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

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SAINTS WERE, FOR MEDIEVAL Christians, the tangible element in a religion mostly defined by abstract theological ideas. They were men and women who had been excellent in their lives or through their deaths and who, at the moment of death, went immediately to live with God (a reward normal humans could reach, at best, at the Last Judgment). Saints were still present in their bodies on earth and could, due to their double character as "living dead," act as intermediaries between humans and God. Due to the holy power, virtus, given to them by God, they were believed to be able to interfere in human lives by punishing or rewarding, causing or circumventing damage, helping or hindering in battle, and so on. Saints had their places in the mass and in specific liturgies; they were carried out of the church into the streets of towns in processions, were represented in plays, and also appeared outside of the sacred space in images on all sorts of media. We (modern Europeans) may today still celebrate the feast of St. Martin or St. Nicholas and know something of the background of the night of St. Walburga or the fire of St. John, but mostly as rituals and legends out of context and separate from our secular lives. For medieval people, the saints’ calendar determined the whole year; the legends of saints were part of the oral tradition that was passed on from generation to generation, and celebrating their ceremonies was a crucial part of personal, social, and political life.

While modern Europeans usually do not care much, among European medievalists scholarly interest in saints and sanctity increased considerably at the beginning of the twenty-first century, probably not least because we have come to be interested again in entanglements of the secular and sacred arising in our societies from phenomena such as global migration. Although we always knew that religion was an inseparable
part of human life in the Middle Ages, we have rarely considered religious factors—saints and sanctity, visions and prophecy, rules and directions drawn from reading the Bible, and so on—truly central for political decisions. It seems to be difficult for a modern enlightened person to accept that any kind of more or less “superstitious” belief could really have been taken seriously by the men and women in charge of historically important actions. At best, we tend to classify those beliefs as mere symbolic communication, thereby often recasting the problem by understanding symbolic communication as only a kind of expression layered over the real facts that made politics happen, a kind of “opiate of the people” that rulers implemented but did not themselves believe in. We may not consider that any symbol can only have an effect once there is real meaning and real belief behind it and the symbol itself becomes an inseparable part of action.

When saints are reported to have helped in battles, for example, we, as believers in the laws of nature, tend to attribute that to the psychological impact on the armies, be it the ones being helped or the ones who see a strong force against them. Rulers, with a fine sense for psychological warfare, allegedly supported these superstitions in order to mislead people with less insight. Speaking ironically, it must have been really important for rulers to convince their foolish followers, if we think, for example, of the enormous sum of money the French king, Louis IX, was ready to pay for the crown of thorns that he planned to use to emphasize his own vocation as a king in the biblical tradition with holy legitimization in which he himself supposedly did not even believe. Saints and sanctity did not just supplement hard politics; they were a determining factor in it. Thus, dealing with saints and their multiple presences in medieval reality is not only an important part in understanding any facet of the Middle Ages—the Middle Ages cannot be understood without them.

Consequently, this collection of articles, *Saints around the Baltic*, addresses an important general topic of cultural-political history: the expansion of Christianity into the regions around the Baltic Sea during the Middle Ages (from the point of view of modern cultural memory completing Europe, at least as a virtual entity). The comparative approach brings together regions touched by, and even more included in, “Christianity” at very different times and by very different Christianities. This not only means “Latin”/“Roman”/“Catholic” or “Orthodox”/“Russian”/“Greek”—a topic that has been researched frequently of late, but takes into consideration how much “Christendom” itself developed throughout its history. The collection’s main emphasis
is cultural change following the introduction of new ideas, features, and people. And since transfer and transformation are, as in modern world historical approaches, considered a two-way street, this introduction resulted in change in the newly Christianized regions and also change among the adjacent Christian culture(s), which themselves changed considerably between Carolingian times and the later Middle Ages—a topic that should be elaborated much more in future studies.

How can saints, their emergence, transfer, and change help us to learn more about emerging and changing cultures? Clearly a history of Christianization must incorporate saints—but are saints one of the crucial indicators for cultural and even political developments and change? As the tangible element of Christian religion, saints were also local and therefore part of the neighborhood, so to speak, first and foremost bound to their places of death and burial, to memories of martyrdom and conversion. Through body relics, cults, and legends they were actual as well as symbolic centers of Christian communities. They were (and are for historians) among the most tangible nuclei of local, regional, and even “national” identity.5

While saints were in principle bound to their graves, at the same time they proved to be adaptable to new groups and functions and quite mobile early in Christian history. Their relics could be taken anywhere: saints could be imported and adapted, their cults transformed, their legends translated (literally and culturally). Consequently, many saints were venerated in more than one place: Mary, the Mother of God, owns many churches and serves many peoples and social groups as their preferred person of identification,6 and this volume is full of other examples of saints who traveled great distances. Christianity around the Baltic, as elsewhere, knew patrons of towns,7 dioceses, or even whole realms as well as the people of these entities, and it knew patrons of specific functional groups (such as guilds, a feature evident in several articles in this volume) or for specific troubled situations. Not least through the possibility of the multiplication and transfer of relics that developed after the fourth century, saints acquired the ability to be present in many places. Saints could travel and multiply their places of impact and thus build bridges between places; they could create peace and trust; they could bind societies together more or less seamlessly and create new communities. At the same time, they could separate, cause competition, and become manifestations of boundaries and hostilities even up to open war between groups, different saints against each other, or the same saint in different places. Identities defined
by saints could strengthen the group from within or clash with outsiders. Settlers brought their favorite saints with them, merchants brought saints back home, new rulers could exchange saints—foreign missionaries could become, as martyrs buried in their place of destiny, local saints for the newly baptized, and also back home. Thus, saints were one of the most important media of symbolic communication, an idea addressed systematically in this volume that has also lately been considered elsewhere; they could work as argument or statement, as metaphors and as representations of ideas and communities (cf. Jürgensen).

