Saints and Sainthood around the Baltic Sea
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Identity, Literacy, and Communication in the Middle Ages

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SCANDINAVIAN HISTORIANS IN MODERN times have often tacitly assumed that saints in the Middle Ages were peaceful. Saints' lives, miracle collections, and pictures and figures of saints have been studied to sift out information about daily life, habits, utensils, attitudes toward health, and the like, or saints have been considered political creatures invented or exploited by rulers to enhance their own prestige and strengthen their dynastic line against other members of the family. The topic of saints and warfare, however, has been almost totally neglected. Such a connection has fallen outside the dominant socioeconomic historiographical tradition in Scandinavia during the entire twentieth century, and it has somehow affronted or at least been disturbing for the strong Lutheran and pietistic tradition in Scandinavia, according to which a good Christian would also do good, pious, and peaceful deeds. Modern historians have sometimes directly blamed medieval saints for not having lived a truly saintly life, and for having come to be venerated as saints in spite of their engagement in wars, the brutality they showed toward the people, or some other indecent behavior.¹

Such an approach misses an important aspect of the medieval Christian understanding of saints, namely that it could be necessary, and therefore a good deed, to be a warrior. Ever since the earliest church, Christian theologians agreed that it was unrealistic to imagine societies without war, because societies here on earth can never be without evil, and it is therefore necessary to fight against evil, both spiritually and physically.²

Warfare was endemic to medieval societies, also in Scandinavia, and not least in the Baltic where fighting for trade and economy and fighting for mission went hand in hand throughout the Middle Ages.
Saints have participated in warfare as intercessors and symbols, and as such they have been closely integrated in preparations for warfare and during actual battles, but we still know too little about how they worked in practice in the North, and about how we should actually define a warrior saint.

Saintly Warriors, Some Models

With St. Paul, military concepts and metaphors of warfare became fundamentally embedded in Christian language and worldview. The struggle against evil is continuous and a basic condition for each and every Christian throughout life, but most of this struggle is spiritual. The problem for modern historians is that it can be very difficult to distinguish between spiritual and physical warfare in the medieval sources concerning saints, or to estimate the importance of the one for the other. Saints fought and killed and died, spiritually, but to which extent did this inspire other Christians to do the same physically?

The main focus here will be on saints who somehow contributed to direct physical warfare, which certainly does not exclude their having, at the same time, a number of other functions. They were addressed in prayers and asked to intervene, sometimes in very small and mundane matters, sometimes in political affairs with far-reaching consequences, sometimes to help in actual warfare. It is difficult to single out one primary or main function of any saint, and even the mightiest and most belligerent ones could also be invoked against minor inconveniences.

Saints could be invoked by a single individual in personal matters, but also by a community or any kind of group in matters that involved larger areas of society. Many studies in hagiography have concentrated upon single individuals’ understanding of saints and on individual prayers or the miracles that individual persons experienced. This reflects a bias in the source material, with its meticulous enumeration of individuals helped by miracles, but it may have reinforced the modern impression that saints spent most of their time solving problems of daily life and had little interest in more far-reaching matters that had implications for many, such as warfare. However, in spite of these complications, we can point to some characteristics for warrior saints, on a different level of abstraction:
1. Some saints actually took part in warfare personally, whether or not they had done so while alive; they appeared during battle fighting together with the living soldiers, or they appeared to the war leader in visions before the fighting began; or they were invoked in prayers during battle.3

2. Another characteristic—common to many saints in religious border areas throughout Europe, though not exclusive to these saints—was that they liberated prisoners of war or that they saved peaceful travelers from the attack of pagan enemies.4 It was an achievement repeated by numerous different saints from Canute Lavard in Denmark to Santiago in Spain.5 Ultimately, they were inspired by the miracle that Peter witnessed when he was liberated from prison in Jerusalem by an angel of God, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 12).

3. A third characteristic, which may be classified as belonging to warrior saints, was the example of saints being martyred by infidels during battle or during violent persecutions and torture. This was a common fate for many saints from the Roman persecution of the earliest church, and the recounting of these stories would have had a morally edifying function in all layers of medieval societies. But when they were told in border societies or to soldiers on their way to fight against infidels, these narratives could easily be interpreted as examples to be imitated in actual warfare.

