Providential History in the Chronicles of the Baltic Crusades

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The crusades targeting the eastern Baltic Sea region from the late twelfth century onwards spawned a significant historical literature. The Chronicon Livoniae from c.1227\(^1\) and the Chronica terre Prussie from c.1326\(^2\) are both of some size, and the authors of both handled their topic with a fair degree of historical precision. In true medieval manner, both of them also made considerable and varied use of the Bible. In this article I shall investigate some of the ways in which these important chronicles employed the Scriptures when narrating the ‘perpetual crusades’ and ‘missionary wars’ of the Baltic.\(^3\)

The earliest of the chronicles – and in fact the earliest Christian piece of literature to be produced in the Baltic region – is the Chronicon Livoniae of Henry (of Livonia, c.1180–1259), which covers the Christian mission and warfare in Livonia from c.1184 to 1227.\(^4\) Henry first came to Livonia as a young priest around 1205, his ecclesiastical training and spiritual outlook probably...
established in the Augustinian convent of canons-regular at Segeberg. Henry came to serve under Bishop Albert of Riga (d.1229), who was the third missionary bishop in the region after the deaths of Meinhard and Bertold in 1196 and 1198 respectively. Consecrated in 1198, Albert von Buxthövden, a canon from Bremen, arrived in Livonia in 1200 with a fleet of 23 ships and soon established himself firmly by moving his bishop’s see to Riga, a location easier to defend and with a better harbour to attract merchants. With the building of a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Albert is regarded as the founder of the city, and quite possibly he also instigated the founding of the military Order of the Sword Brothers in 1202. By means of annual preaching campaigns in northern Germany, Albert recruited armed ‘pilgrims’, his crusading efforts buttressed by occasional papal bulls and at times the support of both Danish and German rulers. Key structures established, Albert worked tirelessly and at times ruthlessly – in cooperation and competition with the Sword Brethren and the Danish king – to convert and subdue the pagan tribes of Livonia and Estonia. The episcopal city of Riga remained throughout the absolute centre for this endeavour. This is the history Henry was convinced by his “lords and


6 The Augustinian monk Meinhard arrived from Saxony in Germany around 1184 and soon established a church in Üxküll (Latv. Ikšķile). Before Meinhard, German merchants may have brought their own priests. A Cistercian abbot from Loccum, Bertold, replaced Meinhard in 1196. Bertold was killed in a pagan attack only two years later. See Gisela Gnegel-Waitschies, Bischof Albert von Riga. Ein Bremer Domherr als Kirchenfürst im Osten (1199–1229) (Hamburg: A. F. Velmede Verlag, 1958).

7 HCL IV.1, 16.

8 See Friedrich Benninghoven, Der Orden der Schwertbrüder. Fratres milicie Christi de Livonia (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1965).

9 For a thorough analysis of the relationship between the Baltic and the papacy, see Fonnesberg-Schmidt, Popes and the Baltic Crusades.