>47</sup>

In Kotzebue's history, the bourgeoisie does not appear as a historical factor. Kotzebue sees Heinrich von Plauen as a visionary predecessor of the Hohenzollern kings,<sup>48</sup> a brilliant statesman, misunderstood by his contemporaries, as a courageous representative of religious tolerance, herein reinterpreting Grunau's discrediting accusations. He sees the opposition from within the Order as motivated by envy, the Gdańsk burgher as traitors.<sup>49</sup> Voigt follows this line. He sees Heinrich as a man of ›tremendous strength of spirit‹, ›unshakeable firmness of will‹, restless and ›most manly‹, who failed due to the internal decline and fatigue of the Order as a visionary and tragic hero.<sup>50</sup> The events of Gdańsk in 1411 appear under the heading of the *Frevel*, whereby Voigt combines the source documents from the 1410s into a coherent narrative of betrayal.<sup>51</sup> The serious difference to Baczko is that Kotzebue disavows the political actions of the bourgeoisie, but does not see this as the primary reason for the failure of Plauen and thus the state of the Order. For Kotzebue, the reason for decline is the failure of the Order to create a monarchical state reigned by a dynasty.<sup>52</sup>

The heroic figures of the *Sattelzeit* point to the inner conflicts and the decline of the Order. Prussia under the rule of the Order, which preceded Hohenzollern Prussia, functions as its counterpart. In a way, it mirrors the conflicts about how to organize the state in the period between the French

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44 *ibid.*, p. 44; *id.*: Conrad Letzkau, p. 91.

45 *ibid.*, preface.

46 *ibid.*, pp. 91–95.

47 *ibid.*, p. 113.

48 Eichendorff: *Der letzte Held von Marienburg*, p. 114.

49 Kotzebue: *Preußens ältere Geschichte*. vol. 3, pp. 137–138.

50 Voigt: *Geschichte Preussens*. vol. 7, pp. 219–220.

51 *ibid.*, pp. 139–143.

52 Kotzebue: *Preußens ältere Geschichte*. vol. 3, p. 135.

Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and the Restoration. The failure of the Teutonic Order, the fact that East Prussia became Polish, had to be prevented for the future and the bonds that keep the state together had to be strengthened. The authors' political goals differ: Baczkowski stands for an enlightened monarchy; Kotzebue for the strict exercise of power within the state based on a *Beamten* aristocracy, although he does not approve the murders.

Following Hayden White we see not only Klio writing poetry,<sup>53</sup> but poets (and historians) who literally write history (and poetry). In some cases, the authors incorporate literary figures and elements into their stories. Although (or because) the authors display a critical use of the sources, they repeatedly override the sources' *Vetorecht* in order to formulate a harmonizing narrative. This produces a plurality of interpretations related to similar conflicts, namely the political participation of particular social groups – between, for instance, a noble warrior elite and the economically-rising bourgeoisie.

#### Texts from the aftermath of 1871

One might call the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the second heyday and the culmination of the heroization of Heinrich von Plauen. This has much to do with the crucial conflicts in the prelude to the foundation of the German Empire in 1871, and the conflict constellations within the newly founded, Prussian-dominated State. These conflicts were not so different from those addressed by the authors around and after 1800. They deal with the participation of the bourgeoisie in the political society, the reasons for the rise, the decline and the collapse of a state, and increasingly with the colonial position of Germans in Eastern Europe, its legitimation, and the modes of governing a multiethnic empire. We will focus here on two texts, which discuss these issues – one from a scholar, another from a writer of historical novels.

- Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896) wrote an influential short book in 1862 entitled *Das deutsche Ordensland Preußen*.<sup>54</sup> Treitschke, at that time professor at Leipzig, after 1873 in Berlin, became the doyen of the national-liberal, later national-conservative historical research in the newly founded Empire and a protagonist of ›Borussian‹ historiography.
- The law and judge Ernst Wichert (1831–1902), who was born in Pillau (now Baltijsk) in Eastern Prussia, and later judge in Königsberg and Berlin,

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53 Hayden White: *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore 1978.

54 Treitschke: *Das deutsche Ordensland Preußen*.

wrote several novels, plays, but also reportages. He published a comprehensive novel of three volumes entitled *Heinrich von Plauen* in 1881.

Both texts differ greatly, not only because they belong to different genres. Treitschke frames the history of the Order nationally. He sees the Teutonic Order as the predecessor and model of the emerging Prussian kingdom. Referring to the coat of arms of the Teutonic Order state and the Hohenzollern state, he develops a theory of translation that legitimizes the unification of the German Empire under Prussian leadership.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, Treitschke's focus is on statesmen. His heroes are belligerent *Realpolitiker*. The Teutonic Order's state appears as a model for a tight state organization; he sees the subordination of the church and the subordination of the citizens as a central objective for the future.

Treitschke portrays Heinrich von Plauen as a merciless genius. Alongside Winrich von Kniprode, he is the second »great man of the Order«, gruff and imperious, »with a cold eye for what is necessary«.<sup>56</sup> He appears as a restless but – alas! – unsuccessful fighter against the decline of the order, for example by attempting to introduce new forms of district administration. Heinrich has no other way of stopping the Order's decline but to rule in a dictatorial manner, whereupon he is overthrown. Treitschke furthermore relates the alleged sympathies of the »daring innovator« with the Hussites, which had initially been used by the estates to discredit the Grand Master in order to establish a link to the religious tolerance of the later Hohenzollerns. The country appears as »dishonourless« and »disrespectful«, seduced by Polish »libertinism«. The »betrayal« of Gdańsk also bears witness to this.<sup>57</sup>

Ernst Wichert's novel is entitled after the Grand Master, but the protagonists are two fictitious young noblemen: Heinz von Waldheim, a native of the Empire related to Heinrich von Plauen, and Hans von der Buche, the son of a knight from the Kulmer Land belonging to the traitorous *Eidechsenbund* and a student of Jan Hus (1369–1415). Both are thrown into the turbulent conflicts of 1410–1413. Wichert's Heinrich appears to be a *Realpolitiker*, but not a political genius in the sense of Treitschke. He is a tough man, but also empathetic and hesitant: at first he wants to punish his brother after the murder of the mayors, but then spares him. A long time ago, he was in a relationship with the daughter of the forest master of the family of von der

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55 *ibid.*, pp. 3–6.

56 *ibid.*, p. 66.

57 *ibid.*, pp. 66–73.

Buche, whom the forest master had killed in anger. Heinz turns out to be Heinrich's son from this relationship.

Treitschke sees Prussia as a place of violent German appropriation of space in ›racial struggles‹, ›fertilised‹ by the ›noblest German blood‹. His benchmark to evaluate the stability of a state such as Prussia is nation and ethnicity. He propagates a united *Staatsvolk*, united by common cultural and ethnic bonds and strengthened through the assimilation of the Slavic population.<sup>58</sup> He thereby identifies the ›theocracy‹, especially the celibacy and the segregation between the Order's knights and the local German elites, and the relationship between rulers and the population, as crucial for the decline. To emphasize the problem of the theocracy, Treitschke takes up the complaints of the 1450s about the Knights of the Order being abusive towards women.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the Teutonic Order was not able to transform itself into a dynastic monarchy and was not viable in the long term because it could not recruit from the country's biological reservoir. This excluded the regional German nobility and the urban elites and created an immoral form of colonial rule (over Germans), against which the settlers gradually developed a »Prussian fatherland feeling«.<sup>60</sup>

The issue of an ethnic *Volk* and ›assimilation‹ can also be seen as one of the most prominent topics of Wichert's novel. Family and marriage play a key role in explaining the decline of the Order. The Grand Master appears as a ›father figure‹ from a bygone era. The future belongs to Heinz and Hans. Both are involved in conflicting love affairs.<sup>61</sup> Heinz is in love with the daughter of the Gdańsk mayor Huxer, who wants to marry his daughter off to a rich merchant; Hans is in love with a ward of Heinrich, whom the latter has

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58 *ibid.*, p. 4: »Und wer mag das innerste Wesen von Preußens Volk und Staat verstehen, der sich nicht versenkt hat in jene schonungslosen Rassenkämpfe, deren Spuren, bewußt und unbewußt, noch in den Lebensgewohnheiten des Volkes geheimnisvoll fortleben? Es weht ein Zauber über jenem Boden, den das edelste deutsche Blut gedüngt hat im Kampfe für den deutschen Namen und die reinsten Güter der Menschheit«. See also pp. 64–67.

59 *ibid.*, pp. 57–59, p. 64, p. 67; Kotzebue: *Preußens ältere Geschichte*. vol. 3, p. 136 had already suggested that Heinrich von Plauen had the plan that the mercenaries he had brought into the country to fight against the Polish king should marry local women to create a biological base for the rule of the Order.

60 Treitschke: *Das deutsche Ordensland Preußen*, pp. 58–60: »Eine furchtbare Kluft tat sich auf zwischen der Landesherrschaft und ihrem Volke, seit in den Enkeln der ersten Ansiedler allmählich ein preußisches Vaterlandsgefühl erwuchs und das Volk murrend erkannte, daß eine schroff abgeschlossene Kaste von Fremden und Heimatlosen Preußens Gesckicke lenkte.«

61 Ernst Wichert: *Heinrich von Plauen*. vol. 3, 3rd ed. Leipzig 1886, pp. 326–336.

promised to a Polish prince.<sup>62</sup> Both succeed in overcoming ›realpolitik‹ and the conventions of class and marry their lovers from the urban elites. In both cases these noble-bourgeois marriages are accompanied by rejections of German-Polish marriages (the father of Hans, a member of the rebellious *Eidechsenbund* is the only important figure in the novel who is married to a Polish woman).<sup>63</sup>

The crucial topic with which Wichert is concerned is the reconciliation of bourgeoisie and nobility, which can be read as a plea for the harmonisation of these two groups in the German Empire, founded in 1871.<sup>64</sup> This problem offers an interpretive frame for Wichert's detailed depiction of the murders from 1411. The younger brother of the Grand Master, an impulsive man who wants to defend the order's rule, appears as the representative of the noble elite, while his antagonist Arnd Hecht is portrayed as rigorous and impulsive, aiming for civic independence and capitalistic commerce.<sup>65</sup> Wichert sees the events of 1411 as tragic, but also as a call for unity, for the involvement of the bourgeoisie in politics. In Gdańsk, the forces around Hecht prevail in an unintended chain of violence and escalation against the appeasing forces around Letzkau; on the side of the Order, the commander acts impulsively out of rage and anger by citing the mayors on his castle. Unlike in the other 19th century texts, however, the younger Heinrich and his knights are not able to kill the magistrates. He asks several pirates, Victual Brothers (*Vitalienbrüder*), whom Heinz and Hans had caught on their voyage to Gdańsk, to murder the three. This depiction emphasises unity and harmony. Wichert externalises the murders: ›pirates‹, supposedly patriotless fellows, murder the magistrates.<sup>66</sup>

The texts from the 1860s to 1880s document a slight shift in conflicts dominating societal discourses. They deal with comparable structural conflicts within the process of *Reichseinigung* and the *Kaiserreich* as the earlier texts. Both heroize Heinrich (Treitschke) or depict him (Wichert) in regard to particular political and social problems and can be read as interventions in the discussion of these problems: Firstly, the relation between the church and the state, secondly, the relation between the commerce-oriented bourgeoisie and the military, and politically very present nobility and the question of

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62 *ibid.*, pp. 143–160, 304–325.

63 *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 199–215.

64 Hans-Ulrich Wehler: *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Vol. 3: 1849–1914, München 2008, pp. 355–376, pp. 848–999.

65 Wichert: *Heinrich von Plauen* vol. 2, 3rd ed. pp. 311–378.

66 *ibid.*, p. 373.

governing multi-ethnic spaces. Both texts also show, thirdly, a tendency to see Heinrich as a projection for the imperial ambitions of the German Empire over Eastern Europe and the way to govern such an imperial space.<sup>67</sup>

### The Age of Extremes (1918–1945)

If one asks about »caesuras« of the Teutonic Order as »lieu de mémoire«, the most prominent is the First World War and the consequences of the war – the territorial losses and the revolution of 1918. There are only a few texts after 1918 that deal with Heinrich and some of these texts contributed – maybe surprisingly – to historicisation of the Grand Master by not analyzing him as a hero, but as a historical figure that has to be seen in the contexts of his time.

- Among them are two works by Karl Hampe (1869–1936), professor in Heidelberg who retired in 1934. He wrote a biographical sketch for a volume aimed at a broader audience (1937) and a critical study of the sources relating to the deposition of Heinrich von Plauen (1935).<sup>68</sup> Hampe was one of the many intellectual war propagandists during the First World War. During the Weimar Republic he had adopted a conservative-republican orientation and was ambivalent or even critical towards National Socialism.
- Erich Maschke (1900–1982), *Privatdozent* in Königsberg and as of 1935 professor in Jena, published in 1935 a popular monograph with five portraits of »great« Grand Masters – among them Heinrich von Plauen.<sup>69</sup> Maschke, who had been engaged in the Youth Movement (*Bündische Jugend*), was one of the younger protagonists of the *Ostforschung* and *Volksgeschichte*, which focused on the study of settlement in Eastern Europe and tried to legitimate German hegemony over these spaces.<sup>70</sup>

Compared with one another, the biographical studies of both show the complexity and divergences in the reception of Heinrich von Plauen in the inter-

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67 Ulrike Jureit: *Das Ordnen von Räumen. Territorium und Lebensraum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Hamburg 2012, pp. 159–179.

68 Karl Hampe: *Heinrich von Plauen 1365/70–1429*, in: Willy Andreas/Wilhelm von Scholz (eds.): *Die Großen Deutschen. Neue Deutsche Biographie*, Berlin 1937, pp. 267–283; Karl Hampe: *Der Sturz des Hochmeisters Heinrich von Plauen*, Berlin 1935.

69 Erich Maschke: *Der deutsche Ordensstaat. Gestalten seiner großen Meister*, Hamburg 1935.

70 for Maschke see Barbara Schneider: *Erich Maschke. Im Beziehungsgeflecht von Politik und Geschichtswissenschaft*, Göttingen 2016.

war-period. Maschke's portrayal combines the interpretations of Treitschke with semantics and discourses within National-Socialist Germany. According to him, Heinrich is an exceptional, sometimes even demonic »Führer« who tries to overcome the theocracy of the Order and to transform the Order's government into a national state by expanding the basis of its power – not by introducing a parliamentary representation of the Estates, but through *Volksführung*. Aside from being an ethnically and culturally homogenous group, *Volk* is for Maschke also *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*, a community bound by a common historical mission and fate. Heinrich is again portrayed as a tragic hero who sees the necessity of transforming the Order's state into a secular principality.<sup>71</sup> Maschke follows an understanding of the Order as a young and elitist *Männerbund* – a notion that became important after 1918. For the generation of *Frontkämpfer* and *Freikorps*, groups of men brought together by commonly exercised and suffered violence, the Order became an important point of reference, but also for parts of the German Youth Movement (*bündische Jugend*) to which Maschke had belonged.<sup>72</sup> This stood in contrast to interpretations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which saw the male character of the order and its denial of the bourgeois or noble family based on marriage as the cause of its decline.

Hampe also follows the language of the time and sometimes Treitschke, seeing Heinrich erratically in a few places as a *Führer* living in the wrong time.<sup>73</sup> It is not always clear whether this *herrische Führernatur* is assessed in a positive way. Hampe criticizes the murders of 1411 as judicial murder (*Justizmorde*) and accuses Heinrich also of having blown up the conservative structures of the Order, thus promoting its decline – an interpretation that is new compared to its predecessors. In what was perhaps an effort to make the ambivalence of his depiction less problematic, Hampe declared that the 15<sup>th</sup> century was in general a bad time for heroes.<sup>74</sup> In his article dealing with

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71 Maschke: *Der deutsche Ordensstaat*, pp. 88–106.

72 see Klaus Theweleit: *Männerphantasien*, 3rd ed., Berlin 2020; for the example of the Jungdeutscher Orden see Dieter Tiemann: *Der Jungdeutsche Orden und Frankreich*, in: *Francia* 12 (1985), pp. 425–456.

73 see e.g. the inconsistent use of the concepts of »Staatsmann« and »Führer« in the conclusion of Hampe: *Heinrich von Plauen 1365/70–1429*, p. 283.

74 id.: *Heinrich von Plauen 1365/70–1429*, pp. 267–283. Formulations such as »judicial murder« (*Justizmorde*) for the events of 1411 (p. 274) are complicated to interpret, as they might suggest an indirect critique of the law system under National Socialism; for Hampes ambivalent position toward National Socialism after the »Machtergreifung« see Reichert, Folker: *Gelehrtes Leben. Karl Hampe, das Mittelalter und die Geschichte der Deutschen*, Göttingen 2009, pp. 261–286, who unfortunately does not tackle the question why Hampe,

Heinrich's deposition, Hampe uses extensive source criticism to understand the interests behind the respective sources from the 1410's and emphasizes that national distinctions were of secondary importance for contemporaries because they did not yet exist in modern forms. He distances himself from Treitschke's nationalistic interpretation.<sup>75</sup> Hampe avoids any moral judgement and does not go into the events in Gdańsk. This makes the text from 1935 one that has aged remarkably »well«.

General trends within German historical research in the 1920s–1940s might explain why Maschke and Hampe both dealt with Heinrich and why their depiction went in different directions.

The general shift towards *Volksgeschichte* after 1918 attempted to historically legitimise German rule over large parts of Central and Eastern Europe by focusing on *Volk* and not on the state, methodologically by researching migration movements, languages and identities and not in »great men« making history.<sup>76</sup> This might explain why Heinrich's role as the predecessor of Hohenzollern-Prussia, as well as the events of 1411, lost importance. The societal conflicts with which historians dealt shifted towards questions of rule and control over spaces that were lost after the treaty of Versailles. Heinrich was no longer needed as a predecessor of a monarch or a Bismarck-like statesman. He did not become a prominent *Führer* either, perhaps because he appeared too aristocratic. The interpretation of Heinrich as a proto-Protestant lost importance in the interwar period, because the religious conflicts lost much of their relevance. As a *Führer*-figure of the *Volk*, this made him potentially attractive for young historians like Maschke, working in the *Grenzland*, who tried to legitimate a revision of the treaty of Versailles and German control over Eastern Europe; for a historian like Hampe, he had lost significance.

What can be seen here are the ambivalences in the historical adaptation of the Teutonic Order in the »age of extremes«. In a context in which the Teutonic Order was seen as executing the historical mission of the *Volk*, as a collective historical agent of spatial claims, the extraordinary noble heroes as Heinrich lost their importance.

The narratives of the »long 19<sup>th</sup> century« were however not completely lost after 1945. They can be found, for example, in Erich Weise's (1895–1972) influ-

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who hadn't published about the history of the Teutonic Order before 1933, worked about this topic after 1933.

75 id.: *Der Sturz des Hochmeisters Heinrich von Plauen*, p. 4.

76 for »*Volksgeschichte*« see Ingo Haar: *Historiker im Nationalsozialismus. Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft und der »Volkstumskampf« im Osten*, Göttingen 2000.

ential book *Das Widerstandsrecht im Ordenslande Preußen und das mittelalterliche Europa* from 1955, based on studies that Weise prepared as an archivist in Nazi-occupied Warsaw (1939–1942) and as head of the Reichsarchiv in Poznań (1942–1945). After the Second World War, Weise, now archivist in Stade, worked at the interface of regional historical research and the revanchist policy promoted by the *Vertriebenenverbände*.<sup>77</sup>

Weise sees Heinrich von Plauen as »unquestionably a political genius«. <sup>78</sup> Heinrich had to establish a dictatorship, which was his »tragic fault«. <sup>79</sup> Weise sees the conflicts in Gdańsk in 1411 as avoidable, but relies on the narration of treason and articulates sympathy for the Order and the Grand Master, even stating that the killings had reestablished peace in the land.<sup>80</sup> Here in 1955, Weise is much more in line with the *Führerkult* than Hampe. His book is – apart from its ›West-orientation‹ – a contribution to the discourses of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Heinrich von Plauen and the New Right

References to Heinrich in the past decades are rare, even in the field in which one might expect them, namely the ›New Right‹. A portrait of Heinrich as part of a special volume ›German Heroes‹ of the far-right *Compact Magazine*<sup>81</sup> is an exception. The text, written by Jan von Flocken, a former writer of historical portraits for the conservative newspaper *Die Welt*, demonstrates the transformations of the historical images referred to by the German, as well as an increasingly international, right-wing movement.

Flocken builds on the narratives of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. Flocken's Heinrich von Plauen is a mixture of the Eichendorffian romantic Heinrich, Treitschke's ›Realpolitiker‹ and an indefatigable East German. Flocken's texts follow an approach that is more national history of the Wilhelmine Empire than *Volksgeschichte*. His focus is abstract. He tries to provide evidence of

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77 see Stefan Lehr: Ein fast vergessener »Osteinsatz«. Deutsche Archivare im Generalgouvernement und im Reichskommissariat Ukraine, Düsseldorf 2007; Maximiliane Berger: ›Herrenklasse‹. Erich Weise und der Ordensritter, in: Maximiliane Berger/ Mirjam Hähnle/Anna Leyrer (eds.): Männer über sich. Wissenschaft – Biografie – Geschlecht, Göttingen 2024, pp. 125–146.

78 Weise: Die Staatsverträge des Deutschen Ordens, p. 65.

79 *ibid.*, p. 68.

80 *ibid.*, pp. 70–73.

81 Jan von Flocken: Deutsche Helden. Unser Vermächtnis aus 2000 Jahren, Werder 2017, pp. 27–32.

2000 years of German history to present a national historiography without the Holocaust and National Socialists, to overcome the ›post-heroic‹ historiography.<sup>82</sup> This is reflected in the selection of heroes in Flocken's volume, from Arminius (ca 17 BCE – AD 21) to Erwin Rommel (1891–1944), who is depicted as apolitical knightly warrior. Among the 14 heroes with which Flocken deals, five are from the Middle Ages;<sup>83</sup> all of them – whether medieval or not – were warriors or acquired their title deeds of heroism in wars. Flocken's heroes turn against invaders, or they create a nation. This is associated with ›daily political interventions‹: Arminius fights against ›foreign infiltration‹, Stilicho against ›open borders‹, Otto the Great (912–973) against ›foreign invaders‹. Flocken states that Heinrich was a determined Thuringian, which coincides with the idealizations of Eastern Germany in the publications of *Compact*.

The Teutonic Order is not particularly present in the New Right compared to the German Empire. The ›Identitarian Movement‹ organised a summer camp in 2022 under the title ›Order and State‹. In a promotional video, the Order is evoked in the tradition of the *Männerbünde* of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich.<sup>84</sup> However, the references of the ›new‹ Teutonic Knights follow the logics of meme culture, in which the Order appears randomly aside of the Lambda sign on the front of the T-shirts worn by the participants of this summer camp, which alludes to the film *300* by Zack Snyder, dealing with the Battle of Thermopylae, a key reference for the Identitarians,<sup>85</sup> and a martial Tolkien quote.

This illustrates that right-wing references to the Teutonic Order have shifted. The main focus of the ›New Right‹ was and is Islamophobic. In recent years there has been an increasing focus on the supposedly effeminate elites of the West. The far-right and right-wing governments in Eastern Europe and Russia appear to them as role models.<sup>86</sup> The attitudes of the ›New Right‹ towards Eastern Europe thus differ greatly from that of Treitschke. Furthermore, the ›New Right‹ has become globalized. National references, which have lost relevance as lieu de mémoire like the Tannenberg battles, no longer work in a

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82 *ibid.*, p. 5.

83 Stilicho, Arminius, Kaiser Otto der Große, Graf Eberhard II. von Württemberg, Hochmeister Heinrich von Plauen, Paul Beneke, Georg von Frundsberg, Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg, Eugen von Savoyen, Friedrich Wilhelm von Seydlitz, Eleonore Procharska und Johanna Stegen, Carl Klinke, Manfred von Richthofen, Erwin Rommel.

84 Aktionsmelder: »Bundeslager 2022 der Identitären«, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k0q3ijcS3E> (31.5.2024).

85 Weiß: Die autoritäre Revolte, pp. 106–112.

86 *ibid.*, pp. 187–240.

media world increasingly characterized by international discourses and references. Under the influence of the ›Alt-Right‹, motifs such as the *Reconquista*, the crusades or the anti-Ottoman ›bulwark‹ are presumably more important points of reference.<sup>87</sup> Post-national communities of ›nationalists‹ or ›Westerners‹ define themselves by their opposition against ›invading‹ Muslims; they no longer focus on national antagonisms inside Europe.

The German ›New Right‹ refers to reference points that were hardly predominant in the Wilhelmine Empire; for example, the defence of Vienna against the ›Turks‹, in a period in which close interactions between the *Kaiserreich* and the Ottoman Empire existed.<sup>88</sup> They make use of a postmodern, selective reference culture. At the same time, they are part of the social forgetting of the Middle Ages, compared to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The historical references used by the ›New Right‹ are assertions of historical ›identity‹; at the same time, they are obviously arbitrary; they encourage people to imitate what they consider worth imitating – a ›lifestyle‹.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to understand how the historical images of Heinrich von Plauen developed. It was shown that the perception of von Plauen as hero or antihero was linked to specific conflicts or political discussions. While the contemporary sources were not at all interested in the question of whether or not Heinrich was a hero, they used his memory in order to legitimate their own conflictual actions. The medieval and early modern sources, whether they are historiographical or part of ›pragmatic writing‹, have to be seen as situational interventions in conflicts, in which episodes were narrated in a specific way to legitimize one's own position. By setting episodes into a context, the authors constructed conflicts.

Doing so, the premodern tradition created nevertheless the narrative material onto which the ›heroic‹ historiography of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century built. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the authors used the collapse of the rule of the Order to draw conclusions regarding the modern Prussian state and later the German empire and to discuss its inner political and societal tensions. After the German defeat of 1918, this coincided with a shift in the popular

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87 for several examples see Andrew B. R. Elliott: *Medievalism, politics and mass media: Appropriating in the Middle Ages in the twenty-first century*, Woodbridge 2017.

88 Weiß: *Die autoritäre Revolte*, p. 157.

perception of the history of the Teutonic Order as a ›bulwark‹ against the East. As the prominent Tannenberg myth established after the second battle of Tannenberg in 1914 illustrates, the focus on the state of the Order shifted from being the legal predecessor of the Hohenzollerns to an ethnic German group that occupied and held a space which German intellectuals conceptualized as a space of colonial rule.<sup>89</sup>

The narratives highlight conflicts over political participation, questions of the relationship between state and religion, but also over the family, the dynasty or gender roles. At the same time, there are diametrical differences in the interpretations. Looking into heroes and antiheroes as they are combined in one person in the historical imaginations of Heinrich von Plauen thus opens a broad view into the conflicts and contradictions within those societies that create(d) these (anti-)heroes.

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89 For the Tannenberg myth see Hans Jürgen Bömelburg: *Vergessen neben Erinnern. Die brüchige Erinnerung an die Schlacht bei Tannenberg/Grunwald in der deutschen und polnischen Öffentlichkeit*, in: Peter Oliver Loew/Christian Prunitsch (eds.): *Polen. Jubiläen und Debatten. Beiträge zur Erinnerungskultur*, Wiesbaden 2012, pp. 37–55; for the colonial perception Philipp Höhn: »Zeitenwende?« Fritz Rörig (1882–1952) und die Metamorphosen des Raums in der Hanseforschung, in: *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für Deutsche Geschichte* 49 (2021), pp. 54–92.