4. A fourth characteristic is closely linked to the medieval mental tendency also to understand holiness in physical terms. The power of the saint could be an abstract idea floating around and somehow emanating from heaven, but it could also be located very concretely in physical objects, such as the relics of saints, which, when distributed in border areas, could be understood as actively protecting their devotees and participating in the fight against evil.6 Consequently, newly conquered areas could somehow belong to the saint, who would not only be the patron of the area, but, in the medieval understanding, actually the owner of the land. If, for example, we can detect a pattern in the dedication of churches in missionary areas to certain, specific saints, we may perhaps assume that these saints had participated in the conquest and conversion and in some sense functioned as warrior saints.
Royal Saints and Warfare

Many members of the royal families in Scandinavia were venerated as saints, with or without officially being canonized. They had different functions, as can be seen from the miracles they performed, but they were also closely connected to warfare.7

One such example is the Danish duke Canute Lavard, who was killed in 1131. Soon after his murder, a cult began to develop around his grave in Ringsted. In 1146, Canute’s son and his nephew attempted to have him canonized, immediately before they—or at least the nephew—went on a crusade against the pagan Wends. They probably believed that Canute somehow could help them during their war. The canonization was prevented at this time by the archbishop, because it had no papal approval, but, twenty-five years later, Canute Lavard was canonized by papal authorization and solemnly translated in the magnificent church of Ringsted, in June 1170.

Canute Lavard’s connection to warfare is evident from two sources. The first is the official liturgy used during the translation, which opens with this characterization of Canute: “Blessed the man whose head the Lord has crowned with the crown of martyrdom and protected by the wall of faith, whom the Lord has armed with the shield of faith and the sword to exterminate the heathens and all the Lord’s enemies” (Beatus vir cuius capiti dominus coronam imposuit muro salutis circumdedit. scuto fidei et gladio muniuit ad expugnandas gentes et omnes inimicos).8 Later in this liturgy, Canute is presented as having been an ardent warrior in the pagan areas in northern Germany, where he expanded Christian territory; as having founded churches; and as having brought peace to Christians and pagans alike. He compelled the pagans to abandon their empty and profane rites and to believe in Christ, and he is called an *athleta Christi*, a warrior or a champion of Christ (Pacem Danis et paganis fidem sanctus contulit/ quos a vanis et prophanis ritibus recedere/ et in Christum credere compulit sub pacis federe./ Duci Danorum sub iure regio honorem exhibit Scavorum legio).9 Canute is presented as a warrior who while alive fought to defend and expand Christianity, and who therefore became a martyr and died for the faith. He thus fits in with a number of kings who were canonized during the twelfth century and turned into crusaders or protocrusaders.10

Even after his death, Canute continued to work on behalf of the crusades. In November 1169, Pope Alexander III issued a bull to Bishop
Absalon of Roskilde because of the conquest of the pagan fortress and temple of Arkona on the island of Rügen, which had finally been accomplished the preceding year by Canute Lavard’s son, King Valdemar I the Great. In this bull, the king is described as inspired by heavenly zeal, armed with the weapons of Christ, and protected by the shield of faith, etc., when he with his strong arm fought against the pagans and called them back to the faith and the law of Christ. Pope Alexander gives here a short and concise description of mission by sword, of which he obviously approved. And four days later, the pope issued the bull that canonized Canute Lavard. The connection seems obvious. Canute must somehow have assisted the living soldiers during the siege of Arkona; he had now become recognized as a warrior saint.

This corresponds well with some of Canute’s miracles. He liberated a Swede who had been taken captive by the pagans and held in chains. He also saved a group of poor and unarmed Christians who were attacked by numerous pagans, whom the Christians succeeded in repelling by praying to Canute. As a sign of gratitude, they donated a pagan lance from the battle to be displayed at Canute’s tomb. This miracle elegantly evokes the memory of the siege of Antioch during the First Crusade, when the holy lance was discovered and allegedly saved the Christians from a numerous Muslim enemy.

Canute Lavard began his career as a warrior saint, and he very soon became the patron saint of the guilds of St. Canute, which spread and acquired houses throughout the Baltic area. Whether these guilds were involved directly in warfare or not is a complicated matter. The members of these guilds, however, came from the highest rung of society in their various cities, and also included individuals from the royal family. These persons were inevitably consulted in any preparations for war and actual warfare, and it is unlikely that they should not have prayed to Canute on these occasions.

Canute Lavard had a few Danish predecessors. His uncle, King Canute, had been killed in 1086 in Odense by rebels. He was canonized in 1099/1100 and became the first royal martyr with papal approval. According to the narrative of his life and death, composed for the translation of his relics, he was also an *athleta Christi*. His passion was a detailed imitation of the Passion of Christ, but it also closely resembled the lives and legends of earlier English and international saints who had fought and died for the faith. Canute the King was “the first martyr of his people, the ideal Christian soldier.”
Even earlier, Danish kings had fought for the faith and had been considered important spiritual warriors as well as military ones. King Harald Bluetooth had converted to Christianity in around 965, and boasted twenty years later on an immense runestone that he had “conquered all Denmark and made the Danes Christians.” A hundred years later, in the 1070s, Adam of Bremen wrote, that

This Harald who as the first compelled the Danes to accept Christianity, and who filled the whole Northern World with churches and preachers, this Harald was innocent but wounded and despised for Christ’s sake, and he shall not, I believe, be in want of the palm leaves of martyrdom.”

Adam stated that miracles and healings took place at Harald’s grave. Apparently, a cult for Harald had begun, precisely because he had introduced Christianity through war, but we have only few traces of it from the twelfth century, and it seems to have disappeared totally.

In Norway, King Olav fell at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030, during his brutal campaign to convert the country to Christianity, and miracles were soon recorded from around his grave in Trondheim. After his death, he continued actively to take part in wars against infidels. In 1043, he appeared in a vision to his son Magnus, the evening before the great battle at Lyrskov Heath in southern Denmark against the pagan Wends. When fighting began the next day, the air was filled with the sound of the great church bell in far-away Trondheim, and Magnus swung his father’s big battle-ax, named Hel, and killed Wends in great numbers. Olav apparently became a very important saint in the early mission in the Baltic, to judge from the great number of churches dedicated to him, many of which date back to the conversion period of the different areas. But his influence extended even further. In the twelfth century, the story spread that Olav had not died, but had moved to Syria and was now riding his horse and leading the Christian troops against Muslims. No later than the early twelfth century, the Nordic Varangian guard had their own church in Constantinople dedicated to Olav, in which they kept his sword, while his helmet was in Antioch, and his personal armor in Jerusalem. All these items were an inspiration for the Scandinavians in imperial Byzantine wars against infidels, and in the crusades to the Middle East. When the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem was renovated, probably in the 1120s, two columns near the entrance were decorated with frescos in Byzantine style depicting St. Olav of Norway and St. Canute the King of Denmark.
Scandinavians on crusade venerated these two saints, and must have got the very natural idea of transplanting the holy war and its warrior saints from the Mediterranean to the Baltic.

The Swedish King Eric, killed in 1160, is a more obscure figure in his early career as a saint. He may or may not be the one Pope Alexander III hinted at in 1171 or 1172 when he forbade the Swedes to venerate a saint who had died in excessive drunkenness. Just like King Canute and King Olav, King Eric became the Swedish national warrior saint—against other Scandinavians—during the high and late Middle Ages. Each of these cults received royal and aristocratic support. Soldiers’ prayers were directed to the royal saints, and their names even became battle cries in war. After the creation of the Kalmar Union in 1397, Canute, Olav, and Eric were represented together and functioned as a trinity of saints to protect the Union, and they became the patrons of a new military order for the very highest nobility of the three countries, the Order of the Elephant, which was established in the 1460s. At the same time, St. Eric could also be referred to as helper and protector by Swedish rebels who fought against the king of the Kalmar Union, as the archbishop of Uppsala did in 1471.

It is of great interest in a Baltic context that King Eric was said to have led a crusade to Finland, probably in the 1150s, together with Bishop Henry of Uppsala, who had originally come from England. This episode is an important element in the short version of Eric’s legend, which in the form we know it now must have been composed around 1270. Eric was moved by piety and Christian zeal to fight against the enemies of the faith. He proposed to the pagan Finns that they be baptized and cease their attack upon Christians and upon Sweden. The response was war, and Eric and his soldiers killed a great number of Finns in defense of Christianity and in revenge for their having earlier spilled Christian blood (in ulcionem sanguinis Christiani). Although the war is characterized as just and necessary, Eric afterwards lamented and wept because so many unbaptized pagan souls had gone to hell instead of being saved. After the initial conquest, Eric organized the new church structure and provided the new Christian land with preachers and churches before he returned to Sweden. Bishop Henry established an episcopal see and began the missionary work, but was soon martyred on one of the frozen lakes at the hand of a local Finn called Lalli. The sources are late, and all of the details in this chain of events have been much debated among scholars, including the question of whether this first crusade to Finland ever took place at all. In any case, around 1300, at the latest, a hagiographic tradition was
established to explain that Finland had been converted violently through a crusade led by two saints, a king, and a bishop.  

International Saints and Nordic Warfare

A different group of warrior saints were imported from outside Scandinavia. Often, we know very little about how they were venerated in Scandinavia in the early medieval period, but we can, nevertheless, draw on a number of sources to suggest that they played an active role in warfare. There were many to choose from.