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## Chapter 4

### The King as Anti-Hero: Executing Enemies and Revising History in Fifteenth-Century Sweden<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

»From Kalmar to Stockholm, there is no fish in the sea that has faced as many hooks as the ones that I have baited for you«, said Erik Puke (d. 1437) to Karl Knutsson Bonde (1408/09–1470) according to a fifteenth-century chronicle.<sup>2</sup> This open confession—admitting to treason and ambushes—is unlikely to have happened in reality. Instead, it is most likely part of the chronicler’s intentional vilification of Erik Puke, with the purpose of contrasting him to the heroic, patient, and noble Karl Knutsson, later King Karl. This glorification of Karl is unsurprising. After all, it was »his« chronicle: Karl had ordered it and it would be posthumously named after him. *Karlskrönikan* (»Karl’s chronicle«, ca 1452) clearly served the purpose of exalting King Karl Knutsson while justifying his path to the crown.

His time was a period of chaos in Sweden, which is demonstrated by the fact that Karl Knutsson would be elected king of Sweden three separate times. Sweden was since the end of the fourteenth century in Union with Denmark and Norway. The Union rulers early on attempted to centralize power around the monarch at the expense of the aristocracy. This was but one of the many factors that would lead to extended power struggles and warfare in this tumultuous era. The fifteenth century was also a time of profound changes as the freeholding peasants proved that they were a force to reckon with, the peasantry was thereafter both a threat and a potential weapon for

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1 I would like to thank Christian Hohenthal for reading and commenting on drafts of this chapter and for many enlightening discussions about medieval chronicles and kingship.

2 »then gedde gar ey mellen calmarn oc thette/ ther flere kroke äre fore sette / än iac hafuer sat for tigh /thz kunde toch aldrig lykkis mik«, Gustaf Edvard Klemming; Svenska medeltidens rimkrönikor D. 2 Nya eller Karls-krönikan: början av unionsstriderna samt Karl Knutssons regering, 1389–1452, Samlingar utgivna av Svenska fornskriftsällskapet. Serie 1, Svenska skrifter, 17:2, Stockholm 1866, verses 3156–3159. This is a rather free translation in order to increase the readability while maintaining the message; for example the word used is not ›fish‹ but the more specific ›pike.‹ I have throughout used Klemming’s edition of *Karlskrönikan*. From now on it will be referred to as *Karlskrönikan* with a reference to the verses.

the power-hungry elite to summon and use. These transformations provide the framework for the events depicted in two late medieval chronicles. This chapter focuses on the first section of *Karlskrönikan* that aimed to turn Erik Puke from a hero to a villain, and elevate Karl Knutsson as the main heroic figure. Both of these leaders entered the scene after the death of Engelbrekt Engelbretsson, and his heroic shadow affected both of their portrayals. Their depictions were also affected by who their supporters were; while Karl Knutsson had the support of the aristocracy, Erik Puke had the backing of various peasant groups.

The chapter will attempt to establish how the chronicler understood heroism and how he attempted to create a hero by contrasting him with a villain. Which characteristics did he highlight as suiting a hero? As discussed below, the question remains, how can a chronicle that attempted to glorify King Karl have led to modern scholars describing him, largely based on this same text, as ruthless, harsh, and cruel? I argue that the chronicler attempted to use descriptions and adjectives to heroize Karl Knutsson but he still had to adhere to the framework of events. Furthermore, this chapter highlights that there was a variety of positive attributes that could be used to create a hero, however, these different qualities were at times in conflict with each other. The contrast between the positive attributes used and King Karl's actions created a morally ambiguous character. The chronicler ultimately left us with a confusing depiction of a noble, chivalrous, yet utterly cruel ruler.

## Heroes and Chaos – Sweden in the Early Fifteenth Century

The fifteenth century was indeed a very tumultuous period in Swedish history. By the end of the fourteenth century, Sweden had entered the Kalmar Union, established in 1389 and formalised in 1397. Sweden would be part of the Union, with some interruptions, until 1523. The Union was created by Queen Margaret of Denmark (1353–1412) and ruled by Margaret and her foster son Erik (1381–1459). The latter was born as Bogislav of Pomerania-Stolp, but his name was soon changed to the Nordic-sounding Erik. He was chosen as king of Norway in 1389, elected king of Denmark and Sweden in 1396. The year after, in 1397, he was crowned king of the three realms in Kalmar, which gave the union its name. Nonetheless, the real power lay with Queen Margaret until her death in 1412. Margaret, and after her death Erik, aimed to centralise and increase their power, which could be done by controlling the castles and their fiefs by giving them to loyal people who functioned as royal bailiffs. In addition, it was in the monarch's interest to control the choice

of bishops, especially the archbishop in Uppsala. These attempts to increase royal power would, during Erik's reign, lead to conflicts between the crown and the Swedish aristocrats, the Church, and the peasantry, some of which joined forces in uprisings against the detested king. As is the case with several other unpopular Swedish kings, both writers and historians have emphasized Erik's foreignness by referring to him as Erik of Pomerania.

The fifteenth century is also the era of one of the few well-known Swedish medieval heroes: Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson (end of the 1300s–1436), who led the Engelbrekt uprising 1434–1436.<sup>3</sup> He was the son of a low-level aristocrat and part of a mining family in central Sweden. From 1432 onwards, he represented peasant communities in their complaints against King Erik and in particular against the wrongdoings of the king's local bailiffs. In 1434, after the king had failed to respond to the troublesome situation, he led an uprising against the Union King. Engelbrekt has been interpreted in very different ways depending on the historical circumstances. During the nineteenth century, when nationalistic history-writing flourished, Engelbrekt was depicted as a popular peasant leader, representing Swedish nationalist interests against tyrannical foreign rulers.<sup>4</sup> These historians turned Engelbrekt into the founder of Sweden as a national democracy.<sup>5</sup> This was due to the fact that he was credited with founding the Swedish parliament in Arboga in 1435, in which all the estates were represented. The anniversary of the Swedish parliament was celebrated with festivities in 1935 and 1985, although historians, by the later date, had already demonstrated that the Arboga meeting cannot be seen as the first parliament.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Peter Reinholdsson describes the main aspects of the uprising. Peter Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?: Samhällsorganisation och konflikt i senmedeltidens Sverige*, Uppsala 1998, pp. 30–32. Dick Harrison also provides a concise description of both the Engelbrekt uprising and the ensuing Puke-uprising. Dick Harrison: *Uppror och allianser: politiskt våld i 1400-talets svenska bondesamhälle*, Lund 1997, pp. 49–55.

4 Thomas Lindkvist/Maria Sjöberg: *Det svenska samhället 800–1720. Klerkernas och adelns tid*, Lund 2019, p. 206.

5 Lönnroth adds that this version of Engelbrekt is a literary product. Erik Lönnroth: *Från svensk medeltid*, Stockholm 1959, pp. 111–112.

6 The evidence for the meeting in Arboga 1435 being the first four-estate parliament are a few verses in *Engelbrektskrönikan*. When scholars debated this issue, they turned to two different types of evidence or methods. To start with, scholars have shown that the reference in the chronicle to a meeting with all four estates is an obvious misreading. It does not actually say that the peasantry was present. Others have rather focused on other sources that would support that people from the peasantry were actually present at the meeting and found no evidence for this. Lars-Olof Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid: från drottning Margareta till Kristian II*, 2n ed., Stockholm 2003, p. 205. Erik Lönnroth refutes the 1435 date but instead

Some historians even claimed that Engelbrekt was venerated as a saint, for which there is very little evidence, if any.<sup>7</sup> In a later era, writers stated that Engelbrekt was not a peasant leader; he was a member of the economic elite and his motives were economic, not nationalist. Marxist historians saw him as an early example of the industrial class reacting against feudalist overlords.<sup>8</sup>

The complexities of the Engelbrekt uprising were long downplayed in favour of a depiction of the events as a peasant rebellion and independence war against a disliked Kalmar Union ruled by an equally detested Danish king.<sup>9</sup> Peter Reinholdsson, among others, has shown that both peasants and aristocrats participated in the Engelbrekt uprising, thus calling into question that it was a *peasant* rebellion.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the insurrection clearly demonstrated that the peasantry had become a military force to reckon with in the power struggles of the era, and subsequent rulers attempted to gain their support.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars have debated the background to the uprising and some have underlined the Union King's periodic blockade of trade with the Hanseatic towns as a significant cause. This was because the trade embargoes made it difficult for the miners in central Sweden to export their goods.<sup>12</sup> But there were many reasons for the rebellion. More recently, historians have shown that rejection of the Kalmar Union as such was not the cause of the uprising. Rather, the local royal exercise of power in various Swedish regions was the main concern, especially the bailiffs appointed by King Erik.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the Nordic aristocratic kin groups were divided, and some supported the Union while others did not. The king had sworn an oath to rule Sweden with

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suggests that the first parliament was held in 1464. Lönnroth: *Från svensk medeltid*, p. 115, p. 119.

7 Andrey Scheglov: Was There a Cult of »Saint Engelbrekt«?, in: *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 14 (2018): 185–192.

8 Lindkvist/Sjöberg: *Det svenska samhället 800–1720*, p. 206.

9 Kjell Kumlien states that Engelbrekt's movement was »democratic.« Kjell Kumlien: *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434-1448*, Stockholm 1933, p. 98; For a concise description of the historiography see: Olle Ferm: *State-Formative Tendencies, Political Struggle and the Rise of Nationalism in Late Medieval Sweden*, *Runica et Mediaevalia. Lectiones* 2, Stockholm 2002, pp. 2–4.

10 Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?*, p. 109, p. 257. Dick Harrison states that, in late medieval Sweden, there was no clear boundary between a peasant uprisings, civil war or aristocratic feuding. Harrison: *Uppror och allianser*, p. 104.

11 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 240.

12 Larsson points out that the blockade was over by the time the uprising started. *ibid.*, pp. 186–188.

13 *ibid.*, p. 206.

Swedish men and give the castles and fiefs primarily to Swedish aristocrats, but this did not happen. While it may not have been the direct cause of the uprising, it did create resistance against the king and subsequently against the Kalmar Union. In addition, King Erik made an enemy of many churchmen when he objected to their autonomous appointment of a new archbishop. The Uppsala cathedral chapter had elected a new archbishop without consulting the king.<sup>14</sup> This conflict had a wider European backdrop. In the Reform Councils during the first half of the fifteenth century, church men vocalised demands of the freedom of the Church and of independent and free elections of church officials.<sup>15</sup>

According to the late medieval chronicles, the major point of contention was the foreign, often Danish or German, bailiffs that King Erik had appointed to manage the Swedish castles and who were responsible for tax collection.<sup>16</sup> The Engelbrekt uprising focused on capturing these castles and getting rid of the bailiffs. Engelbrekt led an army consisting of peasants, miners, and several aristocrats that largely achieved this goal. By his side was the aristocratic Erik Puke, but also other noblemen, among them Karl Knutsson. Negotiations with the Union King followed late in 1434; these talks were ultimately unsuccessful in achieving an end to the war. They did, however, lead to a truce.<sup>17</sup>

In January 1435 a meeting took place in Arboga. Although it was hardly the first parliament as previously claimed, the town burghers were formally represented. At this meeting, Engelbrekt became Captain of the Realm (*rikshövitsman*), a new position that resembled a non-crowned regent. At the same meeting, the Council of the Realm was increased in numbers and now included Engelbrekt and Erik Puke. This was clearly contrary to the

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14 The cleric and historian Ericus Olai stated that the Engelbrekt uprising was an act of divine intervention after King Erik threatened the Uppsala church. Biörn Tjällén: Church and Nation: The Discourse on Authority in Ericus Olai's *Chronica Regni Gothorum* (c. 1471), Stockholm 2007, pp. 105–106; Bertil Nilsson states that this was one of many causes for the uprising and that several important bishops sided with Engelbrekt. However, most bishops were pro-Union although they were hostile toward the Union King. Martin Berntson/Bertil Nilsson/Cecilia Wejryd: *Kyrka i Sverige: Introduktion till svensk kyrkohistoria*, Skellefteå 2012, pp. 76–77. I would not consider it a »cause« for the uprising, but it clearly led to support from some bishops once it had started.

15 Beata Losman: Norden och reformkonsilierna 1408–1449, Göteborg 1970, pp. 272–273; Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 183–184.

16 Reinholdsson: Uppror eller resningar?, p. 176; Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, p. 180.

17 Dick Harrison: Karl Knutsson: en biografi, Lund 2004, pp. 65–67; Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 190–203.

king's right to appoint the councillors of the Realm. This expanded Council would not last. During negotiations with the King later in 1435, he removed the rebellious members of the Council and replaced them with more loyal councillors. During this time, King Erik appointed Karl Knutsson to High Constable (*marsk*), one of the two governing positions in Sweden—the other was High Justiciary (*drots*), to which he appointed Kristiern Nilsson (Vasa) (ca. 1365–1442).<sup>18</sup>

The next year a rift between Karl Knutsson and Engelbrekt began. At a second election meeting in Stockholm, Karl Knutsson replaced Engelbrekt as Captain of the Realm, which led to angry protests from Engelbrekt and Erik Puke. They gathered support from the commoners and, in order to calm the peasantry down, the meeting ultimately named Engelbrekt Co-Captain. The same year in 1436, Engelbrekt became gravely ill and was murdered by the nobleman Magnus Bengtsson during his difficult recovery. Karl Knutsson was thereby conveniently rid of his main competitor, Engelbrekt.<sup>19</sup>

Karl Knutsson and the High Justiciary Kristiern Nilsson were left to handle a complex situation. Engelbrekt had a wide reach and his death stirred up parts of the population. Both Karl and Erik Puke were born into the realm's highest aristocratic elite and had close ties to the Council of the Realm. Their interests aligned at times, in particular during the first rebellion, the Engelbrekt uprising.<sup>20</sup> However, they also collaborated in the later phases. During October 1436, renewed negotiations between King Erik of Pomerania and the Council of the Realm were meant to take place. However, King Erik was shipwrecked and rumours spread that he had been killed. Karl and Erik Puke gathered troops to regain the castles that were still managed by bailiffs loyal to the Union King.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, Karl Knutsson and the High Justiciary Kristiern Nilsson divided the castles with their fiefs among the Swedish aristocrats. Erik Puke likely expected to receive one of the more important castles, which did not happen.

Soon after this, a new rebellion started, led by Erik Puke. Karl Knutsson crushed this uprising and had Erik Puke and his right-hand man executed. Scholars have claimed that it was likely that Karl had promised Erik Puke safe passage to the meeting where he was arrested. This event could then be seen

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18 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 203–213.

19 *ibid.*, pp. 221–231. Dick Harrison states that it is unlikely that Karl Knutsson was involved in the murder of Engelbrekt. Harrison: Karl Knutsson, pp. 79–80.

20 Sven-Bertil Jansson: Engelbrektskrönikan, Stockholm 1994, pp. 109–111.

21 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, pp. 76–78.

as an act of treason by Karl.<sup>22</sup> Kjell Kumlien writes, somewhat vaguely, that Karl Knutsson clearly had done something that required him to defend his actions towards Erik Puke; he needed to shield himself from grave allegations that circulated.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the next year, in 1438, Karl Knutsson was elected regent of Sweden. He had to wait ten years for the crown—in 1448 he was elected king of Sweden for the first time. He was deposed and exiled in 1457. His other two reigns lasted from August 1464 to January 1465 and from November 1467 until his death in May 1470.<sup>24</sup>

### Creating Heroes and Villains – Two Chronicles

Two rhymed chronicles depict this time period, *Engelbrektskrönikan* (»Engelbrekt's chronicle« from the late 1430s) and *Karlskrönikan* (around 1452). These two were later combined into one, nowadays referred to as *Karlskrönikan* after the scholarly edition by Gustaf Edvard Klemming.<sup>25</sup> It was long believed to have been written as one chronicle, although historians and linguists early on debated how the different parts were connected, since the rhyming structure and the perspective changes. Scholars have convincingly demonstrated that *Karlskrönikan* consists of at least two different texts, written by several different authors. Most notably, *Engelbrektskrönikan* was incorporated into the beginning of *Karlskrönikan* to depict the time from 1389 until Engelbrekt's death in 1436. *Engelbrektskrönikan* is about a third of the ca. 9600 verses in *Karlskrönikan*.<sup>26</sup> In the process, some sections were removed,

22 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 230–231; Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 81; Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 101.

23 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 95.

24 Kjell Kumlien: Karl Knutsson (Bonde), in: Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/12366 (8.1.2024)

25 When *Engelbrektskrönikan* later was added to *Karlskrönikan*, it was revised; these changes are clearly visible in manuscript D6 in the Royal Library in Stockholm. The revisions were made in order to enhance Karl Knutsson's position also in the time period before Engelbrekt's death. Sven-Bertil Jansson has recreated *Engelbrektskrönikan* by ignoring the modifications done during Karl Knutsson's time. Jansson: *Engelbrektskrönikan*, pp. 16–18. The D6 manuscript is seen as the original manuscript for *Karlskrönikan*; the chronicle is also preserved in six other medieval manuscripts. In these manuscripts *Karlskrönikan* has been combined with other chronicles, both older and younger; in some cases it has also been revised or shortened. In addition, it has been preserved in nine post-medieval manuscripts. Louise Faymonville: *Hövvisk litteratur och förändringar i det fornsvenska textlandskapet*, Stockholm 2023, p. 83.

26 *ibid.*, p. 55.

others slightly rewritten, usually to highlight Karl Knutsson's importance at the expense of others. Herman Schück has posited that *Engelbrektskrönikan* was authored by Johan Fredebern (d. before 1449), who was the scribe for the Council of the Realm and thus worked for King Karl.<sup>27</sup>

*Karlskrönikan* is believed to have been commissioned by the king himself. Scholars have described it basically as a piece of propaganda.<sup>28</sup> It is not without problems to use the term propaganda for medieval chronicles, depending on what one means with the term. One issue is the limited diffusion of these texts: chronicles were simply not a very efficient means of reaching a larger audience compared to, for example, political songs or shorter poems.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the term propaganda is often associated with false information. Many medieval chronicles have a bad reputation with regard to their veracity and reliability, and many are undoubtedly strongly biased. However, this does not mean that chroniclers completely falsified the main historical events. In any event, this is a simplified view of the Swedish chronicles as the authors in general had a framework of events to which they needed to adhere. Information circulated in the Swedish realm in the form of letters, pamphlets, and political songs.<sup>30</sup> It would have undermined an author too much if they completely departed from what was known to have happened. Still, as Christian Hohenthal demonstrates, when describing these events there was a possibility to »spin« descriptions so that they could be used to justify a person's actions or influence the reader's (or listener's) views. Of course, occasionally authors moved some events chronologically or simply made them up.<sup>31</sup> In some cases,

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27 Herman Schück: *Engelbrektskrönikan: tillkomsten och författaren*, Kungl. Vitterhets-, historie- och antikvitetsakademiens handlingar, Stockholm 1994.

28 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 238; Harrison: *Karl Knutsson*, p. 59, p. 99; Kumlien: *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448*, p. 83, p. 95; Lönnroth: *Från svensk medeltid*, p. 78.

29 Justin Lake: *Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography*, in: *History Compass* 12 (2014), No. 4, p. 353; Fulvio Ferrari: *Karlskrönikan och utvecklingen av det senmedeltida svenska litterära systemet*, in: Jonathan Adams (ed.): *Østnordisk filologi – nu og i fremtiden*, Odense 2015, pp. 191–192.

30 Margaretha Nordquist: *A Struggle for the Realm: Late-Medieval Swedish Rhyme Chronicles as Ideological Expressions*, Stockholm 2015, pp. 50–51; Reinholdsson: *Uppror eller resningar?*, p. 102.

31 The term »spin« comes from Richard Kagan, who describes chroniclers as »spin-doctors«. Richard L. Kagan: *Clio and the Crown: The Politics of History in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, Baltimore 2009, pp. 5–7. But my description is taken from Christian Hohenthal who in detail analyses the use of »spin« in Swedish late medieval history writing. Christian Hohenthal: *Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser. En undersökning av fyra svenska historieverk från 1400- och 1500-talen*, Uppsala 2025.

it is very difficult to assess whether the events actually took place, as we have limited sources remaining; we are for example very dependent on *Karlskrönikan* for the events that took place right after Engelbrekt's death in 1436. The introduction of this chapter might serve as an example of the possibility to spin situations. While it might have been possible to verify that Erik Puke did attend the banquet in question, it would be very hard to confirm whether Erik actually said these words to Karl Knutsson and his sister.<sup>32</sup>

It is difficult to know definitively who actually read or listened to the chronicles. Lars-Olof Larsson states that *Engelbrektskrönikan* was written for a somewhat different audience than previous chronicles: it was meant to be read at »less elegant banquets or at market meetings« where people from the lower ranks of the population were also present.<sup>33</sup> Herman Schück claims that *Engelbrektskrönikan* is a compilation of various sources and that they then might have targeted different groups. But he also claims that, when compiled together, these texts aimed to reach a wide audience.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, Fulvio Ferraro convincingly argues that *Karlskrönikan* was likely consumed by a primarily aristocratic audience. He bases this partly on the length of the chronicle, as it has been preserved. Consisting of more than 9600 verses, it would have taken almost ten hours to read. His other argument stems from the negative depiction of ordinary people in *Karlskrönikan* which makes it hard to believe that they were part of the intended audience.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the descriptions of the peasantry and the relationship between the main protagonists and the peasants differ quite significantly between the two chronicles which will be important in the following.

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32 Duncan Robertson argues that the role of the medieval writer was not to record what characters had said but what they would have said, being who they were. Duncan Robertson: Epic Direct Discourse, in: Pacific Coast Philology 20 (1985), No. 1/2, pp. 70–74; Rasa Mažeika: Pagans, Saints, and War Criminals: Direct Speech as a Sign of Liminal Interchanges in Latin Chronicles of the Baltic Crusades, in: Viator 45 (2014), No. 2, pp. 272–274; Sophia Menache concludes that oral addresses in chronicles were a literary means to captivate audiences and impart authenticity. They served to manipulate existing feelings, such as hatred, fear, latent antagonism or unlimited support. Sophia Menache: Written and Oral Testimonies in Medieval Chronicles: Matthew Paris and Giovanni Villani, in: The Medieval Chronicle 6 (2009), p. 17. In my view, Erik Puke's speech indeed served to emphasize Puke's deception and increase the hatred towards him.

33 Larsson, Kalmarunionens tid, p. 198.

34 Schück: Engelbrektskrönikan, pp. 159–167.

35 Ferrari: Karlskrönikan och utvecklingen av det senmedeltida svenska litterära systemet, pp. 192–193.

In general, *Engelbrektskrönikan* is thought of as more reliable, as it was written quite soon after the events took place.<sup>36</sup> It is obvious that the two chronicles differ in how they describe Erik Puke. *Engelbrektskrönikan* is quite positive to Puke, who is the main protagonist's foremost ally and friend.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, *Karlskrönikan* serves to justify why Karl Knutsson not only defeated Erik Puke, but also had him executed.<sup>38</sup> This chapter will make use of *Karlskrönikan's* biases to discuss how the author sought to create heroes and villains.

### Depictions of Karl Knutsson and Erik Puke

Historians have had a limited interest in Karl Knutsson and his rule. As Dick Harrison writes, he was neither a great winner nor a great loser.<sup>39</sup> Nineteenth-century historians depicted him as a glorious young noble, but an unsuccessful king. More recently, historians have seen his reign as a failed precursor to the rule of Gustav Vasa, who would turn Sweden into a nation-state. Harrison, who wrote the only biography of Karl Knutsson, defines his main characteristic as ambition which in turn led to ruthlessness. He furthermore argues that as a propagandist, he was a pioneer.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, scholars agree that *Karlskrönikan* served to produce a very positive image of Karl Knutsson. It is therefore interesting to note that Lars-Olof Larsson underlines that the events surrounding Erik Puke's feud are depicted in »a strikingly incongruous way«. <sup>41</sup> Furthermore, based on the chronicle, Kjell Kumlien refers to Karl Knutsson as ruthless, brusque, and heavy-handed.<sup>42</sup> Although *Karlskrönikan* is meant to portray the king as a hero, his behavior in the chronicle thus still leaves readers with the impression of a cruel and ruthless ruler.<sup>43</sup> While King Karl is indeed described as noble, patient, and kind, his actions definitely do not serve as proof of these characteristics. He

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36 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, pp. 197–198.

37 But the chronicle is not without reservations to Erik Puke or Engelbrekt's behavior. See Hohenthal: Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser, pp. 167–175.

38 Dick Harrison writes that the chronicle's biases become more extreme in this section of the text. Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 88.

39 *ibid.*, pp. 421–422.

40 *ibid.*, pp. 422–425.

41 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, p. 238.

42 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 80, pp. 95–96.

43 As noted below, there are other sources that describe Karl Knutsson. Ericus Olai is for example very negative in his descriptions and likens Karl to a tyrant. Tjällén: Church and Nation, pp. 109–113.

serves as a good example of the moral ambiguity of heroes and contradictions within the concept of the heroic itself.

Erik Puke has, for obvious reasons, garnered less scholarly attention than King Karl Knutsson. Gottfrid Carlsson referred to Puke as »the most tragic figure« in the story of Sweden's national independence fight in the 1430s.<sup>44</sup> Carlsson clearly viewed him as a patriotic hero whose life ended tragically. Herman Schück, on the contrary, states that this sentiment is not warranted, since Erik Puke acted out of self-interest and ambition. He argues that while his title as the »people's chieftain« or »peasant chieftain« can be disputed, he was a pioneer in the sense that he successfully appealed to the broader population's dissatisfaction with an aristocratic regime.<sup>45</sup> Dick Harrison describes the arrest and execution of Erik Puke as a form of treason and adds that Karl Knutsson never managed to completely wash away this stain of blood on his clothes.<sup>46</sup> Kjell Kumlien, furthermore, regards King Karl's failure to reconcile with Puke as his biggest political mistake.<sup>47</sup> It is very difficult, if not impossible, to accurately evaluate the events that took place during the conflict between Karl Knutsson and Erik Puke. Historians must rely almost exclusively on *Karlskrönikan*. The other source we have—a chronicle written (c. 1471) by Ericus Olai (1420s-1486)—is far more skeptical towards Karl Knutsson's behaviour (and the king in general) and describes the events as an act of treason. Indeed, Erik Neuman states that a historian's view of Karl Knutsson depends on whether they follow *Karlskrönikan* or Ericus Olai's later chronicle.<sup>48</sup> While Kumlien tries to find a middle ground by reconciling and balancing the positive *Karlskrönikan* with the negative Ericus Olai, Harrison argues that we need to choose whom to believe. Harrison clarifies his own perspective and states that this section of *Karlskrönikan* is highly unreliable.<sup>49</sup>

More recent scholarship has studied *Karlskrönikan* from other perspectives. Margaretha Nordquist has turned to the history of emotions to analyse the use of anger in *Karlskrönikan*. She concludes that anger could function

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44 Gottfrid Carlsson: Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson, in: Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/16127 (8.1.2025)

45 Herman Schück: Erik Puke, in: Svenskt biografiskt lexikon, sok.riksarkivet.se/sbl/artikel/7423 (8.1.2025)

46 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 101.

47 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 95.