One of the earliest must have been the Archangel St. Michael, who in modern Scandinavian scholarly literature is almost always depicted with the scale with which he weighs the souls of the deceased and helps them into heaven. In the Middle Ages, he became known to everyone from the requiem mass, in which he is depicted saving the souls of all the faithful from the lion, from hell, and from disappearing into obscurity, before finally leading them into the holy light which the Lord has promised to Abraham and his seed.

Domine, Jesu Christe, Rex gloriae, libera animas omnium fidelium defunctorum de poenis inferni et de profundo lacu. Libera eas de ore leonis, ne absorbeat eas tartarus, ne cadant in obscursum; sed signifer sanctus Michael repaesentet eas in lucem sanctam, quam olim Abrahae promisisti et semini ejus (Offertorium of the Requiem mass)

(Lord Jesus Christ, King of glory, liberate the souls of the faithful, departed from the pains of hell and from the bottomless pit. Deliver them from the lion’s mouth, lest hell swallow them up, lest they fall into darkness. Let the standard-bearer, holy Michael, bring them into holy light. Which was promised to Abraham and his descendants.)

St. Michael is designated as signifer, the carrier of the banner, which unambiguously designates him as the leader in battle. By the eleventh century, and especially after the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, most Christians would understand this banner to be vexillum crucis, the banner of the holy cross that the crusaders raised before battle. In this period, the lux sancta to which Michael is leading the faithful may even have been associated with the terra sancta, the Holy Land, the land which the Lord had promised to Abraham, and which the true children of Abraham, as the crusaders were viewed to be, now claimed back with sword in hand.
St. Michael seems to have been very actively venerated in the early conversion period. He is mentioned on runestones from the eleventh century, side by side with the Holy Virgin Mary, and some of the earliest churches in Scandinavia were dedicated to him. In the Norwegian *Draumkvæde*, which is probably medieval in origin, he is called Michael of the Souls and described as coming from the South on his white horse and riding against the devil, blowing the trumpet of Doomsday.

The kind and benevolent archangel with the scale was certainly not the only possible way of understanding St. Michael in the Baltic area. Throughout the Middle Ages, he was also depicted as the dragon slayer. Sometimes he was in angelic garb, as on the twelfth-century granite relief from the church of Øster Starup in Denmark. Sometimes the archangel was in full international contemporary battle armor, as for example on a statue from the early sixteenth century in the church of Pernaja in Finland. This is a close parallel to a statue of St. Olav from very much the same period and area, from the church of Janakkala, also in Finland, but it represents a very common and widespread type. Occasionally, Michael was equipped with specifically Nordic weapons, as he was as a small figure on the outer wall of Hörnsne church on Gotland from around 1300. He holds a circular shield with his left hand and in his right has a battle mace, the *stridshammer*, “which is very common in the Nordic countries,” as noted in papal documents from the later Middle Ages. Overall, the depictions of St. Michael in Scandinavian medieval churches suggest that he was more often portrayed as a dragon slayer in the late Middle Ages than as a weigher of souls.

Another saint whose cult arrived in the Baltic region during the conversion period was the Spanish St. Vincent of Zaragoza, one of the martyrs of the early church. He had been grilled over fire, among other torments, and killed, in 304. His corpse was thrown out into the fields to be devoured by wild animals, but was protected by ravens, even though these birds normally feed on dead bodies. The cult of St. Vincent seems to have been relatively widespread in Scandinavia; one of the larger altars in the cathedral of Lund was consecrated to him in 1145, with the solemn deposition of relics of his. Vincent was venerated in the mid-eleventh century by the Danish king, Sven Estridsen, who took the saint’s relics with him on his war ship to ensure luck in battle against the Norwegian King Harald Hardrade. King Sven actually lost both the battle and the relic, so Vincent was not as effective as hoped for on this occasion.
did play an important role, however, in spreading Christianity in eastern Europe and in the countries along the Baltic shores.

Around 1170, Vincent joined the crusades on the Iberian Peninsula; his body sailed into the harbor of Lisbon, with no living person on board and guided only by a pair of ravens. He became probably the most popular of the Portuguese warrior saints, equaling even Santiago the Moorkiller from Compostela; moreover, “Vincent, Vincent” became the battle cry of the Portuguese crusaders. It is interesting to speculate whether a saint accompanied by ravens might have had a particular appeal for the Nordic warriors whose euphemism for “killing in battle” was “to feed the ravens.” In any case, the stories about Vincent and his support for religious wars in the South will certainly have been well known in the Baltic area throughout the Middle Ages. Vincent was mentioned in connection to the cathedral of Lund in the early twelfth century, and in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Vincent was depicted on the column next to St. Olav and St. Canute.