48 Erik Neuman: *Karlskrönikans proveniens och sanningsvärde: en undersökning och några slutsatser*, Uppsala, 1927, p. 106.

49 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 100; Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, pp. 83–96.

in different ways; controlled anger could be an efficient political tool to influence others, while unrestrained rage was a negative trait that undermined a person's credibility.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, she tries to capture the emotional regimes (or communities) that underpinned the society in which the chronicle was recorded. Thomas Småberg has explored the importance of friendship in *Karlskrönikan*. He describes friendship as an ideal relationship, but argues that the author displays a pragmatic view, where friendship is linked to political alliances rather than to chivalrous values. Nonetheless, he argues that chivalrous ideals are present in *Karlskrönikan* and that they were used to link the text to an aristocratic tradition.<sup>51</sup>

### The Heroic King

In media studies the term hero can be understood, in common usage, as a person admired for positive traits or achievements. In literary theory, it simply refers to a protagonist, with or without positive characteristics. When a person lacks the admirable qualities of fortitude, honesty, courage, and decency, they can be referred to as an anti-hero. An anti-hero according to this definition is then not the same as an antagonist or a villain.<sup>52</sup> While the term hero might have been understood in the Middle Ages, the expression anti-hero is a newer invention.<sup>53</sup> Neil Cartlidge maintains that the term anti-hero is useful for analysing characters in medieval romances. He argues that the polarization of heroes and villains in romances has discouraged recognition of how morally ambiguous, even downright sinister, the heroic protagonists can be. He further writes that medieval heroism is closely linked to values such as

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50 Margaretha Nordquist: Sankt Eriks vrede: Oförrätter, minne och politiska känslor i den senmedeltida Karlskrönikan, in: Lychnos: Årsbok för idé- och lärdoms historia. Tema: Känslor, Lund 2022, pp. 125–139.

51 Thomas Småberg: Ideal och identiteter: föreställningar kring vänskap i Erikskrönikan och Karlskrönikan, in: Vänner, patroner och klienter i Norden 900–1800: rapport till 26:e Nordiska historikermötet i Reykjavík den 8–12 augusti 2007, Reykjavík 2007, pp. 147–174.

52 Daniel Chandler/Rod Munday: Hero; Anti-hero, in: A Dictionary of Media and Communication, Oxford 2020.

53 The term hero does not seem to have been widely used in English until the sixteenth century. Morton W. Bloomfield: The Problem of the Hero in the Later Medieval Period, in: Norman T. Burns/Christopher J. Reagan (eds.): Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Albany (New York) 1975, p. 28; Merriam-Webster's Dictionary notes that the first use of anti-hero is from 1714. Merriam-Webster: America's Most Trusted Dictionary: Antihero, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antihero](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antihero) (8.1.2025). The use of the Old Swedish word for hero, *håladh*, is well attested in the Middle Ages.

chivalry, aristocracy, and masculinity, etc. Anti-heroism can then be described as the ways in which heroes fail to live up to the paradigm of heroism and, importantly, can refer to the contradictions within heroism itself.<sup>54</sup>

Ulrich Bröckling characterises the anti-hero as standing in opposition to the hero in terms of a code of behaviour; the anti-hero does what heroes do not. He contrasts this to the no-longer-heroes; they underline that processes of de-heroization can turn those who were once celebrated into insignificant or even ridiculed characters.<sup>55</sup> This highlights that the chronicler, and Karl Knutsson in reality, had several choices in his attempts to undermine Erik Puke. As Engelbrekt was dead, Erik Puke could have been turned into a no-longer-hero. Instead, the author tried to turn him into the qualitative opposite of Karl Knutsson, as Bröckling states: by emphasising the reversal of the heroic moral. This means that Erik Puke in a sense appears as a great adversary, but is portrayed as evil.<sup>56</sup> Though this was perhaps needed, it was also riskier, as it required a more exaggerated narrative.

The medieval heroic paradigm was linked to chivalry, at the core of which we find virtues of generosity, bravery, and loyalty, in addition to physical beauty. Moreover, during the late Middle Ages, there was an ever-sharper emphasis on family and lineage for aristocrats and heroes. Chivalry was ultimately a web of associations linking the knight's social accomplishments, his courage, generosity, his courtliness (especially in regards to women), his skills in horsemanship, hunting, and swordplay.<sup>57</sup> In Sweden the rhymed historical chronicles from the early fourteenth century were strongly influenced by translated chivalrous romances.<sup>58</sup> But in the fifteenth century, when *Karlskrönikan* was written, the chivalrous elements had become more stereotypical and clichéd. Louise Faymonville stresses, however, that we should not see the chivalrous elements merely as a stereotypical manifestation, but rather as proof that the production of texts was now even more politically motivated than before, and that they centered on legitimizing royal power rather than furthering aristocratic ideology. This also entailed a focus on the production of rhymed chronicles rather than romances. However, chivalric phrases re-occur, in particular among appreciative terms and descriptions of actors, also

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54 Neil Cartlidge: *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*. Studies in Medieval Romance, Suffolk 2012, pp. 1–2.

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

56 *ibid.*, p. 40.

57 Maurice Hugh Keen: *Chivalry*, New Haven 2005, p. 43, p. 52, p. 145, p. 219.

58 Faymonville: *Hövvisk litteratur och förändringar i det fornsvenska textlandskapet*, p. 108.

in the later chronicles.<sup>59</sup> Thomas Småberg posits that the chivalrous values were still relevant at the time. He argues that it would not have been possible to write a propagandistic work, aiming to influence people's views, if the linguistic expressions were not gripping and something to which the audience could relate.<sup>60</sup>

In *Karlskrönikan*, the hero is not simply a knight in a medieval romance, but a king or at least a king-to-be. While some heroic aspects were mutually applicable to chivalric heroes and kings, some added characteristics defined the ideal ruler. A good king acted wisely, showed self-restraint, and was fair. He had a genuine faith in God and always had his subjects' wellbeing in mind. The Swedish Mirror for Princes, *Konungastyrelsen* (1330-1350), specifies that the king's virtues were not of a particular kind, but that he should possess cardinal virtues to a greater extent than others. The essential virtues, according to the anonymous author, were hope, faith, and love. In addition, the king needed wisdom, strength, moderation, and justice. Absence of prudence made him unsuitable for government. The author added a fifth virtue: mercy. *Konungastyrelsen* advocated for monarchy, preferably hereditary monarchy. Interestingly, this was actually in conflict with the contemporary Swedish system of elective monarchy, but the author claimed that a hereditary monarchy would ensure that the king came from a respectable family. It was a system in which son appropriately succeeded father. In turn, the author believed, this would lead to the ruler having appropriate personal traits that could be further developed through education.<sup>61</sup> Since the rhymed chronicles were influenced by chivalric values, we can expect that the texts combined these ideal characteristics.

To further complicate matters, however, we can expect different ideals or traits within any heroic paradigm. The authors of medieval texts were generally educated in clerical settings or, indeed, were themselves clerics. While they certainly recognized the value of military prowess and chivalric heroism, it was equally natural for them to insist on the superiority of Christian virtues.<sup>62</sup>

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59 *ibid.*, pp. 269–270.

60 Småberg: *Ideal och identiteter*, p. 171.

61 Tania Preste: *The King's Virtues in Swedish Mirrors for Princes c. 1300– c. 1600*, in: Stefano Fogelberg Rota/Andreas Hellerstedt (eds.): *Shaping Heroic Virtue: Studies in the Art and Politics of Supereminence in Europe and Scandinavia*, Leiden 2015, pp. 137–138.

62 R. R. Bolgar: *Hero or Anti-Hero? The Genesis and Development of the Miles Christianus*, in: Norman T. Burns/Christopher J. Reagan (eds.): *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Albany 1975, p. 121.

In line with this, we can expect a tension between, for example, mercy and strength, forgiveness and revenge, or, as we shall see, trust and astuteness.

As noted above, *Karlskrönikan* contains chivalric elements. These are, in general, used as phrases to describe Karl Knutsson's well-mannered behaviour. He can thus be described as answering questions with chivalry and wisdom, or chivalry and honour.<sup>63</sup> He celebrates Christmas with great joy and chivalrous conversations.<sup>64</sup> In addition, Karl Knutsson is surrounded by state-ly warriors and heroes.<sup>65</sup> His knights are distinguished and brave heroes.<sup>66</sup> Several of Karl's meetings and banquets are described as chivalric events, with honourable receptions, generous food and musicians.<sup>67</sup> Karl explicitly treats people, including Erik Puke, kindly and with honour.<sup>68</sup> Karl himself is described as being mild, chivalrous, and wise.<sup>69</sup> All the expressions used can be found in the chivalric romances and the *Erikskrönikan* (Chronicle of Duke Erik) from the fourteenth century. They thus situate *Karlskrönikan* in this context.



Figure 4: Karl Knutsson's grave monument, Riddarholmskyrkan, Stockholm.

Chivalrous values are used as attributes in the chronicle; they are meant to establish Karl Knutsson as a noble hero. As I argue, these chivalrous

63 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2826, 3218, 4650.

64 *ibid.*, verses 4148–4149.

65 *ibid.*, verse 4195.

66 *ibid.*, verse 3688.

67 *ibid.*, verses 3340–3346.

68 *ibid.*, verse 3132.

69 *ibid.*, verse 3066.

attributes appear as a thin varnish, void of deeper meaning when applied to Karl Knutsson. Nonetheless, they do succeed in linking the chronicle to an aristocratic tradition, as Småberg points out. The text thus clearly targeted the aristocracy as its main audience. *Engelbrektskrönikan* has been described somewhat differently. As noted above, it is seen as a more reliable source, less biased and compiled closer to the events by an author who was likely present himself at many of the happenings that he describes.

### The Traitor and the Merciful Hero

Neither *Engelbrektskrönikan* nor *Karlskrönikan* contain longer descriptions of people, their emotions, or their intentions. Both texts focus on events that are described in a chronological sequence. We shall therefore turn from the chivalrous attributes to the actions of the two main characters to see what they say about their characters. Both Erik Puke and Karl Knutsson are introduced to us in the older *Engelbrektskrönikan*. Karl Knutsson is a minor character during the events described, while Erik Puke takes a more central role. *Engelbrektskrönikan* is even more focused on the succession of events than *Karlskrönikan*; in fact, large parts of the text are descriptions of various sieges and attacks on castles. The chronicle is structured around a main conflict, that between King Erik of Pomerania and his Swedish adversaries, led by Engelbrekt Engelbrektsson.

Erik Puke can be seen as a hero in this earlier narrative, not because of descriptive attributes but because of his actions and because he is consistently described as Engelbrekt's main ally. They are described as the best of friends.<sup>70</sup> Lars-Olof Larsson notes that after a certain point they appear as »conjoint actors«.<sup>71</sup> *Engelbrektskrönikan* was not entirely positive to Erik Puke and Engelbrekt. Especially one event, the election of Karl Knutsson as Captain of the Realm, can be interpreted as putting the two friends in a more negative light. They both refuse to accept the outcome of the election and manage to get the Council of the Realm to accept Engelbrekt as Co-Captain.<sup>72</sup> While this indeed indicates a burgeoning rift between the Council of the Realm and

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70 Jansson: *Engelbrektskrönikan*, p. 115.

71 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 215.

72 Christian Hohenthal describes that Engelbrekt and Erik Puke interrupts the proper order of the ritual by refusing to accept the outcome. Hohenthal: *Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser*, pp. 170–178.

Engelbrekt, it is still a fairly mild criticism compared to the almost parodically exaggerated description of Erik Puke after Engelbrekt's death.

Several scholars have noted that the death of Engelbrekt allowed Karl Knutsson to take center stage in the political arena. But Erik Puke was still alive and he still had the trust and confidence of Engelbrekt's men as well as the support of the peasantry.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, Erik Puke had fought by Karl Knutsson's side in several battles, which made turning him into a villain a delicate matter. From the time of Engelbrekt's death, which marks the end of *Engelbrektskrönikan* and the beginning of *Karlskrönikan*, Erik Puke is painted as traitorous and devious. In the process of vilifying Erik, the author also had to deal with the fact that he had the support of the peasants, which forced the chronicler to reassess the peasantry and describe them as naïve, foolish, and incompetent.

Almost immediately, and with very little context to prepare the reader for the shift in viewpoint, we are introduced to the idea that Erik Puke is stubbornly set on defeating and killing Karl Knutsson. The conflict is first described as a fight over resources, more specifically over supporters.<sup>74</sup> As Margaretha Nordquist has pointed out, the chronicler at times manages to construct a contrast between the calm Karl and the unrestrained, angry Erik Puke.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Erik is described as a coward when he refuses to face Karl in an one-on-one battle. This narrative is quite effective; one of Erik's own men get to tell him that »while you threaten, others strike.«<sup>76</sup>

The negative descriptions of Erik Puke escalate quickly in the chronicle. He is time and again described as false and evil.<sup>77</sup> He is repeatedly called a traitor and betrays Karl Knutsson's trust over and over again.<sup>78</sup> He seeks to have him killed at any point possible, which seems like very risky behaviour. Karl is often portrayed as ignorant of these events and seems surprised by the attempts on his life, but it is hard not to interpret him as rather naïve. He repeatedly refuses to listen to his advisors, who tell him to watch out for Erik. When incidents are brought to his attention, he either chooses to interpret them as misunderstandings or simply forgives Erik Puke immediately.<sup>79</sup> The purpose

73 Jansson: *Engelbrektskrönikan*, pp. 115–117.

74 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2776–2795.

75 Nordquist: Sankt Eriks vrede.

76 »*tha swarade swennin som han wil / meden tu höther hugger annar til*«. *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2844–2845. The episode is recounted in *ibid.*, verses 2818–2846.

77 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2899, 2971, 3008, 3075, 3101.

78 *ibid.*, verses 3102, 3111, 3483, 3499.

79 *ibid.*, verses 3008, 3110–3115, 3136–3169, 3476–3503, 3522–3535, 3570–3571, 3584–3586.

of this part of the account must have been to highlight that Karl Knutsson was mild and forgiving. He gives Erik chance after chance. This depiction serves to link Karl to Christian virtues, such as mercy, forgiveness, and a strong faith in his fellow men. According to the chronicle, Karl Knutsson wholeheartedly trusts that Erik Puke is his friend and provides him with continuous opportunities to do better and become a better man.<sup>80</sup> The chronicler underlines many instances in which God is on Karl's side; it is thanks to God's grace that he survives the attempts on his life. It is also God's will that Karl eventually becomes king.<sup>81</sup>

Karl is, in his mercy and forgiveness, contrasted with the Council of the Realm. According to the author, the entire Council thought very poorly of Erik Puke. This is revealed during a meeting that took place after King Erik's shipwreck, when the recently captured castles were being redistributed and given to aristocrats who were not loyal to the Union King. As mentioned, Erik Puke—who was on the same side as Karl Knutsson—likely expected to receive a more significant castle and fief, but the larger ones went to Karl Knutsson's closest allies.<sup>82</sup> The author personally reassures readers that if Karl had not been present at the meeting, the councillors would have had him executed. He would have »lost his head for robbery and other major things« that he had done to others.<sup>83</sup> The author states that Karl always thought well of Erik, something that he rewarded very badly.<sup>84</sup> It was, of course, in Karl's interest that the entire Council wanted Erik Puke dead long before he actually had him decapitated. As Kjell Kumlien notes, Karl Knutsson was in fact the least likely to interfere on behalf of Erik Puke.<sup>85</sup>

This description is, as many others, quite unlikely. The conflict, this time, concerned property. As Dick Harrison describes, it was hardly just Erik Puke who was discontented with these events.<sup>86</sup> Kumlien furthermore points out that the description underlines the great power that Karl Knutsson now possessed, as he could go against the wishes of the High Justiciary.<sup>87</sup> But

80 *ibid.*, verses 3130–3135, 3498–3499.

81 *ibid.*, verses 3009, 7435. See Hohenthal: *Textens ritualer och historieskrivningens gränser*, pp. 103–109, 129–123, for a discussion of how God's active presence is manifested at several times in the chronicle.

82 Kumlien: *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448*, pp. 81–82.

83 »*hade ther hoffuwdit mist / for roff oc andre store sake*«. *Karlskrönikan*, verses 3453–3454.

84 *Ibid.*, verses 3445–3459.

85 Kumlien: *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448*, p. 82, footnote 56.

86 Harrison: *Karl Knutsson*, pp. 82–83.

87 Kumlien: *Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448*, pp. 80–81.

according to the chronicler, Karl Knutsson is Erik Puke's defender in this situation and Erik is ungrateful.

All of these events take place after the dramatic altercation that introduced this chapter, where Erik openly confessed to repeatedly trying to ambush Karl with no result. Notwithstanding, Karl continues to believe in Erik's good-will and friendship. When his own men warn him that Erik once again will try to assassinate him, he answers that it is strange that they try to create a rift between himself and Erik. Karl continues: »Erik has promised me good-will, he will never do me such an injustice.«<sup>88</sup> It is difficult to understand such naivety. The interpretation must be that the chronicler attempted to exaggerate Karl's Christian mercy and forgiveness at the expense of his strategic wisdom. Nonetheless, the narrative quickly changes as does Karl's view of his »friend«. Erik Puke writes an open feud letter to Karl Knutsson and his reaction is suddenly no longer surprise or sadness. Instead, »he tells his men happily: now, you can all see the dishonor Erik has done me. Now I have proof of that which many have told me, that Erik wants to betray me.«<sup>89</sup> He assures them that this is their lucky day, that they can gain honour and glory and defeat their worst enemy.<sup>90</sup> The joy in this turn of events appears strikingly odd against the background described above.

It is hard to accept the depiction of the traitorous and murderous Erik Puke, but it is even more difficult to accept the image of Karl Knutsson. It is possible that different virtues and different moral systems are at play here; the author has perhaps chosen to downplay Karl's strength and intelligence because the virtue that he needed to emphasize was mercy and forgiveness, providing his evil adversary a chance to repent and do better. In order to highlight his great leniency, the result is that the chronicler depicts his adversary as a caricature of a villain. Like a Bond-villain, he openly—and utterly illogically—admits to all his evildoings. As we shall see in the next section, there was a reason for the exaggeration of Karl's mercy: it seems, in fact, to be a trait that he completely lacked.

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88 »erik haffuer mik sa got jät / han gör mik aldrigh slik oret« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 3534–3534. The entire episode is found in *ibid.*, verses 3524–3535.

89 »gladelige til sit folk han sade / nw mogen i alle see / then oäre erik mik thee / nw finder iac rön pa / som monge haffue sakt mik fra / at erik wille mik forradha« *ibid.*, verses 3581–3586.

90 *ibid.*, verses 3580–3595.

## The King and the Peasants

As noted, the main conflict in *Engelbrektskrönikan* was between the popular leader Engelbrekt, his aristocratic and peasant warriors, and the Union King Erik of Pomerania. Historians have evaluated the role of the peasantry in varying ways and the interpretation has also shifted over time. Traditionally, historians tended to neglect the role of the peasants and focus on the aristocracy. They often portrayed peasants as having been controlled and used by the nobles in their private feuds. More modern scholarship has emphasized that late medieval peasants had agency and wielded both political and military power.<sup>91</sup> In *Engelbrektskrönikan* the peasantry is usually described in two ways: either as innocent victims of ruthless, greedy bailiffs or as fairly competent soldiers.<sup>92</sup> When they are portrayed as combatants, they are often referred to by the province from which they came—the Upplanders or the Dalecarlians, for example. This highlights that provincial and regional identities were still very important and, furthermore, that it was local communities who acted in the conflicts.<sup>93</sup> By contrast, in *Karlskrönikan* the description of the peasants is more ambivalent and, at times, much more negative.

As noted above, *Karlskrönikan* has been described as a chronicle that was meant to be read at markets for common people. But as Fulvio Ferrari demonstrates, not only the length of the chronicle but also the content makes this highly unlikely. As Ferrari points out, *Karlskrönikan* is not very positive towards the peasantry. The narrator displays open contempt for the peasants. It is therefore highly unlikely that the chronicle was meant to appeal to the peasantry.<sup>94</sup> It is evident that the text's transition from the older *Engelbrektskrönikan* to *Karlskrönikan* reveal an actual shift in how the elite perceived the peasants. The peasant armies led by Engelbrekt were not only a positive force in the fight against the Union King, but also became a very tangible threat to the aristocracy that needed to be handled. Ferrari suggests that the audience of *Karlskrönikan* were aristocrats who could be convinced that a

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91 Harrison: Uppror och allianser, p. 101.

92 This is in line with the depiction of peasants in a later chronicle, where they appear either as defenders of the realm or victims of aggression. Margaretha Nordquist: *Envisioning a Political Community: Peasants and Swedish Men in Vernacular Rhyme Chronicles, Late Fifteenth Century*, in: Wojtek Jezierski/Lars Hermanson (eds.): *Imagined Communities on the Baltic Rim: From the Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries*, Amsterdam 2016, p. 115.

93 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 141.

94 Ferrari: *Karlskrönikan och utvecklingen av det senmedeltida svenska litterära systemet*, pp. 185–193.

ruthless Karl Knutsson was their best option.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, some time after Erik Puke was executed in 1437, the Council of the Realm introduced restrictions on the peasants. These concerned, among other things, limitations on their right to carry arms: an attempt to prevent new uprisings.<sup>96</sup> These provisions can also be seen as a more general effort to limit the peasantry's power and, subsequently, to limit the ability of aristocrats to summon peasant armies for support, something that Erik Puke quite successfully achieved.

In *Karlskrönikan* the peasants are a threat in the background, but also described as gullible and incompetent soldiers.<sup>97</sup> In several episodes, we meet crowds of peasants that have been »mised« by Erik Puke.<sup>98</sup> According to the author, he lies to them and they are incapable of detecting his lies. One of these lies is more striking than others. He—again according to the chronicle—tells them that he will not be their king, and instead wants to elect a peasant as a king.<sup>99</sup> This very improbable scenario highlights the ignorance and naivety of the masses. Of course, what was at stake was the support of the peasantry. Although the chronicler wants to depict Erik Puke as a scheming manipulator, he also clearly demonstrates that Erik and not Karl had the support of the population.

In the ensuing battles, Karl's knightly troops defeat the peasant soldiers; they flee under miserable conditions while forgetting both weapons and provisions.<sup>100</sup> Karl's own defeat at the hands of one of these peasant armies is explained by the fact that his men failed to follow his strategies.<sup>101</sup> Nordquist has described Karl Knutsson's anger as restrained and controlled; in the episodes that she analyses this is indeed true. But there are also several episodes where Karl's anger seems quite unmoderated and menacing. In one incidence, the burghers of Västerås refuse to provide him with provisions, as they are afraid that Erik Puke and his peasants will burn the town to the ground. Karl then threatens to do exactly the same to them. The burghers ask him »to show them mercy and to calm his anger«.<sup>102</sup> Threats and intimidations are

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95 *ibid.*, pp. 185–193.

96 Larsson: *Kalmarunionens tid*, p. 239.

97 *Karlskrönikan*, verses 2864–2881, 3508, 3515–3521, 4026–4033.

98 »at erik hade them forwent« *ibid.* verse 3508; »huru erik sik redhe giorde / ok hade forwent rekbona alle / at the mz honom halle«, *ibid.* verses 3517–3519.

99 *Ibid.*, verses 3780–3782.

100 *Ibid.*, verses 3920–2933, 3985–3990.

101 *Ibid.*, verses 4194–4207.

102 »oc bade honom sik nade ware / oc stille sine wrede« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 3659–3660. The entire episode is retold in: *ibid.*, verses 3630–60.

common-place in Karl's feud against Erik Puke; these are directed at his adversaries, but also at townspeople or commoners who are afraid or simply want to keep their own possessions.

Erik Puke, on the other hand, riles up the peasantry by depicting Karl Knutsson as a tormentor of the common people. Erik states in one speech that Karl has ordered peasants to be broken on the wheel, burned, and hanged. The chronicler then writes that Erik spread these rumours all over the realm: »Therefore, people in all the places, believed the lies that Puke said«. <sup>103</sup> One wonders whether he was actually spreading lies. When Karl travels north to defeat Erik, he first encounters the peasants of Uppland who had supported Erik's uprising. Karl organises a trial, »according to the law«, and »he called the four worst ones from the huddle, the ones that the people said were the most culpable. He asked them to confess their sins and had them burnt at the stake«. <sup>104</sup> According to Kjell Kumlien, he acts according to the law when he sentences them to death for treason. <sup>105</sup> The punishment for treason was undeniably death, according to Magnus Eriksson's Law of the Realm. It is perhaps possible to interpret this as an act of treason against the elected Captain of the Realm. But since the Captain himself was in an armed conflict with the elected king, the situation was quite complicated. As Peter Reinholdsson puts it, there were more than one political centre: the Union King, the Captain of the Realm, the Church leaders, and the various aristocratic factions all represented different political entities. <sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, what is not indicated in the lawbook is the method of execution for treason. Karl Knutsson chose to burn the four at the stake. This is a qualified capital punishment; burning at the stake was mostly used for highly-charged crimes such as bestiality and witchcraft. It is rarely attested to as having been used in practice. Lars-Olof Larsson writes that burning at the stake was a novelty in Swedish criminal law. <sup>107</sup> It is hard to know what he means by this. Perhaps he means that it had not been used in practice. However, it existed as a punish-

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103 »*Thy trode folkit alle stade / a the lygn som puken sade*« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 3818–3819. The entire episode: *ibid.*, verses 3789–3805.

104 »*thy han ville laghin göma*« *ibid.*, verse 4079. »*iiij the värsta aff them alla / loth han vt aff hopen kalla / efter thy som folkit sagde / the som största scullena haffde / them badh han göra sin scriptamal / oc loth them brenna ther j baal*« *ibid.*, verses 4086–4091. The entire episode in *ibid.*, verses 4060–4103.

105 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 86.

106 Reinholdsson: Uppror eller resningar?, pp. 144–145.

107 Larsson: Kalmarunionens tid, p. 238.

ment in the medieval law codes from the fourteenth century.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear that Larsson expresses surprise at the choice of execution method and it was undoubtedly a very harsh and even shocking response.

This was then a very noticeable demonstration of Karl's power and in no way a merciful act. Furthermore, according to the chronicler, the explicit purpose was to create a deterrent, »so all the peasantry, around the realm, in all places, would hear it, and beware of doing such damage again.«<sup>109</sup> Despite this, the author assures us that Karl showed them great mercy by only executing the leaders, and that no one would have reacted if he had killed them all. In the end, the peasants submissively thank him for his grace and honour »and promise that they will never do such foolish things again.«<sup>110</sup> Karl celebrates Christmas in Arboga, »with much joy and chivalrous conversations.«<sup>111</sup> When he then rides into the province Närke, the chronicler states that »he had no one else put to death« instead they had to pay an extra tax.<sup>112</sup>

The uprisings continued after the decapitation of Erik Puke in Stockholm and the peasants killed Karl Knutsson's bailiff and squires in two separate provinces.<sup>113</sup> At that point, Karl wants revenge and wants to go first to Hedemora in the province of Dalarna »and speak to them there, that each of them will lose their hand and foot« so he will get justice. He then says that he would continue to Mora and then to the province of Värmland and do the same to the rebellious peasants there.<sup>114</sup> He ends his angry speech by stating that »if the peasantry is not chastised, they will never obey us in our life time.«<sup>115</sup> At this point the High Justiciary Kristiern prevents him from this violent revenge and notes that he is not well liked.<sup>116</sup> Kristiern Nilsson

108 Göran Inger: *Svensk rättshistoria*, Malmö 1997, p. 59. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to say if it had been used in practice before since we have few court records from the period before 1450.