It may also have added to Vincent’s popularity in Scandinavia that, according to his legend, he was born in the Spanish town of Huesca just like St. Lawrence, who was the patron saint of the Ottonian religious expansion eastwards in the tenth century, and the patron saint of the missionary episcopal see of Lund. Just like Lawrence, Vincent had been tortured over burning coal. Both were frequently depicted with the grill in their hand, and both became connected to mission and warfare. They were sometimes depicted together, and churches were sometimes dedicated to them in common.33

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With the crusades to Jerusalem, new saints came to the Baltic area. Everywhere in western Europe, warriors heard the stories about how the first crusaders were attacked by Muslims while marching through Syria toward the Holy City, but suddenly got reinforcement from an army of dead crusaders riding out of heaven, led by St. George and St. Demetrios. These two saints had both been soldiers in the Roman army and had converted to Christianity, and for this they were both cruelly martyred in the very early fourth century. In the beginning, they were probably venerated for their witness and their suffering, but from the ninth century onwards, Byzantine emperors actively promoted the cult of St. George and St. Demetrios as warriors who fought actively together with the imperial armies to protect the emperor.34 There may actually well have been a
cult or at least a developed knowledge of the two saints around the Baltic shortly after this period, because of the region’s close connections to Kiev, where George and Demetrios were also venerated as warrior saints long before the crusades. It is difficult to tell because of lack of sources from Scandinavia, but, in any case, it seems certain that the cult of St. George there grew markedly after 1100. He became popular everywhere in western Europe, including Scandinavia. In the high and later Middle Ages, St. George became one of the most popular and common saints in mural paintings in Scandinavia, which is often explained by noting that he was the protector of the weak and of leprosy hospitals. He is, however, almost always depicted as a mighty warrior and a dragon slayer, as he was on a fresco from 1496 in Bellinge church near Odense in Denmark. St. George could be used directly in war propaganda, as he was in a monumental wooden tableau from Storkyrkan in Stockholm from 1489, often attributed to Bernt Notke. Here St. George symbolized the brave Swedes or probably Sten Sture himself, clad in shining gold on his dapple gray horse, protecting the maiden Sweden against being devoured by the Kalmar Union led by the Danes, represented by the horrible and defeated dragon under the hoofs of the horse. The figure was erected to commemorate the Swedish rebels’ victory in 1471 at Brunkeberg over the Danish King Christian I, who had attempted to conquer Stockholm. St. George was chosen for this monument instead of St. Eric to illustrate the divine favor toward the Swedish case, because St. George was the personal patron saint of the rebel leader, Sten Sture.

Another saint connected to crusades was actually the fourth-century St. Nicholas, who is often presented only as a peaceful healer and a helper of sailors. His cult came to western Europe following the turmoil in Byzantium shortly before the First Crusade, when his relics were moved from Myra in Asia Minor to Bari in Italy by industrious and belligerent Normans, which probably occurred in 1087. In Bari, Nicholas became the protector of crusaders on their way from southern Italy to the Holy Land, and since the twelfth or thirteenth century, he was well known for liberating Christians from Muslim prisons. He must also have been considered important for Scandinavian warriors and rulers. When the Danish king Eric went on a crusade to Jerusalem in 1103, he acquired important relics of Nicholas and sent these home to initiate a cult for the saint in Slangerup, the king’s own birthplace. Similar royally supported cults for St. Nicholas were established in Oslo and in Trondheim in Norway, probably associated with relics of the saint, brought from Byzantium by
the crusader King Sigurd Jorsalfar. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the cult of St. Nicholas spread along the Baltic coast, following step by step the armed mission through Pomerania and further eastwards, where a number of new churches in the missionary areas were dedicated to St. Nicholas. Just as was the case with St. George, St. Nicholas was a popular saint with the Teutonic Order, and the two followed the knights on their continuous crusades. In Tallinn in Estonia, a fine altarpiece from around 1480 shows St. Nicholas waiting for a ship. It is not solely a merchant ship because it is decorated with banners showing the black head of St. Mauritius and the altar was donated by the brotherhood of the Black Heads in Tallinn. They had as their patron saint Mauritius, another of the warrior saints of antiquity who became especially popular in the Baltic and whose veneration was connected to crusading.