109 »at alldher almoghen sculle thz höra / kringom riket alla stadhe / och vakta sich fra tolkom vadha« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 4093–4095.

110 »Och sworo thz sculle aldrey ske / honom tolken darscap mere thee« *ibid.*, verses 4102–4103. Erik Neuman accurately states that the chronicler's description of Karl Knutsson as a mild martyr requires a considerable amnesia regarding his cruel treatment of the peasants. Neuman: *Karlskrönikans proveniens och sanningsvärde*, p. 112.

111 »medh myken glädhi och höffuelich snach« *Karlskrönikan*, verses 4148–4149.

112 »engin loth han mere aff lifftua« *ibid.*, verses 4152–4153.

113 *ibid.*, verses 4540–4550.

114 »tha menar jach ther medh them rwna / at hwar thera mister hand oc footh« *ibid.*, verses 4627–4628; *ibid.*, verses 4625–4633.

115 *Ibid.*: »thy wtan almoghen faar naghan agha / the lydha oss aldrey j wara dagha *Karlskrönikan*«, verses 4608–4635, the quoted verses are 4634–4635.

116 *ibid.*, verses 4636–4661.

is the next to be vilified and ultimately humiliated by Karl Knutsson.<sup>117</sup> The chronicler may have intended to suggest that the High Justiciary was lying, but against the backdrop of the resistance that Karl faced, this authorial strategy is not very successful. Indeed, Kjell Kumlien correctly states that the chronicle's description of the Puke-feud clearly points to Karl Knutsson's unpopularity.<sup>118</sup> Thus, it seems evident that Karl Knutsson's reputation was hardly as a merciful ruler. The chronicler has left us with a portrait of a cruel and vengeful person, but it is unlikely that this was his intent; rather, he tried to downplay his harshness.

However, the chronicler had to perform a balancing act, because at the same time we can assume that the author did want to represent Karl Knutsson as a forceful person who could handle and control the peasantry. In line with Fulvio Ferrari's reasoning, the chronicle targeted the high aristocracy and not the general population. Kjell Kumlien writes that Erik Puke's uprising had an anarchistic tendency that distinguished it from Engelbrekt's rebellion.<sup>119</sup> He relies on *Karlskrönikan* for this conclusion. However, if we consider that this section of the chronicle is thoroughly biased and untrustworthy, we should interpret this as part of the author's intent. *Karlskrönikan* explicitly lets Erik Puke divulge that he has no control over the peasants.<sup>120</sup> By underlining the anarchistic character of the uprising, the chronicler could appeal to the aristocracy's fears. Domestic strife was at this point in time seen as a potential threat to the realm's independence.<sup>121</sup> To control the peasants by any means possible might, in fact, have been an effective way to appeal to the aristocrats for support.<sup>122</sup> Unfortunately for Karl, this strategy would not be successful in the long run. As Kjell Kumlien points out, he would end up having the most volatile career of any Swedish king in history.<sup>123</sup>

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117 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 108, pp. 119–121.

118 Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 83.

119 He believes that the chronicle therefore is trustworthy, but as I argue, this is unlikely. Kumlien: Karl Knutssons politiska verksamhet 1434–1448, p. 93.

120 *Karlskrönikan*, verse 4275.

121 Tjällén: Church and Nation, p. 67.

122 In fact, in his actions he resembles the earlier rulers of the contemporary sagas who could transform from a *rex iustus*, whose punishments were predictable, to a furious avenger. The unpredictability and harshness might have been an effective royal practice in the Norwegian High Middle Ages, but it was not as suitable for the late Middle Ages. Karl Knutsson would have fit very well into the power play of the kings' sagas. Hans Jacob Orning: Unpredictability and Presence: Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages, Leiden 2008, pp. 272–274.

123 Kjell Kumlien: *Historieskrivning och kungadöme i svensk medeltid*, Kungl. Vitterhets-, historie- och antikvitetsakademiens handlingar, Stockholm 1979, p. 163.

## Conclusion

King Karl was elected king three times and deposed twice, which clearly demonstrates that he faced problems gaining stable support. The writing of *Karlskrönikan* was a way for him to legitimize his power and his path to the throne. However, despite this purpose and the fact that the chronicle has been described as propaganda, the author has left us with a portrayal of Karl as a morally ambiguous character. This has multiple explanations.

To start with, in the section of the text that is analysed in this chapter, the chronicler attempted to make Karl into a hero and Erik into a villain. If we accept Karl as the hero in our story, then he obviously had considerable flaws. Even if the author attempted to label him as a chivalrous hero, brave but mild and polite, his own actions told a different story. Dick Harrison is therefore not wrong when he calls Karl Knutsson »our anti-hero«. <sup>124</sup> While medieval historians most likely saw their mission differently than modern ones, it is unlikely that they could disregard or completely misrepresent the events they described. Instead, the chronicler had to work with what he had, which was a ruler who was brutal in his response to opposition, be it aristocrats or peasants. What the writer could do was use attributes and adjectives to give Karl a chivalrous framework, while downplaying events and explaining that his actions were reasonable. It was most likely unintentional that the tension between the attributes and Karl's actions would make the narrative even less credible. This interpretation then explains why so many modern historians, at the same time, see the description as paradoxical or incongruous, while referring to *Karlskrönikan* as a piece of propaganda.

Furthermore, this chapter highlights that there was a range of heroic attributes that could be used and, just like today, different traits were at times in conflict with each other. But it was possible to employ this variety of ideals to one's advantage. Naivety could be turned into trust, a lack of strategy and preparation could be spun into a belief in people's ability to better themselves. Cruelty could be rewritten as forcefulness and strength. In this way, burning peasants at the stake could be rephrased as something necessary. What makes the narrative so unbelievable is the author's effort to balance Karl's negative traits by reimagining and enhancing the positive ones. In this sense it is likely that the author had multiple goals. He wanted to paint a picture of Karl as forceful and in control, while also highlighting that he acted out of necessity when he executed Erik Puke and that he therefore was completely innocent

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124 Harrison: Karl Knutsson, p. 93.

regarding any accusations of wrongdoing. In fact, we are meant to believe that Karl was the real victim.

Finally, the peasantry appeared as a political force during this period that could be summoned for uprisings against an unwanted king or Captain of the Realm, and the aristocracy was clearly threatened by them. Peter Reinholdsson states that the late medieval uprisings were not peasant revolts. He argues that they were seen as legitimate ways to protest and protect rights and tradition. In this regard he contrasts them to the revolts during the early modern era.<sup>125</sup> This may be true in general, but in the first half of *Karlskrönikan* we can already observe the view that the peasantry was a substantial threat to the established elites.<sup>126</sup> Karl's anti-heroic actions can be explained by the chronicler attempting to present him as a ruler who would keep the commoners under control and the realm intact. Karl Knutsson might not have been the king they wanted, but the author, and likely Karl himself, tried to persuade them that he was the leader they needed.

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125 Reinholdsson: Uppror eller resningar?, p. 109, p. 119.

126 Also Margaretha Nordquist notices that the later *Sturekrönikan* (the »Sture chronicle«) vacillate between regarding the peasantry as Swedish men, part of what she calls the regnal community, and the threatening vision of peasants acting without a noble proxy. Nordquist: A Struggle for the Realm, p. 276.

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## Chapter 5

# The Depictions of Vytautas the Great as Hero, Counterhero, and Antihero in the Correspondence of the Grand Masters of the Teutonic Order from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries

### Introduction

The construction of ›heroes‹, ›counterheroes‹ (those who compete with heroic figures), and ›antiheroes‹ (those who defy heroic figures) was an extensive part of the crusade ideology of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia. This is most clearly expressed in the extensive written canon of texts produced in the Order's *milieu*.<sup>1</sup> The presence of heroic masters and knights who upheld the Order's commitment to fight the enemies of Christianity can be seen well after the recognition of the conversion of Jogaila (pol. Jagiełło, King of Poland) in 1386/1387 to Christianity and the resulting period of crisis (in terms of its legitimacy as a crusading institution) in which the Order found itself.<sup>2</sup> Other aspects of crusade historiography linked with the expeditions to the Holy Land also appear in these texts, ranging from the adoption of terms and ideas from the »traditional« crusades to the introduction of cults of saints and relics connected to the conquest of Prussia itself.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Jarosław Wenta: Studien über die Ordensgeschichtsschreibung am Beispiel Preußens, Toruń 1999; Arno Mentzel-Reuters: Deutschordenshistoriographie, in: Gerhard Wolff/Norbert H. Ott (eds.): Handbuch Chroniken des Mittelalters, Berlin 2016, pp. 301–336.

2 For an overview of this crisis and attempts to navigate it, see Hartmut Boockmann: Johannes Falkenberg, der Deutsche Orden und die polnische Politik. Untersuchungen zur politischen Theorie des späteren Mittelalters, Göttingen 1975; Marcus Wüst: Studien zum Selbstverständnis des Deutschen Ordens im Mittelalter, Weimar 2013, pp. 270–273; Norman Housley: A Crusade against the Poles? Johannes Falkenberg's Satira, in: Helen J. Nicholson/Jochen Burgdorf (eds.): Templars, Hospitallers, and Crusades: Essays in Homage to Alan J. Forey, London 2020, pp. 183–198.

3 Janusz Trupinda: Ideologia krucjatowa w kronice Piotra z Dusburga, Gdańsk 1999, pp. 100–137; Gregory Leighton: Ideology and Holy Landscape in the Baltic Crusades, Leeds 2022. For the cult of saints in Prussia, see: Waldemar Rozyński: Hagiotoponimia w państwie zakonu krzyżackiego w Prusach. Zarys problematyki, in: Aleksandra Witkowska/Urszula Borkowska (eds.): Peregrinatio ad veritatem: Studia ofiarowane profesor Aleksandrze Witkowskiej OSU z okazji 40-lecia pracy naukowej, Lublin 2004, pp. 259–268; Id.: Święci na pograniczu: o świętych w państwie Zakonu Krzyżackiego w Prusach, in: Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie 2 (2006), pp. 187–193; Cordelia Heß: Heilige machen

From the perspective of the construction and deconstruction of heroes and antiheroes in the Middle Ages, the key figures involved in the conflicts between the Teutonic Order and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, particularly Konrad von Jungingen (1393–1407), Ulrich von Jungingen (1407–1410), Heinrich von Plauen (1410–1413), and Vytautas of Lithuania (1392–1430) are extremely relevant examples. They became pivotal figures in the creation of images of heroes, counterheroes, and antiheroes, according to Ulrich Bröckling.<sup>4</sup> In present-day Germany, Poland, and Lithuania, the images of these leaders continue to resonate as important figures of national heritage and identity.<sup>5</sup>

For example, Konrad von Jungingen's contacts with Vytautas were more nuanced and, perhaps, heroic—they represent the Grand Master's attempts to secure peace through diplomacy and to expand Christianity. However, he was hardly remembered in the modern period. His brother and successor, Ulrich, was remembered among Polish and Lithuanian historians as a hot-tempered ruler prone to violence.<sup>6</sup> Prussian historians commemorated his death at the

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im spätmittelalterlichen Ostseeraum: Die Kanonisationsprozesse von Birgitta von Schweden, Nikolaus von Linköping und Dorothea von Montau, Berlin 2008, pp. 81–98 for Prussia and the Baltic. Also see Marian Dygo: Zur Herrschaftssprache des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen im 13. Jahrhundert, in: Roman Czaja/Jürgen Sarnowsky (eds.): Die Ritterorden als Träger der Herrschaft: Territorien, Grundbesitz, Kirche, Toruń 2007, pp. 110–111. Also see Anti Selart: Life in Livonia after the Crusades: An Introduction, in: Anti Selart (ed.): Baltic Crusades and Societal Innovation in Medieval Livonia, 1200–1350, Leiden 2022, pp. 2–9, which rightly points out that the divide between 'Christian' and 'pagan' in the sources is the predominant focus of historians, while archaeologists present a different picture due to their evidence and approaches.

4 Ulrich Bröckling: Negations of the Heroic – a Typological Essay, in: *helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu Kulturen des Heroischen* 5 (2019), pp. 41–42.

5 I.e., they figure into the respective >cultural memories< of those nations. See Jan Assmann: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München 1997. For the images of the Order in Polish and German, and Lithuanian national consciousness, see Henryk Samsonowicz: *Krzyżacy*, Warszawa 1988, pp. 3–16; Sven Ekdahl: The Battle of Tannenberg–Grunwald–Žalgiris (1410) as Reflected in Twentieth–Century Monuments, in: Victor Mallia-Milanes (ed.): *The Military Orders, Volume 3: History and Heritage*, Aldershot 2008, pp. 175–194; and Alvydas Nikžentaitis: *Der Vytautaskult in Litauen (15.–20. Jahrhundert) und seine Widerspiegelung im Denkmal*, in: Konrad Maier/Anja Wilhelmi (eds.): *Das Denkmal im nördlichen Ostmitteleuropa im 20. Jahrhundert, Lüneburg 1997*, pp. 131–145. A more recent example can be seen in Janusz Trupinda (ed.): *Nigra crux. Mala crux. Czarna i biała legenda Zakonu Krzyżackiego*, Malbork 2023, which considers the images of the Teutonic Knights in Polish and German national traditions.

6 This image emerged in Jan Długosz's *Annales seu cronici incliti regni Poloniae*, completed c. 1480.

Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald as that of a hero (›Heldentod‹).<sup>7</sup> Heinrich von Plauen was also deemed a hero for his role in the Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald, as he saved the castle of Marienburg (Pol. Malbork) from the siege of Jagiełło and Vytautas.<sup>8</sup> It is not surprising that the Grand Masters of the Order were remembered in a positive light among Germans in former East and West Prussia, given the ›Ostforschung‹ tradition.<sup>9</sup>

On the other side of the coin, Vytautas, the Grand Duke of Lithuania, was far from the ›evil traitor‹ or enemy to Christendom that the letters for the period reflect him to have been. He emerges more as a figure who possesses heroic qualities but strategically rejects them when necessary. In other words, he appears as a figure who is sometimes a counterhero, and sometimes an antihero. As a Christian ruler, he founded several monasteries and participated in the promotion of religious life in his territories in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, establishing a dichotomy with the image of him as a ruthless pagan and enemy of Christendom.<sup>10</sup> He emerged in his own time as a heroic figure and became crucial within modern Lithuanian national memory as a pivotal ruler and ›event-maker‹.<sup>11</sup> His name was selected for the new name of Kaunas University in 1930, reflecting his legacy within Lithuanian national consciousness in the modern era.<sup>12</sup>

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7 For the monument, see Wolfgang Wippermann: *Der Ordensstaat als Ideologie: Das Bild des Deutschen Ordens in der deutschen Geschichtsschreibung und Publizistik*, Berlin 1979, pp. 191–192. For the legacy of Tannenberg in Germany, see Udo Arnold: *Tannenberg (Grunwald) in der deutschen Tradition des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Ordines Militares. Colloquia Torunensia Historica* 19 (2014), pp. 241–256. For the battle's place in Polish and Lithuanian memory, see Alvydas Nikžentaitis: *Internationales Gedenken an die Schlacht bei Tannenberg*, in: Werner Paravicini/Rimvydas Petrauskas/Grischa Vercamer (eds.): *Tannenberg – Grunwald – Žalgiris 1410: Krieg und Frieden im späten Mittelalter*, Wiesbaden 2012, pp. 321–328.

8 Although, it should be noted that he was subsequently expelled from his office in 1413 and exiled to Lochstädt Castle (Rus. Pavlovo).

9 Bernhard Grün: *Zwischen Fronteinsatz und Freiheitsklang – Studententum und Kameradschaftswesen im Nationalsozialismus*, Würzburg 2019, p. 71.

10 Jan Fijałek/Władysław Semkowicz (eds.): *Codex diplomaticus ecclesiae cathedralis necnon dioeceseos Vilnensis, voluminis I (1367–1468)*, Kraków 1932, p. 52 (no. 31), p. 75 (no. 50), p. 139 (no. 111), and several others record the pious foundations of Vytautas and Jagiełło in Lithuania from the 1390s to the 1420s.

11 Nikžentaitis: *Der Vytautaskult*, pp. 131–145; Giedrė Mickūnaitė: *Making a Great Ruler: Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania*, Budapest 2006, pp. 271–275.

12 Sven Ekdahl: *Crusades and Colonisation on the Baltic Frontier: A Historiographic Analysis*, in: Alan V. Murray (ed.): *The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe: The Expansion of Latin Christendom in the Baltic Lands*, Farnham 2014, pp. 15–20.

The present chapter will focus on the potential origins of Vytautas' complex representation in sources such as letters and missives to supplement the content of the major narratives (i.e., chronicles) produced in Prussia during the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century. It begins with a brief overview of the sources available and addresses their general narrative strategies, before moving into the specific themes and depictions of Vytautas as a hero, counterhero, and antihero.<sup>13</sup> It identifies a sort of ›corporate storytelling‹ of the Teutonic Order via narration strategy: the brothers of the Order and their Grand Masters were beneficial to the whole of Christendom through their wars against the enemies of the Church, which could be traced back through an extensive tradition dating back to the thirteenth century. Vytautas was an important figure in this storytelling by the late fourteenth century. In times of conflict he took on the same qualities of the Order's previous enemies at some points, whereas in times of friendship he took on positive, even heroic, qualities.<sup>14</sup>

### Narrating heroes, counterheroes, and antiheroes: Methodology

The sources considered in this chapter, particularly letters and missives, have much to say about ›heroes‹, ›counterheroes‹, and ›antiheroes‹.<sup>15</sup> However, most scholarship has focused exclusively on the chronicles and larger narrative texts written up to the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a period described as a ›Golden Age‹ in the history of the Order's Prussian branch, and for good reason: these texts reflect the Teutonic Order's spirituality and crusade ideology clearly and consistently.<sup>16</sup> This pattern continues in chronicles writ-

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13 For the definitions and uses of these terms, see Bröckling: *Negations of the Heroic*, pp. 40–42.

14 Birgitte Norlyk/Marianne Wolff Lundholt/Per Krogh Hansen: *Corporate Storytelling*, in: Peter Hühn/Jan Christoph Meister/John Pier/Wolf Schmid (eds.): *Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin 2014, pp. 105–114.

15 Gustavs Strega: *Remembering the Common Past: Livonia as a lieu de mémoire of the Teutonic Order in the Empire*, in: Anti Selart/Mathias Thumser (eds.): *Livland – eine Region am Ende der Welt? Forschungen zum Verhältnis zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie im späten Mittelalter*, Köln 2017, pp. 347–370; id.: *Remembering the Dead: Collective Memory and Commemoration in Late Medieval Livonia*, Brepols 2023. Also see Wentz: *Studien über die Ordensgeschichtsschreibung*, pp. 140–141.

16 E.g., Edith Feistner: *Selbstbild, Feindbild, Metabild: Spiegelungen von Identität in präskriptiven und narrativen Deutschordens-texten des Mittelalters*, in: Horst Brunner/Werner Williams-Krapp (eds.): *Forschungen zur deutschen Literatur des Spätmittelalters: Festschrift für Johannes Janota*, Tübingen 2003, pp. 141–158; Mary Fischer: *The Books of the Maccabees and the Teutonic Order*, in: *Crusades* 4 (2005), pp. 52–72; Edith Feistner/Michael

ten beyond the 1330s and 1340s.<sup>17</sup> It appears in the *New Prussian Chronicle* of Wigand von Marburg (fl. 1394), a herald in the service of the Teutonic Order, the *Prussian Chronicle* of Johannes von Posilge, a churchman active in Pomesania (d. 1409), and the anonymous *Older chronicle of the Grand Masters* (c. 1440).<sup>18</sup> Sources produced outside of the Order's sphere of influence, like the anonymous *Annals of the Franciscan of Thorn* compiled throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, show a similar pattern.<sup>19</sup> The 1390s and the reign of Konrad von Jungingen as Grand Master (1393–1407) saw a peak in the Order's history in terms of diplomatic relations with European rulers.<sup>20</sup>

The general trend in these texts is that the masters of the Order (or other higher officials) are praised for their piety, their diplomacy, or their valour in battle.<sup>21</sup> Their actions are depicted as upholding the Order's mission and contributing to the betterment of Christianity. Antiheroic figures, unsurprisingly, are depicted as working for the Devil and contributing to the detriment of Christianity. This is particularly evident in the biblical depictions of indigenous Prussian and Lithuanian rulers.<sup>22</sup> These trends, of course, fit into the ideological nature of the ›war against the pagans‹ presented throughout the sources associated with the Teutonic Order and the crusades in the Baltic.

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Neecke/Gisela Vollmann-Profe: *Krieg im Visier: Biblepik und Chronistik im Deutschen Orden als Modell korporativer Identitätsbildung*, Berlin 2007; Jürgen Sarnowsky: *Das Bild der „Anderen“ in den frühen Chronistik des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen*, in: Steffen Patzold/Anja Lutz-Rathmann/Volker Scior (eds.): *Geschichtsvorstellungen: Bilder, Texte und Begriffe aus dem Mittelalter – Festschrift für Hans-Werner Goetz zum 65. Geburtstag*, Köln 2012, pp. 233–235; Wüst: *Studien zum Selbstverständnis*, pp. 105–116.

17 See Wüst: *Studien zum Selbstverständnis*, pp. 105–116.

18 Mentzel-Reuters: *Deutschordenshistoriographie*, pp. 324–325, for issues surrounding the chronicle attributed to Johannes von Posilge.

19 Ernst Strehlke (ed.): *Franciscani Thorunensis Annales Prussici (941–1410)*. Johannes von Posilge, *Officials von Pomesanien, Chronik des Landes Preussen (von 1360 an, fortgesetzt bis 1419)* zugleich mit den auf Preussen bezüglichen Abschnitten aus der *Chronik Detmars von Lübeck*, in: Ernst Strehlke/Theodor Hirsch/Max Töppen (eds.): *Scriptores rerum Prussicarum* (hereafter SRP), vol. 3, Leipzig 1866, pp. 57–388; Wenta: *Ordensgeschichtsschreibung*, pp. 236–237.

20 Sebastian Kubon: *Die Außenpolitik des Deutschen Ordens unter Hochmeister Konrad von Jungingen (1393–1407)*, Göttingen 2016, pp. 13–16.

21 E.g., Peter von Dusburg: *Chronica terrae Prussiae*, ed. Jaroslaw Wenta/Slawomir Wyszomirski, Kraków 2007, p. 21 (describing Hermann von Salza), p. 73 (describing Dietrich von Bernheim); Max Töppen (ed.): *Die ältere Hochmeisterchronik*, in: SRP 3, p. 574 (describing Poppo von Osterna); Wigand von Marburg: *Nowa kronika Pruska*, (ed. and trans.) Slawomir Zonenberg/Krzysztof Kwiatkowski, Toruń 2017, p. 252 (describing Winrich von Kniprode); Töppen (ed.): *Hochmeisterchronik*, p. 624 (describing Werner von Tettingen).

22 Peter von Dusburg: *Chronica*, p. 70; Wilhelm Wattenbach (ed.): *Das Formelbuch Arnolds von Protzan*, Breslau 1862, pp. 309–310.

For the Order, it formed the bedrock of its self-image and thus was crucial to the Order's communication of ideas about ›heroes‹ and ›antiheroes‹ with those who were not members.<sup>23</sup>

As stated above, at around the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Teutonic Order was functioning at its economic and administrative peak in Prussia.<sup>24</sup> Konrad von Jungingen's diplomatic reputation is often emphasized in this period.<sup>25</sup> A significant number of Konrad's letters and foreign correspondence involved Vytautas, and these pieces of correspondence demonstrate the complexity of the construction of heroic figures in premodern societies. At times, the two were friends. In October of 1383, for example, Vytautas was baptized as Wigand, and sided with the Order in its conflicts against Jogaila (Pol. Jagiełło) in the Lithuanian Civil War (1381–1384). The chronicle of Detmar von Lübeck describes how, after baptism, this led to several attacks into Lithuanian territories, in which Vytautas and the Order cooperated with one another as allies.<sup>26</sup> The positive aspects of this relationship are also evident in the Order's treasury book, compiled from 1399–1409, which records several gift exchanges between the two leaders, one example being a silver dog collar given by Vytautas to the Grand Master.<sup>27</sup> In 1406, Johannes von Posilge praised the joint expedition undertaken by Vytautas against Muscovy, in which Friedrich Zollern (the Commander of Ragnit (Rus. Neman)), and Michael Kuchmeister (the Advocate of Samogitia) took part.<sup>28</sup> In 1407, Ulrich von Jungingen congratulated Vytautas on this successful campaign.<sup>29</sup> Other examples will be discussed below, but the ones provided here demonstrate the ambiguity that allowed contemporaries in Prussia to construct key figures like Vytautas in a positive light.

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23 Wüst: Studien zum Selbstverständnis, pp. 287–293.

24 Jürgen Sarnowsky: Die Wirtschaftsführung des Deutschen Ordens in Preußen (1382–1454), Berlin 1993, pp. 3–4; id.: Der Deutsche Orden, München 1998.

25 Kubon: Außenpolitik, pp. 15–22.

26 Strehlke (ed.): Detmar, p. 127: »Darna in deme dage der XI dusent meghede do wart gedoft Witaute.«

27 Erich Joachim (ed.): Das Marienburger Treßlerbuch der Jahre 1399–1409, Königsberg 1896, p. 425.

28 Strehlke (ed.): Johannes von Posilge, pp. 282–283: »Ouch czoch Wytowt in desim jare vor senthe Jacobs tag us uff den koning von Moskow gar mit grossim volke...Und login dem koninge von Moskow XIII tage in syme lande mit gewalt...Un worin us von heyme xv wochin, also verre worin sie hin geczogin, und nomin doch keynen schadin von den gnaden unsers lieben herren.«

29 Berlin, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GStA PK), XX. HA, Historisches Staatsarchiv Königsberg, Ordensfoliant (OF) 3, p. 320 (2 September 1407). Also see p. 333 (1 April 1408); p. 342 (23 June 1408).

However, there are some unique examples of the Grand Masters' foreign correspondence that provide a more interesting portrayal of the construction of counterheroes and antiheroes. For example, Vytautas could easily be depicted as a counterhero. In July of 1384, Vytautas, »*traditor perversus*« became an enemy of the Order, as noted in the anonymous annals of the city of Thorn (Pol. Toruń). The annals were originally composed in the 1340s but were completed less than 30 years after the treaty, around 1410.<sup>30</sup> This shift in the perception of Vytautas took place quite rapidly; in January of 1410, Vytautas had promised Samogitia to the Order and »gave himself to the Christian faith«. <sup>31</sup> The »*malignissimus et nequissimus traditor*« then constructed a castle in Lithuania and proceeded to destroy Marienburg (in Lithuania) and Georgenburg (Rus. Mayovka).<sup>32</sup> The annalist describes Vytautas as »*sicut de venenose et infidelissima radice, patre suo Kinstut*«, linking him to his father, Kęstutis, who was often described as an antihero and in ›qualitative opposition‹ to the efforts of the Teutonic Order.<sup>33</sup> By 1390, Vytautas allied with the Order again, and sought assistance in capturing the citadel of the Grand Dukes in Vilnius. According to local chroniclers in Prussia, he distinguished himself for his valour in battle, »storming the upper castle with might« alongside crusaders including Henry Derby, the future king of England.<sup>34</sup> The short amount of time that passed between the composition of the annals here and the events that they describe provide us the opportunity to examine changes in relations in real time.