Mauritius had been the black commander in the Roman imperial army of a legion of Christian soldiers from Egypt. When he refused to decimate the legion, he was executed in the late third century. Like St. Lawrence, St. Mauritius came to be connected with the tenth-century eastward expansion of the Ottonians, and he became the patron saint of the important missionary see of Magdeburg. In the eleventh century, it was believed in northern Europe that he had carried with him the holy lance that had been used to pierce the side of Christ. Mauritius was included early in the liturgy at the cathedral of Lund, and in the late twelfth century, the crusader king, Valdemar the Great of Denmark, issued coins showing the picture of Mauritius, imitating coinage from Magdeburg. In Livonia, Mauritius became the patron of the Black Heads, a guild of bachelors who traded, but also served as military contingents. The different merchants' guilds in Livonia had diverse saints as patrons, but “the ‘military’ ones had a very prominent position.” In the mid-fifteenth century, Mauritius’ picture was painted in the chapel of the Three Magi in Roskilde cathedral, which was the chapel of the most prominent knightly order in Scandinavia at the time, the Order of the Elephant.

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The list of warrior saints could certainly be extended, for example by looking more closely at the spread of the cult of St. James in the Baltic during the thirteenth andfourteenth centuries. Instead, it is interesting to speculate about how much was actually needed to make a saint into a religious warrior. An example would be the extremely popular fourth-century St. Martin of Tours. He was very well known in the north, and in
modern historical studies his life as a peaceful bishop has been much more emphasized than his career as soldier. However, he is normally depicted in the Middle Ages as a warrior on a big battle horse or as a nobleman with fine hat, a tendency that can also be seen in the widespread images of the saint from Scandinavian churches. During the Middle Ages, St. Martin’s home monastery became increasingly identified with the crusades. Marmoutier Abbey near Tours was founded by Martin after 371. In 732, Muslims had decided to raid and destroy the monastery, according to the French chronicles of St. Denis, but they were stopped by Charles Martel. This is what we know today as the decisive battle at Poitiers, but it was commonly believed in the Middle Ages to have taken place at Tours, which therefore became a place of particular symbolic importance for the preaching of the crusades. Pope Urban II continued to Tours after his sermon in Clermont and preached the First Crusade here in 1096, and Pope Calixtus II continued the tradition by preaching another crusade here in 1119. On a common European scale, Martin of Tours became very closely connected to the crusades in the twelfth century, and this must also have been known in the Baltic area.

The Angry Mother—Mary at War

Let us proceed to something much less speculative and for which we actually do have some evidence in medieval sources; that is for the Holy Virgin Mary as a kind of goddess of war. Not only did the veneration of the Virgin become even more widespread during the twelfth century than earlier, it also became deeper and more emotional. The figure of Mary as the caring mother became elaborated with very direct, concrete imagery. Commentaries to the Song of Songs described Mary’s breasts and the milk springing from them—the well of grace, Richard of St. Victor called them. In one miracle narrative, a crusade preacher ran out of inspiration—it could happen in the Middle Ages—but after having sucked the milk from the breast of Mary, he grew strong enough to resume the preaching against Muslims, and with much greater success than earlier. He became cardinal in Rome because of his eloquence.

Because of her all-absorbing maternal love, Mary could also be all-absorbing in her wrath and anger against those who fought against her Son. This may explain why during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, she also became perhaps the most popular saint for warriors fighting against infidels.
Mary was used as a unifying symbol during battle, depicted on icons carried in front of the troops, or more often on banners. This may be seen clearly in a number of manuscript illustrations from Spain, for example of the Cantigas de Santa Maria, but it was also a common way of using Mary around the Baltic both among common crusaders and among the Teutonic Knights whose order was dedicated to the Holy Virgin. Henry of Livonia relates how a siege of a pagan fortress ended: “The crusaders received hostages, entered the fortress, invited the pagans to accept baptism, sprinkled the whole fortress with consecrated water, and raised the banner of Mary on the top of it.”

The crusades occurred in a space that had the special attention of St. Mary. When Pope Innocent III as part of the preparations for the Fifth Crusade called back all indulgence except to the Holy Land, Bishop Albert of Riga in 1215 explained that Riga and Livonia were the land of Mary, the land of the Mother and therefore of no less importance than Palestine, the land of the Son. How he actually succeeded in persuading the pope and the cardinals that this frozen land on the Baltic shore had a special position in the eyes of St. Mary is hard to imagine, but it worked. Warriors could again go on crusade to Livonia and earn indulgence. This parallels what happened in other religious border areas—and had actually also happened before the First Crusade—namely that lands newly conquered from infidels were donated to St. Mary.