This chapter employs a narratological approach in its reading of the sources. Such a method can aid in understanding texts from a wide variety of genres, and has recently been of interest to scholars of the crusades to the Holy Land, evident in the works of Beth Spacey, Stephen Spencer, and Thomas W. Smith.<sup>35</sup> Elements of historical narratives, like the ›fear of the barbarians‹, have been applied as a tool for identifying seemingly-invisible

30 Wenta: *Ordensgeschichtsschreibung*, p. 236.

31 Antoni Prochaska (ed.): *Codex epistolaris Vitoldi Magnis Ducis Lithuaniae 1376–1430*, Kraków 1882, pp. 3–4: »*quame wir czu im und begoben uns gote und im genczlichen czum cristengloben*«. Further cited as CEV. This was the first Treaty of Königsberg, signed on 1 January 1384.

32 Strehlke (ed.): *Franciscani Thorunensis*, p. 130: »*Item IIIa die Julii traditor perversus Witaut combussit castra Beiern et Mergenborg*.«

33 *ibid.*, p. 131.

34 Strehlke (ed.): *Johannes von Posilge*, pp. 165–166: »*An dem virden tage septembris qwomen sie vor die Wille...und sthormeten das obirste hus mit craft und gewonnen is obirhaupt*.«

35 Beth Spacey: *The Miraculous and the Writing of Crusade Narrative*, Woodbridge 2020; Stephen Spencer: *Emotions in a Crusading Context, 1095–1291*, Oxford 2019; Thomas W.

links between different groups of authors writing in the Early Middle Ages.<sup>36</sup> However, this method has not been used for the later crusades to Lithuania and Samogitia, with exceptions being my own work and that of Loïc Chollet.<sup>37</sup> As this chapter will demonstrate, Vytautas' presence and significance as a historical figure can be identified in a huge body of written material for late medieval Prussia. In these texts, Vytautas is a central element of the narratives—both those produced within Teutonic Order circles and in narratives communicated to those not affiliated with the Order. His perception as a hero, counterhero, or antihero is dependent on the moral system (or political situation) in which his actions are read, thus presenting a case for the complexity of identifying such figures in the Late Middle Ages.

### Source Overview

The majority of the sources in this chapter come from the correspondence of Konrad von Jungingen, Ulrich von Jungingen (his successor), and Heinrich von Plauen. These are housed in the main historical archives for the Teutonic Order's Prussian and Livonian territories in Berlin, the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz.<sup>38</sup> As they are registers, the collections are comprised of several templates and copies of correspondence including the acknowledgements of the receipt of gifts, the delaying of meetings, and reports of events abroad (i.e., instructions for emissaries to foreign courts). The missives and copies of letters are referred to as »Ordensfolianten« (further abbreviated as

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Smith: First Crusade Letters and Medieval Scribal Cultures, in: *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 71 (2020), pp. 484–501.

- 36 Mateusz Fafiński/Jakob Riemenschneider: Literarised Spaces. Towards a Narratological Framework for Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, in: Mateusz Fafiński/Jakob Riemenschneider (eds.): *The Past through Narratology: New Approaches to Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Heidelberg 2022, pp. 7–26.
- 37 Gregory Leighton: Crusading and Holy War in the Teutonic Order's Struggle for Žemaitija: Written and Visual Perspectives, in: *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis* 41 (2020), pp. 25–52; Loïc Chollet: *Les Sarrasins du Nord: Une histoire de la croisade balte par la littérature (xii<sup>e</sup>–xv<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Neuchâtel 2017; Id.: *The Christianisation of the Baltic Seen from Medieval France*, in: *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis* 44 (2022), pp. 123–146.
- 38 They were formerly kept in Königsberg until the evacuation of the archive in 1945. See Kurt Forstreuter: *Das Preußische Staatsarchiv in Königsberg. Ein geschichtlicher Rückblick mit einer Übersicht seine Bestände*, Göttingen 1955, pp. 93–95. Also see Cordelia Heß: *The Absent Jews: Kurt Forstreuter and the Historiography of Medieval Prussia*, Oxford 2017, pp. 101–157 for an analysis of the fallout of the dispersal of the archive and its role in Ostforschung.

OF).<sup>39</sup> The registers for Konrad are kept in OF 2c and 3. Those of his successors, Ulrich von Jungingen, and Heinrich von Plauen, are kept in OF 5 (lost since 1945) and OF 6.<sup>40</sup> There are also important pieces of correspondence in OF 8 and OF 9. Several of the copies in the registers concern the relations between Vytautas and the Order before and after the Treaty of Sallinwerder (12 October 1398), in addition to subsequent conflicts in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century concerning the control of the territory of Samogitia and the fallout from the Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald.

The contents of these registers remain either unedited or preserved in the older editions such as Johannes Voigt's *Codex diplomaticus Prussicus* (published in 6 volumes from 1836–1861), the *Codex epistolaris Vitoldi Magnis Ducis Lithuaniae*, and other collections of texts.<sup>41</sup> These letters provide crucial material for historians seeking to study communication, exchange, and the expression of group identity. For one, the recipients of these letters were oftentimes not members of the Order, so the letters needed to be crafted carefully with the Order's image and goals in mind.<sup>42</sup> Researchers in the Anglophone sphere primarily tend to focus on chronicles when studying the Teutonic Order; the letters examined in this paper present the opportunity to consider how depictions of heroic, counterheroic and antiheroic figures developed ›in real time‹, as it were. In other words, the letters represent events

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39 Sebastian Kubon: Der Vertrag von Sallinwerder (1398) und sein Bruch aus der Sicht des Deutschen Ordens, in: Georg Jostkleigrew/Gesa Wilangowski (eds.): Der Bruch des Vertrages: Die Verbindlichkeit spätmittelalterliche Diplomatie und ihre Grenzen, Berlin 2018, pp. 310–337, at p. 313n17 for a description of OF 2c and 3; Sebastian Kubon/Jürgen Sarnowsky: Regesten zu den Briefregistern des Deutschen Ordens: die Ordensfolianten 2a, 2aa und Zusatzmaterial: Mit einem Nachdruck von Kurt Lukas: Das Registerwesen der Hochmeister des Deutschen Ritterordens, maschinenschriftl. Phil. Diss. Königsberg 1921, Göttingen 2012, pp. 59–61.

40 OF 5 was lost during the evacuation of the archives in Königsberg in 1945. See Jürgen Sarnowsky: Regesten zu den Briefregistern des Deutschen Ordens III: die Ordensfolianten 5, 6 und Zusatzmaterial, Göttingen 2017, pp. 13–21; Markian Pelech: Der verlorene Ordensfoliant 5 (früher Hochmeister-Registrant II) des Hist. Staatsarchiv Königsberg, mit Regesten (nach Rudolf Philippi und Erich Joachim), in: Udo Arnold (ed.): Beiträge zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens I, Marburg 1986, pp. 123–180.

41 Johannes Voigt (ed.): *Codex diplomaticus Prussicus*. Urkunden-Sammlung zur älteren Geschichte Preußens aus dem Königl. Geheim-Archiv zu Königsberg nebst Regesten, 6 vols., Königsberg 1836–1861. Further cited as CDP.

42 Jürgen Sarnowsky: Written communication in the later Middle Ages – the letter registers of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia, in: Iris Shagrir/Benjamin Z. Kedar/Michel Balard (eds.): *Communicating the Middle Ages. Essays in Honour of Sophia Menache*, Oxford 2017, pp. 76–87, outlines the source critical aspects of working with these letters.

and figures in close proximity to the events being described. It should not be forgotten, either, that the letters here were meant to be communicated orally.

As historical sources, letters offer a more nuanced understanding of ›heroes‹ and the perception of ›antiheroes‹ in the southern Baltic region, as opposed to the depictions of the Order and Vytautas in the Prussian chronicles written around the same time. Perhaps one of the best examples is a letter written by Vytautas at Vilnius in March of 1401. Addressed to the kings and princes of Christendom, the letter concerns a series of attacks on the Teutonic Order (referred to as »*cruciferi de domo Theutonica*«) concerning the Christianisation of Lithuania and Samogitia.<sup>43</sup> The document is particularly interesting regarding the ways in which heroes and antiheroes shaped one another, for we have a direct document issued by a figure who oftentimes was framed as the antihero himself describing the ›hero‹ in quite negative terms. As outlined in the introduction to this book, this is yet another example of the new assessment of heroic figures in lights of changing historical circumstances. Indeed, the subsequent complaints against the Teutonic Order by Vytautas and Jagiello in in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century present important examples in which groups or figures traditionally identified as heroic (i.e., the Teutonic Order, or its Grand Masters) could take on villainous qualities. Among the »striking issues« (›*fremden sachen*«) that the Order mentioned in a list of instructions for an embassy to the King of the Romans was the accusation, brought forth by the ambassadors of Polish King, Jagiello, »that the Order fights against the new Christians, and not pagans«. Both parties (i.e., Poland and Lithuania) accused the Order of »fighting not for the betterment and expansion of the Christian faith, but for land alone«. <sup>44</sup>

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43 CEV, pp. 75–76 (no. 238). Also see Berlin, GStA PK, XX. HA, Historisches Staatsarchiv Königsberg, Ordensbriefarchiv (OBA) no. 665.

44 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 2c, pp. 69–72 (= Kurt Forstreuter (ed.): *Die Berichte der Generalprokuratoren des Deutschen Ordens an der Kurie*, Bd. 1: *Die Geschichte der Generalprokuratoren von den Anfängen bis 1403*, Göttingen 1961, pp. 355–360, here p. 356 (no. 264)): »*der orden hilde das orloyge wedir die nuwen cristen und nicht wedir die heydenschaft*«. Furthermore, Jagiello accused the brothers of »fighting for land, and not for the faith and Christianity« (ouch als ab her meynte, czu orloygen alleyne umb die land und nicht umb den gelouben noch umb des cristenthum).

## Vytautas as Hero, Counterhero, and Antihero in the Correspondence of the Grand Masters of the Teutonic Order

As already mentioned, the chronicles produced in Prussia for the relevant period (i.e., the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century) refer to Vytautas regularly. He emerges in these texts as an important player in local and international politics and, as outlined above, could at times take on heroic qualities in the sense that he maintained the cultural norms embodied by the Teutonic Order and its mission. The first part of this section will outline some of these examples.

There was a straightforward pattern among the authors of the chronicles: when Vytautas and the Order were on friendly terms, he was depicted as a valuable asset and friend. For example, Wigand von Marburg (fl. 1394) refers to several collaborative expeditions led by the marshals of the Order and Vytautas against the Lithuanians and Samogitians.<sup>45</sup> In November of 1398, following the Treaty of Sallinwerder, Konrad von Jungingen wrote to Vytautas, »beloved friend« (»lieber herre«), reassuring him that the Order (in this case, the Livonian Branch) would intervene on his behalf concerning Pskovian raids into Lithuanian territories.<sup>46</sup> In 1400, he also wrote to Vytautas concerning the state of affairs with the Russians and Tatars.<sup>47</sup>

Johannes von Posilge, writing shortly after these events (he is believed to have died in 1409), refers to the joint expedition led by Vytautas and Marquard von Salzbach (the Commander of Ragnit) against the Golden Horde in 1398/1399 as a conflict between Christianity and its enemies.<sup>48</sup> He also recounts another campaign in which the Order and Vytautas worked together, namely a military campaign (Ger. *Reise*) into Samogitia in the winter of 1400.<sup>49</sup> This same campaign is mentioned in a report to the Holy Roman Emperor and copied in Konrad von Jungingen's register, in which the crusaders fight »for the love and honour of God our Lord and his worthy Mother, and [for] the expansion of the holy Christian faith«. <sup>50</sup> By far the most examples

45 Wigand von Marburg: *Nowa kronika*, p. 512, p. 540.

46 CEV, p. 57 (no. 192).

47 CEV, p. 60 (no. 206).

48 Strehlke (ed.): Johannes von Posilge, pp. 230–231, lamenting the fallen knights of the Order: »Unser herre gebe yn die ewige ruw mit enander, die do sint geblebin!«

49 *ibid.*, pp. 235–236. Johannes states that the successful expedition was completed successfully »von der hulffe unsers herin.« See Arno Mentzel-Reuters: 'unde den vride machten wider in dem lande'. *Kriegsziele in der Historiographie des Deutschen Ordens*, in: *Ordines Militares. Colloquia Torunensia Historica* 18 (2013), pp. 93–100.

50 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 2c, p. 104 (= CDP 6: pp. 99–100 (no. XCVI)): »gote unserm herren und synir werden muter czu lobe und czu eren, und merunge des heiligen cristiglouben.«

come from correspondence between Konrad and Vytautas concerning the attempted conquest of Samogitia. Five years later, in August of 1405, Konrad thanked Vytautas for constructing the castle of Königsburg in Samogitia.<sup>51</sup> In the letter, he praises Vytautas' efforts as beneficial to the expansion of the holy Christian faith: »God himself will be your protector for constructing this castle, in which you have shown your hard work not only for helping our Order, but also for the honour and service of the holy Christian faith.«<sup>52</sup> A month later, Konrad also thanked three boyars of Vytautas' who also distinguished themselves in a raid of Samogitia.<sup>53</sup> In 1409, Vytautas wrote a letter to the Vogt of Samogitia, »our good friend«, to inform him that he would punish a certain Rambold for his incursions into Samogitia.<sup>54</sup> In 1411, he wrote to Heinrich von Plauen: »honourable lord, Grand Master of the German Order of Prussia« addressing the recipient as a friend.<sup>55</sup> Similar salutations appear throughout the extensive correspondence between the Teutonic Order Grand Masters and Vytautas and demonstrate that at times, he could be assigned positive/heroic values depending on the external political situation.<sup>56</sup>

These positive descriptions of Vytautas extended beyond the lead-up to the Great War between the Order and Poland-Lithuania (1409–1411). For example, in 1426, Vytautas wrote to the Grand Master outlining his plans for a campaign »uf die ungläubigen« – Pskov and Novgorod.<sup>57</sup> The next year, Vytautas wrote to the Livonian Master about his »fortunate expedition against Novgorod« and informed him about news of Turkish raids in Wallachia, lamenting to the Master: »and this is a sadness to us all, and it pains God, that paganism should conquer over Christianity.«<sup>58</sup> These reflect the ways in which Vytautas himself could adopt positive values and goals when it best

51 The location of this castle remains a matter of debate.

52 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 3, pp. 212–213 (=CEV, p. 117 (no. 324)): »Sunderlich grosmechtiger herre, got der almechtige geruche ewer beloner czu sein vor die buwunge des huses, in der ir euch swerer arbeit der ewern so gar willeclich habt dirzeigeit, nicht alleine unserm orden czu hulffe und czu fromen, sunder ganzcen cristenheit czu eren und czu dinste.«

53 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 3, pp. 222–223 (= CEV, pp. 120–122 (no. 329)).

54 CEV, p. 175 (no. 398): »Dem ersamen herren foite czu Samayten, unserm guten frunde«.

55 *ibid.*, p. 226 (no. 483): »Deme erenwirdigen herren Heinrich von Plawen, homeister dutschs ordens von Prewsin unsir fruntschaft zcu vor.«

56 Sarnowsky: Written communication, p. 79.

57 GStA PK, XX. HA, OBA no. 4581.

58 GStA PK, XX. HA, OBA no. 4975 (= Hermann Hildebrand (ed.): Liv-, Esth-, und Curländisches Urkundenbuch, Bd. 7, Riga 1881, pp. 526–527 (no. 737)): »Dornoch czogen dy Turken obir dy Thune in Gros Walachie, das auch den romisschen konig angehoret, und in demselben lande haben sy czumole grossen schaden getoen...Und daz ist uns alles czumole leit, und daz sey Gote geclaget, daz dy heydenschaft also macht nymt obir dy cristenheit.«

sued him, and how these could be received by others (i.e., the masters of the Order) as heroic ones.

Of course, several opportunities to criticize Vytautas can be seen in the sources and these reflect how his image could quickly be transformed into that of a counterhero or even an antihero. Categorizations and applications of the heroic and its antitheses were fluid and refused strict compartmentalization in the Middle Ages. Johannes von Posilge (who was not always supportive of the Teutonic Knights), is a good example.<sup>59</sup> He describes Vytautas as a traitor who thwarts the efforts of the Teutonic Order to make peace in the land.<sup>60</sup> For example, describing an attack on the castle and town of Memel (Lit. Klaipėda) in May of 1402, Vytautas is described as »the traitor, Vytautas.«<sup>61</sup> Later in 1409, the continuator of Johannes von Posilge's chronicle describes Vytautas and his cousin, Skirgaila (regent of the Grand Duke from 1386–1392), as »those who have done great harm to Christianity and have shed the blood of many Christians.«<sup>62</sup>

This theme of depicting Lithuanian rulers as enemies of the faith also appears in Konrad von Jungingen's correspondence concerning Vytautas, written around the same time. These especially concern the peace negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Sallinwerder (mentioned above), in addition to the subsequent fallout of that treaty, the Samogitian Uprising of 1400/1401. As Sebastian Kubon has convincingly demonstrated, a primary goal of the Order's foreign policy at that time was not simply the construction of a land bridge between Prussia and Livonia. The conversion of Samogitia and its people was also a frequent theme in his letters abroad. Therefore, the efforts to deliberately thwart the terms of the treaty can be seen as counterheroic. To demonstrate this, we can examine two important letters composed by Konrad von Jungingen in 1401. The first was addressed to supporters of the Order abroad: the archbishops of Trier, Köln, and Mainz, as well as to the dukes of Austria, Saxony, and Guelders (the latter of which was a frequent guest of the Order and participant in the *Reisen*). The second was addressed to the Pope, the King of France, the College of Cardinals and the Order's proctor in Rome.

These letters focused on Vytautas' betrayal (»verraterei«) of the terms of the Treaty of Sallinwerder and highlighted that it was harmful to the whole

59 Mentzel-Reuters: 'unde den vride', pp. 97–100.

60 Of course, this »peace« was brought about through war. See *ibid.*, pp. 93–100.

61 Strehlke (ed.): Johannes von Posilge, p. 257: »rechtin vorretir Wytold.«

62 *ibid.*, p. 306: »die der cristinheytt grossin schadin habin czugeczogin und vil cristinliches blutes ere tage habin vorgossin.«

of Christianity.<sup>63</sup> The depiction of Vytautas as a counterhero was meant to garner further support for the Order and its cause. It served as an important propaganda tool for the Order.<sup>64</sup> It is quite clear that Konrad wished to remind the recipients of his letter of older ›heroic‹ ideals (i.e., the holy wars waged by the Order). Vytautas and his men are depicted as pagans and enemies of Christ, while the Order's task of fighting God's war and the patronage of that war by the Virgin Mary is emphasised. Rhetorical devices and specific way of depicting the Order as a bulwark (›vormauer‹) against the enemies of Christianity (i.e., the King of Poland and Vytautas) were important ›weapons‹ in this conflict.<sup>65</sup>

Other important strategies were the use of the Bible and religious imagery to differentiate Vytautas from the Order. This is especially true in the second letter. Specific elements in the letter provide insight into the depiction of Vytautas in the Order's diplomatic correspondence, the construction of him as a counterhero, and, ultimately, his transformation into an antihero in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first theme in this letter reaffirms the positive image of the knights, who ›propagate the buds of the Catholic faith in the farthest boundaries of the pagans‹.<sup>66</sup> This is in line with the tradition of crusading and conversion in the Baltic, in which the Teutonic Order saw itself as part of the ›vineyard of the Lord‹ (›vinea Domini‹).<sup>67</sup> The meaning of buds in relation to extending the faith was well-known among medieval commentators

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63 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 3, pp. 27–28. For an edition of these texts, see Kubon: *Der Vertrag von Sallinwerder*, pp. 329–32.

64 Annika Souhr: *Von jeher Fredeschilt der Christenheit*. Rückgriffe auf die eigenen Ursprünge im auswärtigen Schriftverkehr des Deutschen Ordens in Krisenzeiten, in: Phillipe Josserand/Mathieu Olivier, Mathieu (eds.): *Die Erinnerung an die eigenen Ursprünge in die geistlichen Ritterorden im Mittelalter*, Berlin 2012, p. 239. Also see Hartmut Boockmann: *Der Deutsche Orden. Zwölf Kapitel aus seiner Geschichte*, München 1980, p. 177.

65 See: Małgorzata Morawiec: *Antemurale christianitatis – Polen als Vormauer des christlichen Europa*, in: *Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte 2* (2001), pp. 249–260; Annika Souhr: *Von jeher Fredeschilt der Christenheit*, p. 239; Paul Srodecki: *Antemurale Christianitatis. Schilt der Cristenheite i scutum christianitatis. spory polsko-krzyżackie a retoryka przedmurza / tarczy na początku XV wieku*, in: Górczyński, Sławomir (ed.): *Unia w Horodle na tle stosunków polsko-litewskich*, Warsaw 2015, pp. 147–163; id. *Antemurale-Based Frontier Identities in East Central Europe and Their Ideological Roots in Medieval/Early Modern Alterity and Alienity Discourse*, in: Michaela Antonín Malaniková/Robert Antonín (eds.): *Collective Identity in the Context of Medieval Studies*, Ostrava 2016, pp. 97–120. Also see Boockmann: *Der Deutsche Orden*, p. 177.

66 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 3, p. 35.

67 Leighton: *Ideology and Holy Landscape*, p. 17, p. 52, for analysis of this imagery surrounding plants and their symbolic functions in the chronicles and charters for the Baltic Crusades in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century.

on the Bible. Rabanus Maurus (d. 856) connected the word »seed« to the allegorical meaning to the planting the Christian faith.<sup>68</sup> In depicting Vytautas as an unjust ruler, the letter emphasizes the just rule of the Order for it was ordained by God.<sup>69</sup> Also emphasized in the letter is the Order's mission of »expanding the reverence of the Apostolic throne«.<sup>70</sup>

Key to the depiction of Vytautas in the letter as an antihero is the employment of citations from the Bible in the letter. The use of this language indicates that the author of the letter, a member of the Grand Master's chancery, was an ecclesiastical official. This would have perhaps been Arnold Stapel, chaplain to the Grand Master from 1397 to 1402.<sup>71</sup> The biblical citations primarily focus on Vytautas and his breaking of his treaty with the Order. Most of them revolve around a specific theme: the root that produces nothing. This represents abandoning the Covenant of God, and in the typology developed by Bröckling, we can see Vytautas placed into the category of an antihero: one who stands in opposition to the heroic code of behaviour.<sup>72</sup> Invoking Deuteronomy 29:18, the author likens Vytautas to »a root that produces bitter poison« by turning away from God and toward idolatry. A similar example appears in the 1 Maccabees 1, where Antiochus Epiphanes is the »sinful root« who came forth from the generals of Alexander the Great. In the time of his rule there were »certain renegades« (»filii iniqui«) who appeared in the kingdom and suggested making a covenant with the Gentiles, resulting in the construction of a temple of the idols in Jerusalem (as described in 1 Maccabees 1:10–15). These images would have been understood by the recipients of the letter, and thus were employed to place Vytautas in a long line of those who wished to harm Christianity. Four subsequent examples concerning the root of wickedness are used in the letter to describe Vytautas. The first alludes to Job 18:16, describing the wicked »whose roots dry up beneath, and whose branches wither above«. From here, the author invokes Sirach 40:15, referring to »the children of the ungodly« who »are unhealthy roots upon sheer rock.

68 Jacques Paul Migne (ed): *Patrologia cursus completus. Series Latina*. Vol. 112: B. Rabani Maurii Opera Omnia, Paris 1878, column 849–1088, here 1013.

69 See Stefan Kwiatkowski: *Der Deutsche Orden im Streit mit Polen-Litauen. Eine theologische Kontroverse über Krieg und Frieden auf dem Konzil von Konstanz (1414–1418)*, Stuttgart 2000, pp. 11–15.

70 The importance of this can be traced throughout the Order's historical canon. See Wüst: *Studien zum Selbstverständnis*, p. 44.

71 Martin Armgart: *Die Handfesten des preußischen Oberlandes bis 1410 und ihre Aussteller*, Köln 1995, pp. 172–176.

72 Bröckling: *Negations of the Heroic*, p. 41.

« Vytautas and his associates are then compared to the children of Ephraim in Hosea 9:16: »their root is dried up, and they shall bear no fruit.« In each of the examples, those who stray from God and towards idolatry are likened to roots that dry up and produce nothing.

From these comparisons emerges an image of Vytautas as counterhero: a figure who deliberately chooses to turn away from heroic ideals. The letter specifically states that Vytautas sought to lead the people of Samogitia, who had converted to Christianity, from the obedience to the Roman Church back into the abyss.<sup>73</sup> This may be a reference to the Gospel of Luke 8:30–32, which describes how Jesus exorcised the Gerasene demoniac and transformed the spirits into a herd of swine. Before the spirits leave the man, the people of Gerasene beg Jesus to not let the man return to the abyss (i.e., the wilderness surrounding the city). A more direct citation of the Bible appears in the comparison of Vytautas, Jagiełło, and the Russians. The letter states that this situation is like the alliance between Christ and Belial, or God and an idol. This verse comes from 2 Corinthians 6:15, and the entire chapter of Book 2 of Corinthians has been recently analyzed regarding the martial imagery of its content. Specifically, this concerns the language of conflict between good and evil.<sup>74</sup> After narrating how Vytautas led new converts away from the Christian faith, the author of the letter frames the situation quite directly within the context of the Order's existence in the region:

...truly the extent to which the height of his [Vytautas'] ungodliness could be strengthened by means of a rampart, the King of Poland and his Lithuanians and Schismatic Russians, more correctly, heretics, they all joined together with Vytautas and conspired as one in wickedness to my Order and, what is more, to the whole of Christendom, [as] Christ and Belial, God and idol, against the rule of the Christian Faith.<sup>75</sup>

The imagery of Christ and Belial reflects a continued thread of Apocalypticism as it relates to religious conflict, which itself goes back to the early

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73 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 3, p. 35 (= CDP 5: pp. 163–165 (no. CXXII): »dictos ab Ecclesie Romane obediencia retrahendo in abyssum.«

74 Lisa M. Bowers: Investigating the Apocalyptic Texture of Paul's Martial Imagery in 2 Corinthians 4–6, in: *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39 (2016), No. 1, pp. 3–15.

75 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 3, p. 35 (= CDP 5: pp. 163–165 (no. CXXII): »Et quod peyus est dictos ab Ecclesie Romane obediencia retrahendo in abyssum pristine perfidie destinavit periculosius et transmisit, verum quatinus sue impietatis arcem vallo scrupulose societatis arcus muniret, cum Rege Polonie se suosque littwanos ac Ruthenos scismaticos, ymmo hereticos in malum Ordinis mei quinvero tocius xpistianitatis quasi in unum coeuntes et consencientes, xpistus et belial, deus et ydolum, contra racionem fidei perversius colligavit.«

crusading movement.<sup>76</sup> It is particularly important that the author uses the image here, for it reflects his perception of the conflict with Lithuania, Poland, and Russia as a legitimate cause for continued support among the rulers of Christendom.<sup>77</sup> As such, it might be seen within the context of the crisis faced by the Teutonic Order after the conversion of Lithuania to Christianity in the 1380s (mentioned above). To attempt to remedy this situation, the Order continued to depict itself as a protector of the whole of Christendom, with the letter translated below as a strong example of the rhetorical devices employed.<sup>78</sup> Also interesting is the depiction of the King of Poland in the example above as a »rampart« (»arx«) supporting the betrayal of Vytautas, reflecting the continued use of »bulwark rhetoric« in the depiction of the Order's enemies while also linking two of the main antiheroes in the Order's narrative strategy: Jagiełło and Vytautas.

The author of this letter continues to use allusions to the Bible to depict Vytautas as an antihero. He refers to Galatians 6:2, a Pauline epistle describing »the Law of Christ.« In the context of Konrad von Jungingen's letter and the depiction of Vytautas, the verse is applied to the alliance between Vytautas, Jagiełło, and the Russians. This alliance has resulted in them »suffocating and profaning the law of Christ.« In this way, the author of the letter wishes to emphasize that the Grand Master and his Order are keeping that law alive by its very presence in the region and, in expanding to Samogitia, continue to maintain this law. Therefore, the situation of this alliance calls out to those who are in name defenders and supporters of the Mother Church. The letter then implores the reader to not believe the accusations waged against the Order by the King of Poland, and then reminds them that, as a result of the King of Poland's support, there are many more heathen peoples in the region than there are Christians.

Most important to the depiction of antiheroes in the correspondence of the Teutonic Order is the use of the Bible to frame conflicts at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This is even more rare in that the example is not depicted in the Teutonic Order's chronicle tradition for this time. Even if there is no direct call for assistance by western crusaders in the letters describing the uprising

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76 Miriam Rita Tessera: The Use of the Bible in Twelfth-Century Papal Letters to Outremer, in: Elizabeth Lapina/Nicholas Morton (eds.): *The Uses of the Bible in Crusader Sources*, London 2017, pp. 179–205.

77 Sebastian Kubon: Die Wahrnehmung der Litauer durch den Deutschen Orden um 1400 und die Rolle des kollektiven Gedächtnisses, in: *Studia historica Brunensia* 66 (2019), No. 2, pp. 81–92.

78 Wüst: *Studien zum Selbstverständnis*, p. 280.

of 1401, the significance of a threat to the wellbeing of Christianity remains front and center. Vytautas and Jagiełło are thus transformed into antiheroes: in terms of the Order's own self-image and its communication of its activities abroad, the knights and the Grand Master are upholders of true Christianity. Of course, this reflects what the Order wanted its supporters to believe, hence the direct request of the author of the letter to ignore the sayings of the embassies of the King of Poland.<sup>79</sup>

The letter marks the beginning of a significant shift in the diplomatic representation of crusading activities and the legitimacy of the crusade in the southern Baltic region. This trend would continue for the next several years. In 1402, Konrad sent out a similar report outlining Vytautas' actions against the Order and his efforts to turn the Samogitians against the Order's rule.<sup>80</sup> The audience of the letter is not clear, as the manuscript is poorly preserved. Later, in 1409, Vytautas was accused of allying with Moscow, Pskov, Novgorod, and the Tartars to the detriment of Christianity, according to a letter written to an anonymous prince by Ulrich von Jungingen.<sup>81</sup> However, those efforts to describe Vytautas as an antihero appear to have been in vain—the Order would suffer a resounding defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald on 15 July 1410. The fallout from this would cement the decline of the Teutonic Order's authority in Prussia and external perceptions of its usefulness in the region.<sup>82</sup>

However, the depictions of Vytautas in this light did not cease after this defeat. Conflict between the Teutonic Order, Lithuania, and the Kingdom of Poland remained, and so did the attempts of the Grand Masters to depict Vytautas as an antihero. The bulk of this correspondence can be found in the registers of the Grand Masters Ulrich von Jungingen, Heinrich von Plauen,

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79 See Sven Ekdahl: *Die Schlacht bei Tannenberg 1410. Quellenkritische Untersuchungen*, Band 1: Einführung und Quellenlage, Berlin 1982, pp. 156–181.

80 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 3, pp. 23–25 (= CDP 6: pp. 131–132 (no. CCXXIII)).

81 CEV, pp. 204–206 (no. 437).

82 The literature on the Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald is extensive in itself. For overviews in English, see Eric Christiansen: *The Northern Crusades. The Baltic and the Catholic Frontier, 1100–1525*, London 1980, pp. 219–222; Michael Burleigh: *Prussian Society and the German Order: An Aristocratic Corporation in Crisis, c. 1410–1466*, Cambridge 1984, pp. 70–79; Sven Ekdahl: *Crusades and Colonisation*, pp. 1–42. Also see Roman Czaja/Zenon Hubert Nowak: *An Attempt to Characterize the State of the Teutonic Knights in Prussia*, in: Roman Czaja/Andrzej Radziwiński (eds.): *The Teutonic Order in Prussia and Livonia. The political and ecclesiastical structures, 13<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries*, Toruń 2016, pp. 13–30. One should also consult Sławomir Józwiak/Krzysztof Kwiatkowski/Adam Szweda/Sobiesław Szybkowski: *Wojna Polski i Litwy z zakonem Krzyżackim w latach 1409–1411*, Malbork 2010.

and Michael Kuchmeister von Sternberg. They regularly highlight Vytautas as an ally of Jagiełło, Russians, Tatars, and other heathens, thus continuing his depiction in antiheroic terms. This was the case in several pieces of correspondence written by Heinrich von Plauen in the summer of 1413 to rulers throughout Christendom, highlighting the negative depiction of Vytautas as an ally of the King of Poland, the Russians, pagans, and other schismatics.<sup>83</sup> A letter to the King of England in the same year linked Vytautas and the King of Poland with the enemies of the Christian faith, with Heinrich von Plauen imploring the King of England to remember the deeds of his predecessors.<sup>84</sup> He also reminded the King of France, Charles VI (1380–1422), of the heroic deeds of Charlemagne against the pagans. Charles was to remember, therefore, the heroic lineage of his predecessors, which might be seen as likening Vytautas to the legendary Marsile in the eleventh-century *Song of Roland*.<sup>85</sup> An impending invasion of Vytautas and Jagiełło (which would destroy Christendom, according to Plauen) was referenced in several letters from Heinrich von Plauen to rulers of Bohemia and the Empire.<sup>86</sup> An embassy of the Order to the Empire also implored their audiences to remember their predecessors who helped the Order in the expansion and protection of the Christian faith in Prussia and fought against paganism («die heidenschaft czu swechen».)<sup>87</sup> In this letter, Vytautas and Jagiełło «with a great collection of Christians and pagans» are also described as waiting on the borders of the Order's land,<sup>88</sup> and thus the princes of the Empire should remember that the entirety of the Christian faith lay in danger on account of this alliance.<sup>89</sup>

83 Jürgen Sarnowsky: Regesten zu den Briefregistern des Deutschen Ordens III, pp. 207–208 (no. 141–142).

84 *ibid.*, p. 224 (no. 172).

85 *ibid.*, p. 205 (no. 138). Also see Robert Allen Rouse: *Crusaders*, in: Niel Cartlidge (ed.): *Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Medieval Romance*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 173–183, here p. 175.

86 Sarnowsky: Regesten zu den Briefregistern des Deutschen Ordens III, p. 210 (no. 146), p. 216 (no. 157), pp. 219–220 (no. 164).

87 *ibid.*, pp. 224–225 (Nr. 173); GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 6, p. 303: »Item ab die herren den offen briff horen wellen adir nicht, so sprechet gnediger lieber herre der orden ist gewortzilt und inbefestunge bebstlicher und keyserlicher gnade mit gar vil gunsten, koningen, fursten und herren die heidenschaft zuswechen und den heiligen cristenglawben czubreiten das her gar getruwlichen mit hulfte ewuir eldirn und vorfarn euch selbst missentlich invorgissunge vil blutes bis an die czeit dises ingekomenden koning Wladislaus von der heidenschaft czu Poland geruffet hat getan.«

88 GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 6, p. 305: »... mit grosser sammelunge cristen und heydin.«

89 *ibid.*, p. 305–306: »...so ir meiste moget czu hulfte komet, wann is ny so not teten desen landen und der armen cristenheit wy wol her bis her eyn fredeschilt mit hilf uewir vorfar und eldern der gantzen cristenheit ist gewesen. So getruwt und hofft unser homeister czu

In addition to letters written to secular rulers, Vytautas also appears as a villain in the papal correspondence of the Order in the aftermath of the Battle of Tannenberg/Grunwald. Writing to Antipope John XXIII (1410–1415) in the late summer of 1413, Heinrich von Plauen implored him to think of the Order's poor situation in Prussia. Moreover, he reminded John that he indeed wished to make peace with Jagiełło and Vytautas, but that these wishes were in vain. The reason behind this was, according to the Order's side, that Jagiełło and Vytautas instead preferred to ally with Russians from Pskov and Novgorod and neighbouring barbarian peoples against the Order, thus harming Christianity.<sup>90</sup> Subsequent depictions in the foreign correspondence of Heinrich von Plauen continue this trend and appear throughout his letter registers.<sup>91</sup>

The negative depictions of Vytautas as an ally of Jagiełło and the image of him leading armies of pagans and Russians into the Order's territories continued in the correspondence of Michael Kuchmeister von Sternberg. In 1414, he wrote to Sigismund of Hungary that Vytautas and Jagiełło, in addition to princes from Silesia and Mazovia, had allied with Tartars, Russians, and other pagans and invaded Prussia in July of that year.<sup>92</sup> He also wrote to the princes in Jagiełło's army in August of 1414, in which he reminded the men of the Order's commitment to uphold the conditions of the First Peace of Thorn (concluded on 1 February 1411) and admonished them for allying with enemies of the Christian faith, including Jagiełło and Vytautas, to shed Christian blood in Prussia. As in the letter written by Konrad von Jungingen in 1401 (described above), Kuchmeister portrayed Vytautas and Jagiełło as having acted against the Law of Christ.<sup>93</sup> An set of instructions for an Order's messenger dated 1424 repeats several aspects of this alliance between Vytautas, Jagiełło, and »unbelievers« (»unglowbigen«, in this case,

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euern gnaden das ir euwer eldern fusporn und noch volgnug, got und syner werden muter czu lobe der cristenheyt czu dinste euch czu eren dem orden czu troste.«

90 Sarnowsky: Regesten zu den Briefregistern des Deutschen Ordens III, p. 226 (no. 175); GStA PK, XX. HA, OF 6, pp. 317–319.

91 *ibid.*, p. 229 (no. 179), p. 230 (no. 180), p. 231 (no. 182), pp. 232–233 (Nr. 184), pp. 240–241 (no. 198), pp. 241–242 (no. 199).

92 Sebastian Kubon/Jürgen Sarnowsky/Annika Souhr-Könighaus: Regesten zu den Briefregistern des Deutschen Ordens II: Die Ordensfolianten 8, 9 und Zusatzmaterial mit einem Anhang: Die Abschriften aus den Briefregistern des Folianten APG 300, R/LI, 74, Berlin 2014, p. 105 (no. 53). These letters comprised Ordensfoliant 8, which has been lost since 1945.

93 *ibid.*, pp. 109–110 (no. 61).

Russians, Walachians, Tartars, Turks, and others), reinforcing the continued practice of depicting Vytautas as an antiheroic figure.<sup>94</sup>

The regularity of the accusations and negative depictions of Vytautas make it quite clear that he continued to play an important role in the Order's narrative strategy in its letters as an enemy of the Christian faith and, as such, an antihero in the tradition of its earlier enemies in Prussia and Lithuania. Several of these letters are quite detailed and provide rich examples of the ways in which the Order used diplomacy to attempt to garner support from a variety of groups in western Europe, thus highlighting the importance of these texts as important examples of not only written, but oral communication (as highlighted in the work of Jürgen Sarnowsky).<sup>95</sup>

### Conclusion: Vytautas the Hero, Counterhero, and Antihero

Vytautas of Lithuania was obviously a key player in the internal and external politics of the southern Baltic region in the late Middle Ages. Moreover, he appears as an important character throughout the written corpus of materials available to historians studying the medieval history of the southern Baltic region. This chapter has attempted to highlight how sources beyond those of the Teutonic Order's chronicles can help to shape our understanding of the making of heroes, counterheroes, and antiheroes in the Baltic during the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. A significant body of research has considered the ways in which medieval audiences were attracted to antiheroic figures in contemporary literary works, such as the *Chansons de geste* and early medieval examples such as Beowulf. As Neil Cartlidge argued in his study of heroes and antiheroes in the Middle Ages, the fascination with these figures was so prominent that oftentimes we overlook the ways in which heroic figures were immoral, while their antiheroic counterparts could be praiseworthy and impressive.<sup>96</sup> The investigation of heroes and antiheroes as part of a broader phenomenon of the rise of literary culture, and the reception of pre-Christian

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94 CEV, pp. 562–563 (no. 1024): »Item am dinstage noch quasimodo genti haben die herczogen in der Maszaw...den der konig von Polan, herczoge Wytawt und andere heidenische forsten samt mit im werden halden.«

95 Sarnowsky: Written communication, pp. 76–87.

96 Niel Cartlidge: Introduction, in: Niel Cartlidge (ed.): Heroes and Anti-Heroes, pp. 1–5.

literary traditions, was the topic of a collection of studies published a decade ago.<sup>97</sup>

However, the sources presented in this chapter are entirely different from the perspective of genre and intended audience(s) while sharing several aspects of the Teutonic Order's chronicle tradition. What do they say about heroes, counterheroes, and antiheroes? Can sources such as letters, which reflect a similar method of communication to literary texts (such as poetry, which was recited aloud) illuminate the perception of figures in quickly changing contexts? This chapter has attempted to illustrate that they can. Ultimately, the image of Vytautas in these sources highlights the presence of moral ambiguity concerning who was heroic, and who was not. Vytautas' ability to fight in the Order's interest and for the Christian faith is jarring in light of his alliance with Jagiełło and »unbelievers« expressed in these sources. This serves to demonstrate that there was ›cross-pollination‹ between the goals of the Order's historical texts and the personal correspondence of its Grand Masters, which applies to the times when the Order and Vytautas were at peace with one another, as well as when the two were at war. It would seem that Vytautas, as a historical figure, embodied the multifaceted roles of hero, counterhero, and antihero.

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## Chapter 6

### A Long Relationship Between a Hero and His Enemies: Master Wolter von Plettenberg and the Russians (c. 1500– c. 1700)

#### Introduction

An enemy can help to create a hero.<sup>1</sup> Heroes need to be set against an opposition, both internal and external. They need enemies to defeat.<sup>2</sup> We do not have to look far to find contemporary examples. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine helped create a heroic image of President Volodymyr Zelensky, who before the invasion struggled as a national leader.<sup>3</sup> Enemies and the hero who fought them develop a close relationship that can last for centuries. As this chapter will show, they can become interdependent.

A painting portrays a man in a white robe with a black cross kneeling, with his hands in prayer in front of the Virgin Mary with Child Jesus and Angels above (Figure 5).<sup>4</sup> The figure of the Holy Virgin is crushing a demon under her feet. The figure of the praying man is also crushing someone, most likely a bulky man with a beard, wearing a fur hat and holding a sceptre. The person in prayer is Wolter von Plettenberg (c. 1450–1535), the Master of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order. The Plettenberg family originated from Westphalia and resided in the palace of Nordkirchen, where the painting is from, as of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> The bearded man with a fur hat whom he crushed was a Muscovite ruler. We can assume that the artist wanted to portray the Grand Duke of Moscow Ivan III (r. 1462–1505).

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1 I am grateful to Madis Maasing and Anti Selart for their poignant comments on this text.

2 Ulrich Bröckling: *Postheroische Helden: ein Zeitbild*, Berlin 2020, p. 32.

3 Małgorzata Zachara-Szymańska: The Return of the Hero-Leader? Volodymyr Zelensky's International Image and the Global Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, *Leadership* 19 (2023), No. 3, pp. 196–209.

4 In the painting also the coats of arms of the Teutonic Order and Plettenberg family are represented. 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, p. 154.

5 Friederike Scholten: Gutsbesitzer zwischen Repräsentation und Wirtschaftsführung. Das Gut Nordkirchen in Westfalen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert, in: *Virtus. Journal of Nobility Studies* 24 (2017), p. 106.



Figure 5: The painting of Wolter von Plettenberg and Virgin Mary from Schloß Nordkirchen (Westphalia)

The scene depicted in the painting refers to one of the decisive moments in Livonia's pre-modern history, as well as in Wolter von Plettenberg's life and career. It was the battle at Lake Smolino on 13 September, 1502, during which the Livonian army achieved victory over the Muscovite forces. The painting of Nordkirchen, a votive image (*Votivbild*), was most likely commissioned a century after Master Wolter's death. A similar painting is housed in the palace of Hovestadt in the same region.<sup>6</sup> The two paintings demonstrate a certain tradition of memory that includes remembering not only the victor, but also his defeated enemies—the Russians.

I would argue that the memory of Wolter von Plettenberg and the Russians as enemies are bound together. Master Wolter was remembered even centuries later in the historiography not as the leader of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order who had the longest tenure, but as a commander whose army defeated Russians (Muscovites) at the Battle of Smolino. The memory of the victory at Smolino against the Russians was one of the constructive elements of Wolter von Plettenberg's long-term remembrance and heroic image. The commemoration of the battle and of Master Wolter began right after the battle with the creation of texts, liturgical commemoration, and visual representations.<sup>7</sup> The construction of Russians as enemies immediately became part of the narrative too, thanks to a propaganda text: the pamphlet *Eynne schonne hysthorye van vunderlyken geschefthen der heren tho Lyflanth myth den Russen unde Tartaren* (A Fine History About the Wonderful Dealings of the Lords of Livonia with the Russians and Tartars), shortened as *Schonne hysthorie* (composed around 1508).<sup>8</sup> Through texts and images, the memory of the master and the battle quickly became a cultural memory that influenced the commemoration of the event and the man for centuries, with the Russians

6 Kreem/Kreem: Von Livland über Westfalen nach Bayern und zurück, p. 154.

7 Gustav Strenge: Remembering the Dead: Collective Memory and Commemoration in Late Medieval Livonia, Turnhout 2023, pp. 241–242.

8 The only surviving manuscript is in the collection of Uppsala University Library and was copied around 1550: *Eynne schonne hysthorye van vunderlyken geschefthen der heren tho Lyflanth myth den Russen unde Tartaren*, Uppsala University Library (UUB) H 131. I use here a transcript of the manuscript prepared by Matthias Thumser and Juhan Kreem. The text was published by Carl Schirren (ed.): *Eynne Schonne hysthorie van vunderlyken geschefthen der heren tho lyflanth myth den Rüssen unde tartaren*, in: *Archiv für die Geschichte Liv-, Est- und Curlands* 8 (1861), pp. 113–265; Matthias Thumser: *Antirussische Propaganda in der Schönen Historie von wunderbaren Geschäften der Herren zu Livland mit den Russen und Tataren*, in: Matthias Thumser (ed.): *Geschichtsschreibung im mittelalterlichen Livland*, Berlin 2011, pp. 133–153.

always in the background.<sup>9</sup> For example, when choosing Wolter von Plettenberg's bust in 1842 as one of 150 busts and plaques of prominent ›German speaking‹ (*deutscher Zunge*) personalities in Walhalla, the Germanic Hall of Fame, Bavarian king Ludwig I (1786–1868) was motivated by the Master's victory over the Russians.<sup>10</sup> Many historians have also emphasised the role of this victory in building Wolter von Plettenberg's fame, even though the military significance of the battle has been disputed. Leonid Arbusow Jr. wrote in 1935, on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Master Wolter's death: »even today one cannot think otherwise than that the victory of 13 September 1502 was the high point of his career, probably suitable to commemorate him again now.«<sup>11</sup> Juhan Kreem adds »[t]he Battle of Smolino was most likely responsible for the remarkable authority of the Livonian Master Wolter von Plettenberg in the next decades, and is certainly the cornerstone of his reputation in the historiography as the ›greatest Master of Livonia.«<sup>12</sup> Alexander Baranov summed up the attitudes towards the Master by stating that, after the victory at Smolino, »Wolter von Plettenberg was praised and glorified as a military genius, an ideal ruler and a true knight.«<sup>13</sup> Though Wolter von Plettenberg was a leader of the Livonian branch for more than thirty years after the famous battle, this event has remained a touchstone in his commemoration, almost always referenced by those writing about him. The Baltic German historiography of the next centuries saw Wolter von Plet-

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- 9 Jan Assmann: *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge 2011; Klaus Graf: *Schlachtgedenken im Spätmittelalter. Riten und Medien der Präsentation kollektiver Identität*, in: Detlef Altenburg (ed.): *Feste und Feiern im Mittelalter: Paderborner Symposion des Mediävistenverbandes, Sigmaringen 1991*, pp. 63–70; Klaus Graf: *Fürstliche Erinnerungskultur. Eine Skizze zum neuen Modell des Gedenkens in Deutschland im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, in: Chantal Grell/Werner Paravicini/Jürgen Voss (eds.): *Les princes et l'histoire du XIVE au XVIIIe siècle*, Bonn 1998, pp. 1–11; Rory Naismith/Máire Ní Mhaonaigh/Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (eds.): *Writing Battles: New Perspectives on Warfare and Memory in Medieval Europe*, London 2020.
- 10 Ludwig I. von Bayern: *Walhalla's Genossen* geschildert durch König Ludwig den Ersten von Bayern, München 1842, p. 140; Kreem/Kreem: *Von Livland über Westfalen nach Bayern und zurück*, pp. 156–158.
- 11 Leonid Arbusow jun.: *Wolter von Plettenberg. Zum Gedächtnis an seinen Todestag am 28. Februar 1535*, in: *Baltische Monatshefte* 4 (1935), p. 185.
- 12 Juhan Kreem: *Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals: The Mentality of the Teutonic Order in Livonia at the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, in: *Crusades* 12 (2013), p. 242.
- 13 Alexander Baranov: *Contra Multitudinem Ruthenorum Armatorum: The Russian-Livonian Battle of Lake Smolino (1502) Reconsidered*, in: Michael Eisenberg/Rabei G. Khamisy/Denys Pringle (eds.): *The Art of Siege Warfare and Military Architecture from the Classical World to the Middle Ages*, Oxford 2021, p. 228.

tenberg as a saviour of Livonia, and the battle as an event that changed the fate of Livonia.<sup>14</sup>

It is obvious that the Battle of Smolino on 13 September, 1502, in which Livonian forces fought against Russians, was the cornerstone of Wolter von Plettenberg's reputation, fame, and heroic figuration. This chapter will try to reveal the role his enemies, Russians, played in the formation and development of his heroic figure between 1502 and the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, focusing attention on historical narratives written in Livonia and outside of it. What role did the Russians play in the memory of Wolter von Plettenberg? How did the Livonian War (1558-1582) influence the narratives on the victory of 1502? How did the depiction of Russians change in Master Wolter's story during political developments of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries?

#### Russians as enemies: from the 1490s to 1502

No enemies are eternal, even if they seem to be. When did the Russians appear in Livonia as opponents and enemies? In the late Middle Ages, there were several military conflicts between Livonia and Russian principalities, as well as conflicts between the border regions like the bishopric of Tartu (Dorpat) and Pskov.<sup>15</sup> Russians were depicted by the Teutonic Order as stubborn schismatics during its war with Novgorod (1443–1448).<sup>16</sup> However, Russians were not a primordial threat to Livonia in the late Middle Ages. They became a more explicit threat in the very late 15<sup>th</sup> century, when, as a result of expansion through the conquest of numerous Russian principalities, most notably Novgorod (1478), Muscovy became a direct neighbour of Livonia. The Teutonic Order in Livonia began to discuss the ›Russian threat‹ in the 1480s, when the Livonian branch unsuccessfully waged war on Pskov

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14 Norbert Angermann: *Livländisch-rußische Beziehungen im Mittelalter*, in: Norbert Angermann/Ilgvars Misāns (eds.): *Wolter von Plettenberg und das mittelalterliche Livland*, Lüneburg 2001, p. 130, p. 141.

15 Anti Selart: *Ein westfälisch-russischer Krieg von 1443–1448? Bemerkungen zum Krieg des livländischen Deutschen Ordens Gegen Nowgorod*, in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung* 61 (2012), pp. 247–262; Alexander Baranov: *Zwischen Bündnis und Konfrontation. Der livländische Ordensmeister Bernd von der Borch und der Großfürst Ivan III. von Moskau 1471–1483*, in: Stephan Flemmig/Norbert Kersken (eds.): *Akteure mittelalterlicher Außenpolitik: das Beispiel Ostmitteleuropas*, Marburg 2017, p. 139.

16 Madis Maasing: *Livonia and Depiction of Russians at Imperial Diets before the Livonian War*, in: *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana* 29 (2021), No. 1, p. 40.

(1480–81).<sup>17</sup> An open conflict between Livonia and Muscovy erupted in 1494 when two Russian merchants were sentenced to be burned at the stake for sodomy in Tallinn (Reval), but the Grand Duke of Moscow Ivan III closed the Hanseatic *kontor* in Novgorod in response and took many Hanseatic merchants hostage.<sup>18</sup> It seems that for the Livonians—in particular, for the main political and military power in Livonia, the Teutonic Order and its Master Wolter von Plettenberg—the future war seemed inevitable. In 1501, the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order started a war with the Muscovites that initially consisted of raids in the border regions of the enemy territory.<sup>19</sup> Thus the Livonians initiated the war with Muscovy. The main events took place in 1502, when Livonian forces entered Pskovian lands.