The queen of heaven from the Apocalypse is clad in the sun, with the moon under her feet, and with a crown of twelve stars. While the old dragon wipes a third of all the stars away with its tail, the queen gives birth to her son, who will govern all peoples with an iron scepter. The biblical images of Mary as the center of a cosmic war are strong and often illustrated in paintings, altarpieces, etc. The sun became the symbol of Mary, the “sun of justice,” as she was called in the liturgy used in Riga. The star became another of the common Mary-symbols and gave her, in the North, a singular relationship to the sea. Stella Marie so easily became Stella maris, the star of the sea, and this double expression was used in a number of songs in honor of the Virgin. Mary became the protector of the sea, which crusaders would cross to fight in the land of Mary, and Livonia could be called “The land on the other side of the sea,” the Outremer of the North, as Palestine was the Outremer of the Mediterranean.

St. Mary could be quite effective when necessary. Henry of Livonia relates how the Danish king in 1221 had demanded Riga’s capitulation, but his governor had to leave the city without any result, and
he left for the open sea, but without any steersman he was cast hither and thither. Because he came to Livonia against the will of God, the winds rose against him, for good reasons, and the sun of justice did not shine over him. He failed to respect Mary who is called the star of the sea, and therefore she did not show him a safe route for his journey. So, the queen of the world and the empress of all lands will always protect her own land. Was she not in command, when many kings attacked Livonia? Did she not let King Vladimir of Polotsk die a sudden death? Did she not deprive the great king of Novgorod of his kingdom, when he attacked Livonia, so his own people rebelled against him? And the other king of Novgorod, she killed by help of the Mongols.55

Henry continues at length, and concludes:

see, how sweet the mother of God is towards her own and how she always defends her own against enemies, and see how cruel she is against those who invade her land, or those who strive to hinder the belief and the cult for her Son. See how many kings she has haunted. See, how many heretic and pagan princes she has exterminated from earth.

This double aspect of Mary is actually neatly summarized already in the Song of Songs where it is said:

Thou art beautiful, O my love, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners, Turn thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me.

These verses were used in the liturgy for the feast of the Assumption of St. Mary, on August 15, which became a popular day for crowning young kings before they went on crusade. On that day, the crusaders had conquered Fellinn in Estonia in 1223, and therefore they chose the next year to attack Tartu on exactly the same day.56

St. Mary was a double-faced figure, at least seen from a modern perspective. She is loving and caring, and she is also the violent woman who destroys the enemies of Christ without any mercy. The latter aspect of her functioning in the Middle Ages is very seldom included in the modern Scandinavian descriptions of her.

Saints in the Middle Ages combined tenderness and caring with military brutality. This is an old phenomenon, but it became more pronounced with the crusading period from ca. 1100 onwards. Saints’ lives
were rewritten in order to turn the saints into crusaders, new royal saints were canonized precisely because of their engagement in crusading, and some of the saints became patrons of the new knightly orders, which were in themselves a novelty in Western Christianity. The combination of living a monastic life and systematic killing is another example of the spiritualization of warfare characteristic of the crusades and of the warrior saints.

Both from iconography and from written sources, it is clear that saints were depicted as warriors, and that they were involved in actual warfare in the countries around the Baltic. Much, however, is still unclear and conjectural when it concerns saints and warfare, especially in the North, because of the paucity of sources. We still have too little knowledge about how saints were used on the battlefield. Were their names used as battle cry in the North as they were in southern Europe? Were they depicted on standards and flags and carried in front of the army in the North as they were in the South? We know from a few sources that their relics could be carried with the army, as King Sven Estridsen did with St. Vincent, but we do not know how they were actually used. Were they carried in procession before the battle began, were they strategically placed to protect the main contingent of soldiers, the main ship, the main siege tower? And what happened after victory? How common was it to dedicate the new churches in missionary areas to a saint who had helped in conquering the land?

A main problem of interpretation is the ambiguity of medieval religious expressions—should a fight be fought physically or spiritually, or both? The answer is that it depended upon the listener, and differed from person to person and from time to time. It is well attested that, for example, during the eleventh century, the spiritual understanding of the military language of the Bible and church fathers was supplemented by an interpretation that allowed direct use of physical force, and even praised it if it was in the service of the church. We must assume then, that military expressions in, for example, Scandinavian saints’ lives could be understood, by some of the listeners, as a license to war, and as a promise that the saint would participate and help.
NOTES

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1 This is the tone in a great number of general histories of Scandinavian countries from the twelfth century. This attitude is much less pronounced in some recent publications on saints, e.g., Anu Mänd, “Saints’ Cults in Medieval Livonia,” in The Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic Frontier, ed. Alan V. Murray (Farnham, 2009), pp. 191–223; and Haki Antonsson and Ildar H. Garipzanov, eds., Saints and their Lives on the Periphery. Veneration of Saints in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe (c. 1000–1200) (Turnhout, 2010).