The decisive battle of the campaign took place at Lake Smolino on 13 September 1502. The Livonian forces that combined a few thousand Teutonic Knights, mercenaries, and autochthonous peasants (Latvians and Estonians) faced the Muscovite army and their allies, troops that exceeded the number of their opponents several times over.<sup>20</sup> The Livonian forces stood under the command of Master Wolter von Plettenberg, and were joined by the archbishop of Riga, Michael Hildebrand, on the battlefield. The size of the opposing forces is still debated by historians, but there were likely armies of several thousand men on each side.<sup>21</sup> Contemporaries both in Livonia and outside of it, and future generations, considered this battle to be an important victory

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- 17 Klaus Neitmann: Um die Einheit Livlands. Der Griff des Ordensmeisters Bernd von Borch nach dem Erzstift Riga um 1480, in: Hans Rothe (ed.): *Deutsche im Nordosten Europas*, Köln 1991, pp. 109–137; Anti Selart: Switching the Tracks. Baltic Crusades against Russia in the Fifteenth Century, in: Norman Housley (ed.): *The Crusade in the Fifteenth Century. Converging and Competing Cultures*, London 2016, p. 95; Marina Bessudnova: The ›Russian threat‹ in the Livonian Order’s Documentation from the 80s and Early 90s of the 15th Century, in: *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana* 17 (2014), No. 1, pp. 144–156; Marina Bessudnova: *Specifika i dinamika razvitija russko-livonskich protivorečij v poslednej treti XV veka*, Lipeck 2016.
- 18 Anti Selart: Zur Geschichte der Russen in Livland um die Wende des 15. zum 16. Jahrhundert: Der Vorwand zur Schliessung des St. Peter-Hofes in Novgorod im Jahre 1494, in: Norbert Angermann (ed.): *Städtisches Leben im Baltikum zur Zeit der Hanse*, München 2003, pp. 177–210; Marina Bessudnova: Die Schließung des hansischen Kontors in Novgorod im Jahre 1494 im Kontext der Beziehungen des Großfürsten von Moskau zu Maximilian von Habsburg, in: *Hansische Geschichtsblätter* 127 (2009), pp. 69–99; Marina Bessudnova: *Rossija i Livonija v kontse XV veka. Istoki konflikta*, Moscow 2015, pp. 281–310.
- 19 Madis Maasing: Infidel Turks and Schismatic Russians in Late Medieval Livonia, in: Cordelia Heß/Jonathan Adams: *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, Berlin 2015, p. 366.
- 20 Baranov: *Contra Multitudinem Ruthenorum Armatorum*, pp. 227–232.
- 21 *ibid.*, pp. 229–230.

over the Russians. However, the outcome of this battle has been disputed by scholars, because the Livonian forces retreated back to Livonia after Smolino. Some historians claim that both sides suffered heavy losses and that the battle was undecided with no evident victor.<sup>22</sup> Juhan Kreem points out that after the battle, Livonian forces retreated back to Livonia.<sup>23</sup> Russian contemporary sources had a different interpretation of the battle, claiming that Russian forces won.<sup>24</sup> The war ended in 1503 and a fifty-year peace, that in reality was a series of regularly renewed peace treaties (*Beifrieden*), followed between Livonians and Russians, which lasted until 1558.<sup>25</sup> Teodors Zeids has highlighted Wolter von Plettenberg's diplomatic skills that resulted in numerous, consecutive peace treaties between Livonia and Muscovy, ensuring a long period of peace, and argues that these skills should be evaluated higher than his military victories.<sup>26</sup> The victory at Smolino, most likely seen by contemporaries as provisional, instigated a propaganda campaign by the Teutonic Order that aimed to vilify Russians and attract support from the European rulers. It was a moment that marked the beginning of Wolter von Plettenberg's long-term relationship with the Russians, which is reflected in numerous texts and images, and which will continue beyond his death; Russians appeared in almost every narrative regarding the Master and his ›spectacular‹ victory.

#### After Smolino: Creating the Image of Wolter von Plettenberg and Russians

The construction of the Russians as an enemy by the Livonians can be traced back to a specific text that was written shortly after the Battle of Smolino. The pamphlet *Schonne hysthorie*, alongside of the description of Livonia's political history between 1491 and 1507, told an emotional story that constructed stereotypes and vilified the opponents, the Russians.<sup>27</sup> It was meant to be a propaganda text, a tool of political communication that intended to attract

22 John Fennell: Ivan the Great of Moscow, London 1961, p. 255; Iurij Alekseev: Pohody Russkih Vojsk Pri Ivane III, Sankt Peterburg 2007, p. 423.

23 Kreem: Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals, p. 238.

24 Baranov: Contra Multitudinem Ruthenorum Armatorum, p. 230.

25 Ruth Kentmann: Livland im russisch-litauischen Konflikt. Die Grundlegung seiner Neutralitätspolitik. 1494–1514, in: Beiträge zur Kunde Estlands 14 (1928), pp. 85–159.

26 Teodors Zeids: Wolter von Plettenberg und seine Stellung in der Geschichte Lettlands, in: Norbert Angermann/Ilgvars Misāns (eds.): Wolter von Plettenberg und das mittelalterliche Livland, Lüneburg 2001, p. 23.

27 About *Schonne hysthorie*, see Thumser: Antirussische Propaganda, p. 137; Kreem: Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals, p. 240.

attention, financial resources, and to portray the ›Russian threat‹ as equal to that of the Turks.<sup>28</sup> Even just in the description of the geographical location of Livonia, in the first chapter of the book, the author calls the Livonian neighbours »cruel Russians« (*grusamen Russen*).<sup>29</sup> As Madis Maasing has put it, *Schonne hysthorie* »depicted Russians as barbaric, evil, and un-Christian; Grand Duke of Moscow as a tyrant and in a secret pact with Tatars and Turks; while the Livonians were portrayed as steadfast protectors of Christendom«<sup>30</sup>. The pamphlet is full of offensive descriptions of the Russians and religious and ethnic prejudices. It portrayed not only the Russians collectively as enemies and evildoers, but also framed the Muscovite ruler himself as evil; according to the author, he had »a bloodthirsty pride« (*blothgyrygen ouermuth*).<sup>31</sup>

The pamphlet's main audience was not in Livonia, but in the Empire, more precisely in Northern Germany. Though no printed copy of *Schonne hysthorie* has survived, because of the illustrated cover of the manuscript and the way it was copied in the manuscript around 1550, it is believed that the pamphlet was printed around 1508.<sup>32</sup> The text of *Schonne hysthorie* was written in Middle Low German and, as Mathias Thumser claims, it was intended in its printed form for a broad public. In particular, it was intended to educated urban upper classes, who had financial resources.<sup>33</sup> As ›an advertising leaflet‹, that used the tools of manipulative propaganda, it was intended to persuade the public to acquire indulgences, and the money was to be used for arms and mercenaries in the expected next war with the Russians.<sup>34</sup> The text warned that Russians pose a threat to all neighbours, meaning that more military conflict would be likely.<sup>35</sup> Historians are not certain about the success of the

28 Maasing: Infidel Turks and Schismatic Russians in Late Medieval Livonia, p. 347.

29 Eynne schonne hysthorye, UUB H 131, folio 3 verso.

30 Norman Housley: Indulgences for Crusading, 1417–1517, in: Swanson, Robert N. (ed.): Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits, Leiden 2006, p. 287; Maasing: Livonia and Depiction of Russians at Imperial Diets before the Livonian War, p. 44.

31 Eynne schonne hysthorye, UUB H 131, folio 13 verso.

32 The dating of the manuscript is based on yet unpublished research of Matthias Thumser, which will be published in his and Juhan Kreem's forthcoming edition of *Schonne hysthorie*. Thumser: Antirussische Propaganda, p. 137; Kreem: Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals, p. 240; Leonid Arbusow jun.: Die Beziehungen des Deutschen Ordens zum Ablasshandel seit dem 15. Jahrhundert, Riga 1909, pp. 50–51; Marshall Poe: A People Born to Slavery: Russia in Early Modern European Ethnography, 1476–1748, Ithaca 2000, p. 19.

33 Thumser: Antirussische Propaganda, p.139.

34 *ibid.*, p. 139.

35 *ibid.*, p. 141.

indulgence campaign. Friedrich Benninghoven claimed that it did not achieve its main aim of attracting military and financial support from the Empire.<sup>36</sup> It seems that it had more propaganda influence than financial, though its long-term impact should not be overestimated.<sup>37</sup>

*Schonne hysthorie* was most likely written by the priest of the Teutonic Order, Christian Bomhower (d. 1518).<sup>38</sup> Bomhower was a burgher's son from Tallinn. In 1500 he became the secretary of the Livonian Master Wolter von Plettenberg. He later served as a cathedral canon in Tartu, Tallinn and Cologne; he studied in Cologne and earned a doctorate in canon and secular law in Siena.<sup>39</sup> Yet the key development in his career that made him into a propagandist and creator of a master narrative on the conflict between the Livonians and Russians was his appointment as a commissioner of indulgences after the Livonian and Russian war in 1503.<sup>40</sup> He was involved in two indulgence campaigns in the Empire: 1503–1506 and 1507–1510.<sup>41</sup> Under the Master's patronage, Christian Bomhower became a bishop of Tartu in 1514.<sup>42</sup> In this context, it is evident that Bomhower's text was part of the indulgence campaigns.

In short, the pamphlet had the goal of gathering resources necessary for the war with the Muscovites by vilifying Russians and describing the atrocities committed by them during the war.<sup>43</sup> The whole *Schonne hysthorie* emphasised that the enemies of Livonia, the Russians, were schismatics and allies of Tatars, yet in the description of the decisive battle, the religious aspect of the war and the victory against the enemies becomes more evident. *Schonne hysthorie* presented the Battle of Smolino as a decisive moment for Livonia,

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36 Friedrich Benninghoven: Rußland im Spiegel der livländischen Schonnen Hysthorie von 1508, in: Zeitschrift für Ostforschung II (1962), p. 625.

37 Selart: Switching the Tracks, p. 100.

38 Henrike Bolte: Bischofserhebungen und geistliche Landesherrschaften im spätmittelalterlichen Livland: Dorpat-Ösel-Kurland, Berlin 2023, pp. 560–566.

39 Thumser: Antirussische Propaganda, p. 135; Bolte: Bischofserhebungen und geistliche Landesherrschaften im spätmittelalterlichen Livland, p. 562.

40 Housley: Indulgences for Crusading, p. 287.

41 Maasing: Livonia and Depiction of Russians at Imperial Diets before the Livonian War, p. 44; Arbusow jun.: Die Beziehungen des Deutschen Ordens zum Ablasshandel seit dem 15. Jahrhundert, p. 23, p. 29, p. 32, p. 35; Stuart Jenks (ed.): Documents on the Papal Plenary Indulgences 1300–1517, Preached in the Regnum Teutonicum, Leiden 2018, pp. 458–501.

42 Bolte: Bischofserhebungen und geistliche Landesherrschaften im spätmittelalterlichen Livland, p. 560, p. 566.

43 Simon Dreher: Gegen die vermalediden ketzer und affgesneden Ruyszen und ungelovigen Tarteren: Bedrohungskommunikation im Rahmen der livländischen Ablasskampagnen (1503–1510), in: Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung 70 (2021), No. 1, p. 3.



Figure 6: The title page of the *Schonne Hysthorie* manuscript

in which the fate of the region and its Christian population was »hanging by a silk thread« (*wo de guden lande unde chrystene tho Lyflanth do an eynen*

*syden vadem gehangen hebben*).<sup>44</sup> The victory at Smolino was portrayed as »an obvious miracle« (*eyn schynbarlyck myrakel*) that was delivered by God himself and the Virgin Mary, who was a patroness of Livonia and the Teutonic Order.<sup>45</sup> However, Master Wolter is not described as a hero in the text and there are no descriptions of any features that would demonstrate his charisma, like a speech before the battle or his looks afterwards.

*Schonne hysthorie* not only created a textual narrative of the Russians as enemies, but also an image, in the form of a hand-drawn image on the cover. The drawing showed a pope in the centre, a cardinal, two bishops with a clergyman to their right, three Russians in kaftans and long hats to the left of the pope standing with their backs to him, and finally a bearded man with a black cross on his mantle kneeling before the pope (Figure 6). In Cologne, the city in which Bomhower had studied, the book *Errores atrocissimorum Ruthenorum* (1507) was printed with a very similar cover image featuring the same protagonists depicted in the woodcut.<sup>46</sup> It was a version of Polish scholar and clergyman Johannes Sacranus' (Jan z Oświęcimia, 1443–1527) work *Elucidarius errorum ritus Ruthenici* (written c. 1500).<sup>47</sup> Bomhower was no stranger to Sacranus' work; this work had had an influence on Bomhower's attitudes towards the Orthodox faith, as he labelled it as a heresy. Bomhower referred to Sacranus' book in his own *Schonne hysthorie*.<sup>48</sup> Remarkably, the

44 UUB H 131, folio 50 verso; Benninghoven: Rußland im Spiegel der livländischen Schonnen Hysthorie von 1508, p. 621.

45 UUB H 131, folio 49 recto; Maasing: Infidel Turks and Schismatic Russians in Late Medieval Livonia, p. 370; Thumser: Antirussische Propaganda, p. 150; Kreem: Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals, p. 243; on Virgin Mary as a patroness of the Teutonic Order and Livonia, see Udo Arnold: Maria als Patronin des Deutschen Ordens im Mittelalter, in: Gerhard Eimer (ed.): Terra sanctae Mariae: mittelalterliche Bildwerke der Marienverehrung im Deutschordensland Preußen, Bonn 2009, pp. 29–56; Stefan Samerski: Zwischen Waffengang und caritas. Der Deutsche Orden und seine Heiligen im Mittelalter und in der Frühneuzeit, in: Lilija Berežnaja (ed.): Die Militarisierung der Heiligen in Vormoderne und Moderne, Berlin 2020, pp. 130–139; Anu Mänd/Anti Selart: Livonia – a Region without Local Saints?, in: Nils Holger Petersen (ed.): Symbolic Identity and the Cultural Memory of Saints, Newcastle upon Tyne 2018, p. 95, p. 118.

46 *Errores atrocissimorum Ruthenorum*, [Köln] [1507] (USTC no. 748672).

47 Sacranus work was printed at first in Cracow around 1504 and then, most likely, in Cologne in 1510. Johannes Sacranus: *Elucidarius errorum ritus Ruthenici*, Cracow [1504] (USTC no. 768005); Johannes Sacranus, *Elucidarius errorum ritus Ruthenici*, [S.l. 1510]. About Sacranus and his book, see Ulla Birgegård/Monica Hedlund (eds.): Bergius, Nicolaus: A Historico-Theological Exercise on the Status of the Muscovite Church and Religion, Stockholm 2019, p. 47, p. 299.

48 Benninghoven: Rußland im Spiegel der livländischen Schonnen Hysthorie von 1508, p. 608; Oleg Kudryavtsev: Russia in the Mirror of Christian Bomhower's Schonnen Hysthorie,

same work of Sacranus was printed around 1507 in Cracow, and the title page had almost the same motif—cardinals, the pope, and Russian heretics with long hats, yet the figure of the bearded man with a cross on his coat was missing.<sup>49</sup> The presence of the bearded man with a cross on his coat signifies that the Cologne print of *Errores atrocissimorum Ruthenorum* (Figure 7) was not a coincidence or re-use of an existing image; rather, it represented a member of the Teutonic Order.<sup>50</sup> In 1507, when *Errores atrocissimorum Ruthenorum* was printed, Bomhower was in Cologne. It is believed that the publication of *Errores atrocissimorum Ruthenorum* was organised by him.<sup>51</sup> The title page may have been created on his initiative and used for two publications he prepared; it is no doubt that the man depicted in the image is none other than Wolter von Plettenberg. The title page also visually demonstrated the confrontation between the Master and Russians, who stood with their backs to the pope.

Thus there were numerous texts produced or distributed by the Livonian branch that literarily characterised and artistically depicted the Russians as the ›other‹ and adversaries. The victor over the Russians, Wolter von Plettenberg, was added in the images of the titlepages of these aforementioned texts. The appearance of the Russians in these images emphasised their ›otherness‹. They wore tall hats, were dressed in kaftans and had tall weird hats, such that they were depicted as Turks.<sup>52</sup> *Schonne Hysthorie* quite clearly laid out that like Turks, Russians were heathens, not Christians.

It is not clear how much *Schonne hysthorie* reflected the attitudes towards Russians in Livonia, and whether it was a product of political communication aimed at the audiences in the Empire. In the communication with the Emperor, Wolter von Plettenberg made the rhetorical choice to call Russians schismatics and heretics.<sup>53</sup> As Madis Maasing has argued, these descriptions of ›the gruesome, schismatic, and even infidel Russians‹ were well received in

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in: Novaia i Noveishaia Istorii 6 (2020), p. 55, p. 57; Larisa Mokrobodova: Quaestio Nostro Saeculo Inusitata: Russkoe Pravoslavie v Tezisach Johanna Botvidi ›Christiane Li Moskovity?‹ (1620), Åbo 2013, p. 80.

49 Johannes Sacranus: Elucidarium errorum ritus Ruthenici, Cracow [1507?] [www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/publication/310221/edition/254450/content](http://www.wbc.poznan.pl/dlibra/publication/310221/edition/254450/content) (22.7.2024).

50 Arbusow: Die Beziehungen des Deutschen Ordens zum Ablasshandel seit dem 15. Jahrhundert, p. 92.

51 Thumser: Antirussische Propaganda, p. 135; Arbusow: Die Beziehungen des Deutschen Ordens zum Ablasshandel seit dem 15. Jahrhundert, p. 52.

52 Arbusow: Die Beziehungen des Deutschen Ordens, p. 92; Poe: A People Born to Slavery, p. 19.

53 Maasing: Livonia and Depiction of Russians at Imperial Diets before the Livonian War, p. 44.



Figure 7: The title page of *Errores atrocissimorum Ruthenorum* [Köln 1507]

the Holy German Empire and Roman curia.<sup>54</sup> Yet, was this narrative only an episode that had no future impact on the discourses on Russians in Livonia and outside of it, or did it have a certain continuity? According to Andreas Kappeler the image of Russia created by Bomhower in the *Schonne hysthorie* did not have a further impact.<sup>55</sup> More recently, however, Russian historian Oleg Kudryavtsev has argued that other Western and Northern European authors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century used excerpts and ethnic stereotypes from the *Schonne hysthorie* to portray Russians in a negative light.<sup>56</sup> One can see themes and tropes of the Russian narrative image that were developed later, during the Livonian War (1558-1582), when considerable resources were invested into the hostile evaluation of Russians.<sup>57</sup>

What scholars have thus far overlooked regarding the perception of Russians as enemies is that they were portrayed as such in the liturgical commemoration of the battle at Smolino. Liturgy reached wide audiences within Livonia, namely all those who attended services on the particular feast day, and provided an opportunity to promote an intended narrative. After the victory, the Livonian Diet (*Landtag*) in Walk in 1504 introduced a new feast, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which was celebrated on September 14, a day after the actual battle date.<sup>58</sup> The protocol of the Diet stated that the prelates and the Master had fought »with the real enemy and contestor of the Holy Roman Church and [the Christian] faith, the Grand Duke of Moscow and all Livonians« in the commemoration of the battle should »pray and sing« like during Easter.<sup>59</sup> The victory at Smolino was an event equal in its importance to the celebration of Christ's resurrection. Moreover, commemorative chapels and chantries were founded by the Teutonic Order's Master and his *Gebietiger* to commemorate the victory.<sup>60</sup> When a Franciscan friary was founded in Rakvere (Wesenberg) in 1506 with the support of the archbishop of Riga

54 Maasing: Infidel Turks and Schismatic Russians in Late Medieval Livonia, p. 347.

55 Andreas Kappeler: Ivan Groznyj im Spiegel der ausländischen Druckschriften seiner Zeit: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des westlichen Russlandbildes, Bern 1972, p. 23.

56 Kudryavtsev: Russia in the Mirror of Christian Bomhower's Schonnen Hysthorie, pp. 61–62.

57 Charles J. Halperin: The Double Standard: Livonian Chronicles and Muscovite Barbarity during the Livonian War (1558–1582), in: *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana* 23 (2018), No. 1, pp. 126–147, p. 126.

58 Leonid Arbusow (ed.): *Akten und Rezesse der livländischen Ständetage (1494–1535)*, Vol. 3, Riga 1909, No. 29, p. 116.

59 »[...] mit dem ernstlicken viande unde anfechter der hillgen Romeschen kercken und gelovens, den grotfursten tor Moscow [...]«: Arbusow jun.: *Rezesse*, 3, No. 29, p. 116; Selart: *Switching the Tracks*, p. 90.

60 Eynne schonne hysthorye, UUB H 131, folio 49 verso.

and the efforts of the Teutonic Order and the Livonian nobility, the friars declared that it was because of a Livonian victory over »very evil Russians, our enemies«<sup>61</sup>. The commemoration of the battle and victory was a new practice in Livonian memory culture, because until 1504 the Church of Riga and the Teutonic Order had conflicting and competing memories of the past that reflected and fuelled conflicts, yet the victory at Smolino offered an opportunity to commemorate a common success.<sup>62</sup>

The new feast and also the battle are commented on in the Riga breviary that was printed in Paris in 1513.<sup>63</sup> The introduction of the new feast in the breviary explains the historical context of the battle and places the archbishop of Riga, Michael Hildebrand (1484–1509), as one of the main actors in the battle, in which a few Livonians with divine virtue defeated the Russians, who had a larger army, in a miraculous and unexpected manner.<sup>64</sup> Master Wolter's name, in contrast to the archbishop's, is omitted in this short historical description. The breviary also reveals how the commemoration of the victory was communicated to the Livonians. It instructs that during the procession of the Eucharist on the feast, *Te Deum* should be sung with added lines that praise God for liberating Livonians from the »Russian power«; in the original chant sung during the Christmas liturgy included »liberated us from the Satan's power« (*nos liberavit de diabolica potestate*) and it definitely was not a coincidence that Russians in Livonian version had replaced Satan:

*Grates nunc omnes / We are grateful all*  
*Reddamus Domino Deo / We are giving back to Lord our God*  
*Qui sua benignitate / Who in his kindness*  
*Nos liberavit / Liberated us*  
*De Ruthenica potestate / From the Russian power.*<sup>65</sup>

It is not known how long the victory over the Russians was commemorated liturgically, but because of the Reformation's rapid success it was not com-

61 »[...] de affbsunderden umylden Russen, unse viande«: Leonid Arbusow sen. (ed.): Liv-, est- und kurländisches Urkundenbuch. Vol. 2, 3, Riga 1914, No. 64.

62 Mihkel Mäesalu: Historical Memory as the Cause of Conflict in Medieval Livonia, in: Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. History 64 (2019), No. 3, pp. 1014–1030; Strega: Remembering the Dead, pp. 241–242.

63 Breviarium Rigensis, Paris 1513; the only surviving copy of the breviary is in the collection of the Library of University of Latvia (Latvijas Universitātes bibliotēka) H 2/6, R 2522; Hermann von Bruiningk: Messe und kanonisches Stundengebet nach dem Brauche der Rigaschen Kirche im späteren Mittelalter, Riga 1904, pp. 226–227.

64 *ibid.*, p. 227.

65 *ibid.*, p. 228.

memorated in the whole province after the late 1520s. Still, it may have left some kind of a long-term impact on the society in Livonia.

Wolter von Plettenberg was not a hero during the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. He was portrayed as a successful military leader, but Russians and their threat was both real for the Livonian public and this was emphasized in the commemoration. The Russians in the *Schonne hysthorie* were the blood-thirsty enemies, but their international career as enemies, reaching a wide audience in Europe, had not yet really begun. The Livonians thought that the Russians and their ruler, the Grand Duke of Muscovy, was a dangerous enemy of the Christian faith and the Roman church. Their traits as enemies, evil and dangerous, were already in place, their images—with beards, kaftans and strange high hats, as on the title pages of books most likely commissioned by the Teutonic Order—were drawn and carved in wood. They were portrayed as similar to Turks and Tatars, yet it was several decades later that the vilification of Russians in pamphlets and chronicles began with new vigour.

#### Before the Apocalypse: Russians in the Background of a Charismatic Ruler and Hero

The miraculous victory at Smolino destined Livonia to enjoy the ›fifty years of peace‹, a cliché that has been used by early modern and modern authors. Wolter von Plettenberg was seen as the architect of this period of peace, which continued after his death in 1535.<sup>66</sup> Soon after his death, a narrative about Wolter von Plettenberg as a charismatic leader was constructed. However, the depictions of Russians in the texts written by the Livonian authors after Master Wolter's death, but just before the Livonian war, did not further develop the narrative of ›the gruesome, schismatic, and infidel Russians‹ formed by the *Schonne hysthorie*. Until his final days, Master Wolter remained Catholic and did not follow the example of the Grand Master Albrecht (1490–1568), who secularised Prussia in 1525. The Reformation did transform the Teutonic Order in Livonia, and it became a corporation with many Lutheran members.<sup>67</sup> Yet, the historiography of the branch continued producing texts about the Order's past. Thomas Horner's chronicle *Livoniae Historia*, published

66 Angermann: Livländisch-rußische Beziehungen im Mittelalter, p. 141.

67 Juhan Kreem: Der Deutsche Orden und die Reformation in Livland, in: Johannes A. Mol/Klaus Militzer/Helen J. Nicholson (eds.): The military orders and the Reformation: choices, state building, and the weight of tradition, Hilversum 2006, pp. 51–52.

in 1551, follows a certain tradition of the Teutonic Order's historiography by writing the chronicle according to the tenures of the Livonian branch's Masters.<sup>68</sup> Thomas Horner was active during the 1550s as a secretary of the Teutonic Order's officials in Livonia.<sup>69</sup> His text praises Wolter von Plettenberg as the Master and leader; Horner writes that no Livonian leader can surpass Master Wolter's wisdom and greatness of deeds.<sup>70</sup> Horner focused his attention on the heroic stature (*plane heroica*) of Wolter von Plettenberg, his exceptionality and his death in old age, while sitting in his chair (*ad coelestem illam sedem euocatus*).<sup>71</sup> Horner emphasised that Wolter von Plettenberg's portrait in the great hall of Cēsis (Wenden) Castle emphasizes not a military ferocity, but some exceptional humanity. After this, however, Horner lists military victories achieved by Master Wolter, beginning with his success in the war with the city of Riga (1491) and then referring to the wars with Russians and the great victory at Smolino. Although in Horner's narrative, the war with the Muscovites is mentioned, there is no deeper focus on the Russians as enemies and as potential future threat. The Muscovites in Horner's chronicle are not the evil and dangerous schismatics of *Schonne hysthorie*.

Johann Renner (c. 1525–c. 1584) also wrote a chronicle on the history of the Livonian branch and its leaders.<sup>72</sup> However, in contrast to Horner's chronicle, Johann Renner's text was written over a long period of time and was finished after the beginning of the Livonian War (1558) and the branch's dissolution

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68 Thomas Horner: *Livoniae historia in compendium ex annalibus contracta ... De sacrificiis et idolatria veterum Livonum & Borussorum libellus Joannis Menecii, Königsberg 1551.*

69 Juhan Kreem: *Eine Peripherie mit Zentrumsambitionen? Zum Selbstverständnis des Deutschen Ordens in Livland im 16. Jahrhundert*, in: *Anti Selart/Matthias Thumser (eds.): Livland – eine Region am Ende der Welt? Forschungen zum Verhältnis zwischen Zentrum und Peripherie im späten Mittelalter = Livonia – a region at the end of the world?: studies on the relations between centre and periphery in the later Middle Ages*, Köln 2017, p. 418.

70 *Ex omnibus quotquot in Livonia rerum politi sunt, nemo extitit, uel prudentia, uel magnitudine rerum gestarum, Valthero anteferendus*, in: *Vol. 2. Sammlung der wichtigsten Chroniken und Geschichtsdenkmale von Liv-, Ehst- u. Kurland; in genauem Wiederabdrucke der besten, bereits gedruckten, aber selten gewordenen Ausgaben*, Riga 1853, p. 385.

71 *Horner: Livoniae historia in compendium ex annalibus contracta*; *Thomas Horner: Livoniae Historia in compendium ex annalibus contracta*, in: *Scriptores Rerum Livonicarum*, Vol. 2., Riga 1853, p. 385.

72 Konstantin Höhlbaum (ed.): *Renner, Johann: Johann Renner's livländische Historien und die jüngere livländische Reimchronik*, Göttingen 1872; Peter Karstedt (ed.): *Renner, Johann: Livländische Historien 1556–1561*, Lübeck 1953; Jerry C. Smith/William Urban (trans.): *Johann Renner: Johannes Renner's Livonian History 1556–1561*, Lewiston 1997; Arved von Taube: »Der Untergang der livländischen Selbständigkeit«: *Die livländische Chronistik des 16. Jahrhunderts*, in: Georg von Rauch (ed.) *Geschichte der deutschbaltischen Geschichtsschreibung*, Köln 1986, p. 23.