2 The classical study is still F. H. Russell, The Just War in the Middle Ages (Cambridge 1975).


5 For Canute Lavard, see Vitae sanctorum danorum, ed. M. C. Gertz (Copenhagen, 1908–1912), p. 242–45; Santiago Liber Sancti Jacobi, Codex Calixtinus, ed. Walter Muir Whitehill (2 vols., Santiago de Compostela, 1944), 1:261, 273, 275. See Anthony Lappin, The Medieval Cult of Saint Dominic of Silos (London, 2002), pp. 171–95 for how Dominic was initially invoked for the release of prisoners; however, that aspect of the saint ceased to be of interest after the religious boundary between the Christian and Muslim kingdoms moved far south of Silos.

6 The Cistercian monastery of Dargun in the crusading area of Mecklenburg was founded in 1172 on the day of translation of St. Canute Lavard, and must have had some of his relics; Danmarks middelalderlige annaler, ed. Erik Kroman (Copenhagen, 1980), p. 128. Another example is the many relics of the Holy Cross that were brought from the Holy Land to religious border areas in western Europe. See Nikolas Jaspert, “Vergegenwärtigungen Jerusalems in Architektur und Reliquienkult,” in Jerusalem im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter: Konflikte und Konfliktbewältigung—Verstellungen und Vergegenwärtigungen, ed. Dieter Bauer, Klaus Herbers, Nikolas Jaspert (Frankfurt, 2001), pp. 219–70.

7 On royal saints in general, see Erich Hoffmann, Die heiligen Könige bei den Angelsachsen und den skandinavischen Völkern (Neumünster, 1975); Gabor Klaniczay, Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses. Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe (Cambridge, 2002).

8 John Bergsagel, ed., The Offices and Masses of St. Knud Lavard (+ 1131), (Kiel, Univ. Lib. MS S.H: 8 A. 8’) (Copenhagen, 2010), 2, p. 2.

9 Bergsagel, The Offices and Masses, p. 16.

11 Diplomatarium Danicum, ed. Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab (Copenhagen, 1938–) (Henceforth DD), I:2 no. 189: “rex, celesti flamine inspiratus et armis Christi munitus, scuto fi dei armatus considerans, diuino munere protectus, cum brachio forti et extento ... ad fidem et legem Christi tam potente rac valide magnanimiterque reuocauit ...”

12 DD I:2 no. 190.


17 Adam of Bremen, Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum, ed. J.M. Lappenberg, Hannover 1876: 2.26: “At ille noster Haroldus, qui populo Danorum christianitatem primus indixit, qui totum septentrionem ecclesiis et praedicatoribus replevit, ille, inquam, innocens vulneratus et pro Christo expulsus, martyrii palma, ut spero, non carebit.”


29 Knut Liestøl, Draumkvæde. A Norwegian visionary Poem from the Middle Ages (Oslo, 1946).


In general, see Jan Svanberg, *Saint George of Sweden and Finland* (Stockholm, 1998).

Following the interpretation of Jan Svanberg and A. Qwarnström, *Sankt Göran och draken* (Stockholm, 1993), pp. 58–63, and Jan Svanberg, *S:t Göransgruppen i Konsten* (Stockholm, 1996), pp. 27–30. In an interesting article, Jan von Bonsdorff has argued that the interpretation of the monument as symbolising the wars between Danes and Swedes is a late, nationalistic projection; in Jan von Bonsdorff, “The Inertia of the Canon: Nationalist Projections onto the Works of Hans Grüggemann and Bernt Notke,” in *Renaissance Theory*, ed. James Elkins and Robert Williams (London, 2008), pp. 278–86 and pp. 455–56. If we accept this interpretation, the monument is not a direct means of political propaganda, but it still illustrates how important saints were in warfare.


Mänd, “Saints’ Cults,” pp. 204–5. The patron saint of Reval/Tallinn was St. Victor, another warrior saint who was very popular also with the different guilds in Estonia; ibid. pp. 203–4.


50 For Virgin Mary as supporter in battles in the Baltic area, see also Mänd, “Saints’ Cults,” pp. 194–99.

51 Henrici Chronicon Livoniae, ed. Leonid Arbusow et Albertus Bauer, (Hannover, 1955), (hereafter HCL), XI, 6; XII, 3; XVI, 4.

52 HCL XIX, 7.

53 HCL XXV, 2.

54 Terra transmarina, HCL XV, 4.

55 HCL XXV, 2.

56 HCL XXVIII, 4.