(1562). Johann Renner, like Horner, was a scribe of the Order's officials in Livonia during the 1550s, and had access to the documents and literary tradition of the Order, and was during the 1560s a scribe and chronicler of the city of Bremen.<sup>73</sup> The text has two versions: one finished around 1561, and one with later additions to the original chronicle from around 1580.<sup>74</sup> Renner follows Horner's narrative, but adds some personal details and traits of Wolter von Plettenberg's character.<sup>75</sup> Renner also unfolds Master Wolter's personal qualities, exalting among them his simplicity and gradual career. According to Renner, his career began with the humble offices of *backmeister*<sup>76</sup> and *schencke*<sup>77</sup> and continued with a successive rise to the leader of the branch after serving in numerous roles.<sup>78</sup> Renner refers to Master Wolter's humbleness and simplicity, stating that he ate simple food: ham, dried meat, herring and stockfish.<sup>79</sup> As shown in the next subchapter, after the beginning of the Livonian War, Renner added details to his text that emphasized and emotionally involved the conflict with Russians.

The chronicles that were composed in Livonia after Wolter von Plettenberg's death focused more on, in their understanding, the exceptional personality of the Master than his enemies, the Russians. These texts portrayed him as a charismatic leader. The victory at Smolino in these texts was an important, yet not a central, event of Livonian history. Russians were situated in the backdrop, as unimportant; they became evil actors in the narratives on the recent past during the Livonian War.

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73 J. G. Kohl: Äußere Lebensumstände Renner's, in: Mittheilungen aus dem Gebiete der Geschichte Liv-, Est- und Kurlands 12 (1880), pp. 138–159; Kreem: Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals, p. 244.

74 Kreem: Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals, p. 244.

75 Höhlbaum: Johann Renner's Livländische Historien, p. 1; Horner: Livoniae Historia in compendium ex annalibus contacta (1853), p. 385.

76 Responsible for baking bread in a castle.

77 Responsible for the stocks of drinks in a castle.

78 »[...] also dar sin backmeister, schencke, koekenmeister, ander cumpan, huscumpter, cumpter etc., both he tho dem meisterdome quam [...]«. Höhlbaum: Johann Renner's Livländische Historien, p. 131.

79 »[...] sine spise was grave kost, schincken, droge flesch, hering, stockfisch etc. [...]« Ibid.

Wolter von Plettenberg Against the Russians – New Perspectives During the Livonian War (1558–1583)

The construction of Wolter von Plettenberg's heroic image gained new context in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, after the beginning of the Livonian War (1558–1583).<sup>80</sup> It was a moment when Master Wolter became a hero, a symbol of a different age in which Livonia had been successful against its main enemy, the Russians. The impact of the war on Livonia was dramatic. As a result of it Livonia ceased to exist as a set of ecclesiastical lordships, and the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order was dissolved in 1562. The group that took care of their Master's memory no longer existed and the entity he represented, Livonia, was now conquered and divided by foreign powers. Moreover, the Russians, under the leadership of Ivan IV (the Terrible) (Grand Duke 1533-1547; Tsar 1547- 1484), after a fifty-year period of peace were no longer just rhetorical devices from the Teutonic Order's propaganda texts, but a real, dangerous, devastating, and lethal threat to the Livonians and others. As a conflict the new war differed from the Livonian-Russian war of 1501–1503, though the enemy was the same: the Muscovy.<sup>81</sup>

The Livonian War was a European conflict in which the greatest Northern and Eastern European powers were involved: Poland-Lithuania, Sweden, Denmark-Norway, and Muscovy. The Livonian affairs and Livonia's past were thus discussed outside the region. It was a media event. This war and Ivan IV's despotic rule played an important role in demonstrating to the European audiences of numerous printed pamphlets that Muscovy (Russia) lay outside »*orbis christianus*« (the Christian world), and together with Turks was among Christianity's main enemies.<sup>82</sup> The pamphlets were tools of war propaganda that aimed to create a negative image of Russians and Ivan IV himself.<sup>83</sup> Among such prints, possibly the best known is a German pamphlet *Neue Zeytung* (Nuremberg, 1561) that described Russian atrocities committed in Livonia and aimed to provoke instant emotional reactions from its audi-

80 Alexander Filyushkin: Livonian War in the Context of the European Wars of the 16th Century: Conquest, Borders, Geopolitics, in: *Russian History* 43 (2016), No. 1, pp. 1–21.

81 Alexander Filyushkin: How Holy War Became Unholy: The Evolution of the Sacral Treatment of the Livonian War in the Second Half of the 16th Century, in: *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 57 (2023), Nos. 3–4, pp. 319–335.

82 Kappeler: Ivan Groznyj im Spiegel der ausländischen Druckschriften seiner Zeit, pp. 30–32, p. 242; Ekkehard Klug: Das »asiatische« Russland: über die Entstehung eines europäischen Vorurteils, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 245 (1987), No. 1, p. 266.

83 Charles J. Halperin: »Scratch a Russian, Find a Turk«, in: *Russian History* 45 (2018), No. 4, pp. 370–71.

ences by depicting slaughtered children with ripped hearts, nailed to trees and mutilated, hanged virgins on the woodcut title page.<sup>84</sup>

Wolter von Plettenberg's rise to international prominence must be seen in the context of the anti-Russian sentiment stirred up by the Livonian War and its representation in the broadly-circulated pamphlets. During this war, Wolter von Plettenberg was no longer promoted by the Teutonic Order's Livonian branch, which had ceased to exist, but by individual authors, who pursued their own aims. Broadly speaking there were two kinds of authors: those who used Master Wolter in their larger confessional and geopolitical arguments, and those who focused only on Livonia. The latter, in the midst of political turmoil, tried to create a clear vision of the former Livonia's past. The war had destroyed Livonia as a political entity and thus Wolter von Plettenberg represented victory and the glorious days of the past, in a time when Livonians just recently had been defeated by Russians. For outsiders, especially Catholic authors, he was a symbol of the defence of the Catholic faith and an example for the devastating effect of the Reformation.

The historical context changed the role of Wolter von Plettenberg as a memory figure. Master Wolter was posthumously involved into confessional conflicts. The Livonian War in the narratives was not just a war between different countries, but also a war fought by Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox.<sup>85</sup> It was not a holy war in the minds of the politicians, yet the chroniclers on all sides used confessional rhetoric.<sup>86</sup>

In the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the battle and Master Wolter were mentioned by several authors. Balthasar Russow (1536–1600), a Lutheran pastor from Tallinn, Johann Renner, a scribe of the Teutonic Order's Livonian branch, and the first Duke of Courland Salomon Henning, a secretary of the last branch's Master, represented a mix of the Livonian and Teutonic Order's historiography.<sup>87</sup> A different perspective was shown by Tilmann Bredenbach (1526–1587),

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84 Sehr gewreliche, erschrockliche, vor unerhorthe, warhafftige Neue Zeyttung, was für grausame Tyranny der Moscoviter an den Gefangenen, hinweggeführten Christen auß Lyfland ... zufüget, Nürnberg 1561; Marshall Poe: *A History of Communications: Media and Society from the Evolution of Speech to the Internet*, Cambridge 2011, p. 130; Cornelia Soldat: *Erschreckende Geschichten in der Darstellung von Moskovitern und Osmanen in den Deutschen Flugschriften des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, Lewinston 2014, pp. 137–162.

85 Anti Selart: *Die Reformation in Livland und konfessionelle Aspekte des livländischen Krieges*, in: Ilgvars Misāns/Klaus Neitmann (eds.): *Leonid Arbusow (1882–1951) und die Erforschung des mittelalterlichen Livland*, Köln 2014, pp. 339–358.

86 Filyushkin: *How Holy War Became Unholy*, p. 327.

87 Paul Johansen: *Balthasar Rüssow als Humanist und Geschichtsschreiber*, Heinz von zur Mühlen (ed.), Köln 1996; Halperin: *The Double Standard*, pp. 126–47, p. 129.

a Catholic priest active in Antwerp and Cologne. Bredenbach's book on the Muscovite war against Livonia was published in 1564, in Cologne, Leuven, Antwerp, and elsewhere, and was based on the oral testimonies of the former cathedral canon of Tartu, Philipp Olmen (canon 1551–1558).<sup>88</sup> Bredenbach's book treats the Livonian War as a religious conflict.<sup>89</sup> In contrast to Renner and Russow, Bredenbach had not been in Livonia and used only second-hand information.

The first version of Russow's chronicle was published in the later stages of the Livonian War in 1578 in Rostock, and a second version was published after the end of the war in 1584.<sup>90</sup> It was a Livonian chronicle printed outside Livonia, also because there were no printers in the largest cities of the province yet. Chronicler Russow was not a simple bystander. He himself had experienced two sieges of Tallinn by the forces of Ivan IV in 1570–1571 and 1577 and, as Charles Halperin states, the chronicler's animosity towards Russians can be explained by this.<sup>91</sup> Russow's description of Master Wolter's reign focused on the conflict with Russians, and less on internal policies.<sup>92</sup> Russow dwells on the Teutonic Order's historiography, even structuring it according to the rulership of the branch's Masters. Thus it is no wonder that he followed a certain tradition. Like Horner, Russow introduces the readers to Master Wolter as an intelligent ruler who won many wars, namely the internal war with Rigans and the war with the Muscovites.<sup>93</sup> The miracle narrative of the victory at Smolino, which first appeared in *Schonne hysthorie*, was continued

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88 Tilmann Bredenbach: *Belli Livonici quod magnus Maschoviae Dux Anno 1558. contra Livones gessit, noua & memorabilis historia, lamentabilem universae Torpatensis prouinciae vastationem & excidium complectens, bona fide per Tilmannum Bredenbachium conscripta*, Köln 1564; Kreem: *Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals*, p. 243; Madis Maasing: *Livonian Canons and Challenge of the Reformation*, in: *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University History* 64 (2019), No. 3, p. 1009; Johansen: *Balthasar Rüssow als Humanist und Geschichtsschreiber*, pp. 77–80.

89 Filyushkin: *How Holy War Became Unholy*, p. 327.

90 Balthasar Russow: *Chronica Der Prouintz Lyfflandt: darinne vormeldet werdt: wo datsüluige Landt ersten gefunden, unde thom Christendome gebracht ys, Wol de ersten Regenten des Landes gewesen sint ...*, Rostock 1578; Balthasar Russow: *Chronica der Provintz Lyfflandt: darinne vermeldet werdt, Wo dath sülvige Landt ersten gefunen unde thom Christendome gebracht ys ...*, Bart 1584; Filyushkin: *How Holy War Became Unholy*, p. 323.

91 Halperin: *The Double Standard*, p. 129.

92 Balthasar Russow: *Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt [...] Rostock 1578*; Balthasar Russow: *Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt*, in: *Scriptores Rerum Livonicarum*, vol. 2. Riga 1853, pp. 1–158; von Taube: »Der Untergang der livländischen Selbständigkeit«, pp. 30–31.

93 Russow: *Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt*, p. 32.

by Russow, who referred to this military success of Livonians as a true miracle of God and »the great victory« (*grote Victoria*).<sup>94</sup>

The Livonian War made the narratives on the victory of 1502 more radical and emotional. Renner and Bredenbach added drama to the story of the Battle of Smolino by adding a detail missing from other accounts of the battle: Wolter von Plettenberg's speech before the battle.<sup>95</sup> The speech in Bredenbach's version was indeed emotional. The Master in this text emphasised that honour, fame, fatherland, freedom, and religion were in their hands. Bredenbach's Wolter von Plettenberg said that their courage may sink because of the masses of the barbaric enemy, but their deeds in the past that had defended their parents, homeland, house, and household, and the ancestral (Catholic) faith from the arch-enemy of the Catholic religion (Russians) should encourage them in the battle.<sup>96</sup> The Master said that these past experiences and their courage to defend with a weapon in hand gave him great hope that victory is possible. According to Bredenbach, after the end of this magnificent speech, the battle began and the Master shot steel bullets and cannon balls at the ›Tatars‹.

The Battle of Smolino and the conflict of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century was not the main focus of Bredenbach's book. He was writing about the Livonian War in the 1560s, yet he used this battle to make a further point. The speech is full of pathos and the Russians are portrayed here as a major threat to Livonia and the Catholic faith, hinting at Livonia being a bulwark of Christianity.<sup>97</sup> In Bredenbach's portrayal, Wolter von Plettenberg was a religious hero, who was fighting for religious causes against the Russians. He was a Catholic fighting with the schismatics (Russians) and non-believers (Tatars). Kreem emphasizes that Bredenbach stressed the role of the Catholic faith in the victory of the Livonian forces in 1502, and blamed falling into the Lutheran heresy for the defeats of the Livonian War in 1558–1561.<sup>98</sup>

To make audiences believe in the grandeur of this victory, details about the numbers of troops and men killed, on both the enemy and the Livonian sides, were important. First, the authors demonstrated that it was David's battle

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94 »Diese Victoria der Lyfflender ys warhafftigen ein wunderwerck unde Mirakel Gades gewesen«, Russow: *Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt*, p. 34; Russow: *Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt* (1584), p. 24.

95 Kreem: *Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals*, pp. 243–244.

96 Bredenbach: *Belli Livonici quod magnus Maschoviae Dux Anno 1558*, p. 42 verso.

97 Paul Srodecki: *Antemurale Christianitatis: zur Genese der Bollwerksrhetorik im östlichen Mitteleuropa an der Schwelle vom Mittelalter zur Frühen Neuzeit*, Husum 2015.

98 Kreem: *Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals*, p. 243.

with Goliath, in which a small Livonian army succeeded against the far larger Muscovite armies. Johannes Löwenklau (Leunclavius, Leuuenclaius, 1541–1594) reported that there were 13,000 Livonians (7000 »German« knights and 5000 »Curonian« soldiers) on the battlefield; Bredenbach mentioned that these forces of »Germans« and »Curonians« were joined by additional knights from Riga, Tallinn and Tartu, 15,000 men altogether.<sup>99</sup> The late 16<sup>th</sup> century authors writing about the battle at Smolino emphasise the number of losses the Russians experienced and thus made Master Wolter's victory seem grander and more spectacular. Bredenbach claimed that Livonians killed 100,000 enemies in the battle, out of the force that consisted of 100,000 Russians and 30,000 Tatars.<sup>100</sup> Salomon Henning's chronicle (1587–1589, published in 1590) stated that during the battle with the »hereditary enemy« (*Erbfeind*), an allusion to Satan (and Turks as well), 40,000 Russians were killed during the battle.<sup>101</sup> Löwenklau claimed that during the battle many of Master Wolter's men were wounded, but only one »German« died, yet of 100,000 Russians and Tatars, 80,000 were killed.<sup>102</sup> Johann Renner wrote that the Master and his knights killed some 60,000 Russians that day.<sup>103</sup> In Russow's version of the Livonian history, the enemy at Smolino was some 90,000 warriors strong. He does not give the number of Russians killed, but claims that the number was high, while focuses the attention of readers on the small losses of the Livonian army: only some knights and 400 mercenaries lost their lives, including several of the mercenaries' leaders.<sup>104</sup>

The historical perspective that Russow, Bredenbach, Renner, and Henning had changed their view on the Battle of Smolino and Master Wolter. They wrote or edited their texts during the Livonian War, thus they could compare the successes of Master Wolter and the final defeat of the Livonian branch

99 Bredenbach: *Belli Livonici quod magnus Maschoviae Dux Anno 1558*, p. 42 recto; Johannes Leunclavius: *Commentarius de bellis Moscorum adversus finitimos* [...], in: Sigmund Freiherr von Herberstein/Johannes Leunclavius: *Rerum Moscoviticarum commentarii* ....[...] Basel 1571, p. 207.

100 Bredenbach: *Belli Livonici quod magnus Maschoviae Dux Anno 1558*, p. 43 verso.

101 »Da weyland Herr Walther von Plettenberg, Deudesches Ordens Meister zu Lieffland, löblicher gedechtniß, demselben Erbfeind, inn einer gehaltenen Feldschlacht, Darinnen fast inn die 40000. der Reussen auff der Wahlstat Todt blieben, obgesieget [...]« Salomon Henning: *Salomon Hennings Lifflandische churlendische Chronica von 1554 bis 1590*, Riga 1857, p. 21; Salomon Henning: *Salomon Henning's Chronicle of Courland and Livonia*, Jerry Smith/J. Ward Jones/William Urban (transl.), Dubuque 1992; von Taube, »Der Untergang der livländischen Selbständigkeit«, p. 23.

102 Leunclavius: *Commentarius de bellis Moscorum adversus finitimos* [...], p. 207.

103 Renner: *Historien*, p. 134.

104 Russow: *Chronica der Prouintz Lyfflandt*, p. 34.

in the contemporary conflict. They knew that the Teutonic Order and thus all the other political entities of Livonia lost this long-term conflict with the Russians.

Renner is not, however, directly quoting the Master; he writes that the Master delivered »a short, but serious« speech in which he reminded his men that they should think about the many victories the Germans in Livonia had achieved.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, in Renner's portrayal, the Master motivates his army by pointing to a possible defeat that would have grave consequences (*grote noth*), meaning that they needed to fight chivalrously and in a manly fashion. In the initial version of Renner's text the speech was not present. It has been assumed by scholars that Renner added it later, possibly having been influenced by Bredenbach's work.<sup>106</sup> Juhan Kreem suggests that he may have had sources of his own.<sup>107</sup> However, it seems that Renner may have appropriated a rhetorical approach that seemed to emphasize Wolter von Plettenberg's charismatic personality.

Renner's aim to glorify Wolter von Plettenberg becomes evident in his further description of the battle at Smolino and the Master's actions during it. Renner claimed that the Master was bleeding because of the great heat and intensive fighting, so blood spilt out when he opened the visor of his helm.<sup>108</sup> Renner also stated that because of his deeds, meaning the victory, the Emperor made him a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire (*Reichsfürst*) (1526).<sup>109</sup> It seems that these details of Master Wolter's actions were added by Renner after he compiled the first version of the chronicle.

Another text that can be seen as a contemporary reaction to the Livonian War and focuses on Master Wolter and Russians is Johannes Löwenklau's work *De Moscorum Bellis Adversus Finitimos* (1571). It was printed in a book with Sigmund von Herberstein's (1486–1566) texts on Russia that had images of Muscovite rulers and maps of Muscovy.<sup>110</sup> Löwenklau was not from Livonia. He was a scholar of Greek, a professor at Heidelberg and Basel, later known

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105 Renner: Historien, p. 134.

106 *ibid.*, p. 134.

107 Kreem: *Crusading Traditions and Chivalric Ideals*, p. 244.

108 »De meister her Wolter vorfolgede de fiende heftich und was eine wile vorlaren, dat men nicht anders meinde, he were erslagen, averst he quam dar na wedder andraven und schloch sinen helm up, dar fell ein groth stücke gerunnen blodes uth, welchs he van groter hitte und arbeit gebloth hedde.« Renner: *Historien*, pp. 134–135.

109 »Wolter van Plettenberch wort umb siner groten daden willen van dem Romischen keiser tho einem forsten des rikes up genamen [...]« Renner: *Historien*, p. 135.

110 Leunclavius: *Commentarius de bellis Moscorum adversus finitimos* [...], pp. 205–217.

for his books on Turkish history, yet he had been to Livonia as a young man, where he had learned about the region.<sup>111</sup> Löwenklau's view on the war can be seen as a certain mix of knowledge gathered from the literature, most likely including Bredenbach's book, and personal experiences. By focusing on the Livonian War, he also explains the historical context of Livonia's relationships with the Muscovites and, in a detailed manner, describes the Muscovite-Livonian conflict of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Löwenklau introduces Wolter von Plettenberg, referring to him as a man of great soul and wisdom.<sup>112</sup> He may have used a Livonian tradition, both oral and historiographical (Renner's and Horner's chronicles as examples), that praises Wolter von Plettenberg's charisma. Löwenklau also gives a lengthy description of the Livonian-Russian war and the Battle of Smolino, and like Bredenbach included a short pre-battle speech by the Master.<sup>113</sup> Like other authors, Löwenklau emphasizes the superiority of the Muscovite forces by stating that they had more than a 100,000 warriors, including some 30,000 Tatars.<sup>114</sup> He also mentions the Master's capability to ensure fifty-year peace with the Muscovites that, in Löwenklau's words, represented more of a diplomatic than a military success. Löwenklau brought the story in a broader European context and continued the narrative about the Livonian victory against vicious Muscovites as a miraculous success.

The Livonian War made Livonia and its recent past interesting for authors and readers outside of the province. At the time of the Livonian war in the German speaking part of Europe, the image of Russians as enemies was constructed not only by the historiography, but also by anti-Russian pamphlets that amplified the fear of Russians. In this context, the narrative of the victory at Smolino and the Russian evil gained new attention. These descriptions of the battle were supplemented with more dramatic details by adding an emotional pre-battle speech by the Master and by increasing the numbers of Russian armies and their troops killed. By making an enemy more powerful and more dangerous, the value of victory was also increased.

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111 Wilhelm Kühlmann: *Leunclavius, Johannes*, in: *Verfasser-Datenbank*, Berlin 2015; Alexander Filyushkin: »De Moscorum Bellis« Ioanna Levenklavija, in: *Trudy istoricheskogo fakul'teta SPbGU 6* (2011), pp. 270–278; Johansen: Balthasar Rüssow als Humanist und Geschichtsschreiber, pp. 80–83.

112 *Leunclavius: Commentarius de bellis Moscorum adversus finitimos* [...], 206.

113 *ibid.*, 206–07.

114 *ibid.*, 207.

## New Context, New Russians: Peter the Great and Wolter von Plettenberg as a Global Hero

In his work *An Account of Livonia* (1701), Karl Johann von Blomberg described Wolter von Plettenberg's struggle against the Muscovites by writing: »[...] that there were but three Great Heroes in the World: Alexander [the Great], Julius Caesar and this [Wolter von] Plettenberg [...]«. <sup>115</sup> As von Blomberg stated himself, he based his account on the opinion of some French authors whom he had forgotten. Von Blomberg puts Wolter von Plettenberg amongst the ancient heroes who were part of the so-called Nine Worthies, replacing Hector with the Livonian Master. Von Blomberg's book narrates the history of Livonia, especially its involvement in different military conflicts and disputes with foreign powers. The author was a nobleman from Courland, a diplomat in the service of the Duke of Courland. Just before the Great Northern War (1701–1721), Karl von Blomberg went on a diplomatic mission to London and Paris. The aim to reach wide audiences is also demonstrated by the book's French edition, which was printed four years later in Utrecht. <sup>116</sup>

For von Blomberg the reign of Wolter von Plettenberg and the Livonian Wars with the Muscovites during the 16<sup>th</sup> century are important topics. Von Blomberg describes the war between the Livonians and the Muscovites (1501–1503) in general, and the Battle of Smolino in detail. <sup>117</sup> Von Blomberg calls the battle »Famous Battel«. <sup>118</sup> In order to make the statement stronger, von Blomberg added a several-pages-long quote from Bredenbach's work in original Latin with no reference to the author, stating that »for it were injurious to the Author not to reach up to the Energy of his Stile«. <sup>119</sup>

The topic of the Teutonic Order in Livonia cannot be seen just as a mere historical topic. The Dukes of Courland were descendants of Gotthard Kettler (Master 1558/59–1561, Duke 1561–1587), the last Livonian Master of the Teutonic Order and the first Duke of Courland and Semigallia. Thus, the prominent place of Wolter von Plettenberg in von Blomberg's book can be

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115 [Karl Johann von Blomberg]: *An Account of Livonia: With a Relation of the Rise, Progress, and Decay of the Marian Teutonick Order*, London 1701; Reinhard Wittram: *Peters des Großen erste Reise in den Westen: Hermann Aubin zum 23. Dezember 1955*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 3 (1955), No. 4, p. 384.

116 [Karl Johann von Blomberg]: *Description de la Livonie: avec une relation de l'origine, du progrès, & de la décadence de l'ordre teutonique ... On y décrit les duchez de Courlande & de Semigalle, & la province de Pilten, Utrecht 1705.*

117 [von Blomberg]: *An Account of Livonia*, pp. 75–84.

118 *ibid.*, p. 75.

119 *ibid.*, p. 78.

seen as a reference to the line of succession. However, there were important contemporary political developments that may have motivated him to refer to the events in early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In his book, Blomberg refers to the visit from Peter I (the Great) in Mitau (Jelgava) during the Czar's European trip right before the war.<sup>120</sup> Russia's influence in the former Livonia (Courland, Swedish Livonia, and Polish Livonia) had grown and the following war brought most of the former Livonian territories under the control of the Russian Czar. Russians were a real threat for Courland's independence. Moreover, the book was published shortly after the beginning of the Northern War (1700–1721), when Sweden was also interested in Courland. Von Blomberg's book can be seen as an attempt to attract international attention to the province. An internationally-known hero, even if his fame was exaggerated by the author, would have helped to receive some recognition.

## Conclusions

Like many medieval battles, such as the legendary Battle on Ice (1242) in which Alexander Nevsky's forces defeated the Teutonic Knights, the Battle of Smolino was not an event of great military significance. Moreover, it is difficult to see the Battle of Smolino as an undisputed victory of Livonian forces over the Muscovites and their allies, as it was claimed in contemporary texts like *Schonne hysthorie*. The victory was presented as a miracle and its commemoration was ensured by foundations and a new liturgical feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 14. The Russians, as enemies, were present in the memory culture; they were mentioned in the protocols of the Diet of Walk (1504), which established the new feast, and they were mentioned in the chant to be sung during the feast. The victory over a common enemy was possibly the first event that bound together different Livonian groups, like the Riga church and the Teutonic Order, in its commemoration, bridging conflicts between them about the past throughout the Middle Ages.

The Russians as enemies played an important role in the creation of the memory and the heroic character of Wolter von Plettenberg. His heroic character was constructed gradually. In the first texts about the battle, written during his lifetime, the Master was portrayed as a leader, but after his death, chroniclers portrayed him as a charismatic, heroic figure who had succeeded

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120 Wittram: Peters des Großen erste Reise in den Westen, p. 384.

in defeating the Russians. In the period between his death and the mid-16th century, he became a key figure in the commemoration of this victory.

However, the Livonian War (1558–1583), in which the Livonians again faced the Muscovites, was an important moment in the development of Master Wolter's heroic narrative. The defeat and subsequent dissolution of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order, as well as the Russian atrocities committed in Livonia, added drama to the story. During this war, when the German news pamphlets and authors outside Livonia described the dire conflict in Livonia, the battle at Smolino became a fateful event, a certain turning point. Wolter von Plettenberg's heroic leadership was praised. In late 16th-century descriptions of the battle, the enemy Russian army grew larger, its losses grew more spectacular than before, and Master Wolter became even more heroic in the face of the collapse of Livonia as a political entity.

As Karl von Blomberg's book, published in English and French in London and Utrecht at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, shows, the influence of contemporary politics was essential for this narrative. The diplomat of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia he praised Wolter von Plettenberg as a great European hero, like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and described in detail his victories against the Russians, at a time when the Russian Empire was expanding and the small duchy ruled by the successors of the Master of the Teutonic Order in Livonia was caught up in the developing conflict between the regional superpowers Sweden and Russia.

The presence of the »evil and dangerous« Russians in the long-term heroic image of Wolter von Plettenberg was necessary to emphasise the importance and greatness of the man and his victory. They were not just in the background, lying defeated at the Master's feet, or mentioned in the vivid descriptions of the Battle of Smolino, but rather grounds for the importance of remembering Wolter von Plettenberg. The ›Russian threat‹ was a vehicle for identity building in the Baltics, and the Master was a symbol of a rare success in the fight against the feared and dangerous enemy.

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