The articles assembled in this book—where heterogeneity is a clear asset—are addressing questions noted above more or less intensively, and the multidisciplinary choice of authors support a variety of foci. They are specifically comparing different neighboring regions, and are looking at specific, or sometimes generic, “international” saints, local but also trans-regional aspects and also features of community and social position. Moreover, they pose methodological questions, such as the type of sources and materiality: How does a saint become a saint and how do they have an impact? The focus on change provides a special emphasis on the recognition of saints (and their official, canonical acceptance or the lack thereof), the replacement of saints, the reactivation of saints, and the presence or absence of specific saints at specific times.

From a cultural-historical point of view on saints, quite a few important questions can be traced in the examples the articles bring into focus here, while others remain open more or less explicitly. The collection does not offer a complete synthesized image since the articles do not follow a standardized catalogue of questions—but the variety of approaches (resulting from the source material as well as the different disciplines of the authors) creates a broad panorama of important questions and procedures. The variety of sources is impressive (also the explication of absence or sketchiness in certain cases), although it seems impossible to reach any general conclusion about the saints of the wider region because the source base differs so much from place to place.

Modern approaches may reduce this corpus of sources even more. Sometimes saints have only been made by modern historians creating cultural memory, as Dorothea of Montau (cf. Heß) was created or at least considerably inflated by historians looking for “Deutschum” in the East. This case teaches us that we should carefully assess our own research questions: What does it tell us about our own approach if today we prefer looking for transregional (“international”), peacefully exchanged, saints...
instead of national saints that define clear borders between medieval realms or the “national” groups within them?

This basic “Standortgebundenheit” of any historian, bound to his own position, as R. Koselleck calls it, also leads to one of the clear strengths of the collection: Its “Romferne,” the distance from the papacy as the one defining power (an issue Järvinen broaches as a problem of source tradition). While we may explain this with an intrinsic “Romferne” of scholars mostly from Protestant countries, one of the most interesting results in several articles is the returning interest in “saints in the making” (cf. Lind, Selch Jensen, Sands), specifically if they did not achieve canonization on either an official (papal) level or even locally in the long run. Some of these saints have proved to be successful in cults, others seem to have disappeared again (Bisgaard)—especially if they were functionally relatively restricted like Saint–Duke Canute Lavard (Petersen)—but could also be revived, demonstrating the strong option of oral, unofficial, possibly even counterofficial memory. Furthermore, some historians have turned their attention to a kind of self-Christianization or at least the arrival of Christianity long before a region was “officially” Christianized (cf. Lind, Mänd); before we can find any missionaries, merchants seem to have brought home the Christian God and his saints.

Among the saints in the making are some we may rightly call crusader saints, which leads us to another interesting field frequently discussed lately: although crusade appeals seem to have promised that those who were fighting in the right spirit and died in the holy battle would become martyrs, we have astonishingly scarce traces of actual crusader saints, let alone officially canonized ones—probably because the crusade needed victors, not martyrs. In Livonia, however, there seem to have been attempts to create saints in the contexts of crusades (Selch Jensen), while similarly, around 1240, probably in Bremen and thus close to the Baltic region, the Franciscan Alexander Minorita explicitly criticized the Church for its shortcomings in accepting crusade martyrs.

The articles speak relatively little about imported saints and do not at all ask the question of a possible transport and transformation of the saints back to and in the places where the missionaries had come from, except for the fact that some saints spread—like St. Olaf—to Constantinople and elsewhere. Olav (who became probably the most generic saint in the North, reaching the southern coasts of the North and Baltic Seas) is also the best example of the opportunity to step analytically
from local saints to “transnational” or maybe even generic saints, since he spread from Scandinavia to Livonia and then even further.

Along these lines, the volume is relatively compact on questions of Nordic saints. Several examples interlock very well and leave the first-glance impression that the question of identity in these regions concentrates on only a few saints, but deeper consideration of the volume does not give such an easy answer. The comparative approach reaches beyond regional borders and collects interesting observations that open horizons for further comparative research questions.

- Specifically, it seems urgent to have a closer look at St. Lawrence of Rome, who appeared quite prominently in Lund and Uppsala, and at the same time was an important saint in Saxony after Otto the Great’s victory against the Hungarians on the Lechfeld on the day of St. Laurence (August 10, 955).

- St. Mary Magdalene is another important battle saint south of the Baltic Sea who was established as a helper of the burgers of Lübeck against Danish rule and whose presence (as a biblical and thus very generic saint) can also be traced to Scandinavia.

- Starting from Mary Magdalene, it would also be interesting to proceed to a broader comparison of the saints north, west, and east of the Baltic with the saints of the German Hanse and Poland (although the kingdom only briefly reached the Baltic coast).

- Mary as a possible patron saint of countries has been touched on, but would justify further research. Other saints that could have been expected are lacking or appear only marginally, probably due mostly to the different foci of the articles: Peter, very present in the Slavic lands south of the Baltic Sea; Nicholas, saint of merchants and also of knights further south (who appears among the “saints at war,” cf. Villads Jensen); Catherine of Alexandria, who often appears among (German) urban elites; and James the Elder, an important patron of the pilgrimage to Santiago. Are there more universal saints creating regional and even local identities in the South (in Saxony as a land without saints) than in the North?

This is a rich collection, which results in more questions than it answers, one of the best things that can be said about a publication.
NOTES

1 Dieter R. Bauer, Klaus Herbers, Hedwig Röckelein and Felicitas Schmieder, eds., *Heilige—Liturgie—Raum*, Beiträge zur Hagiographie 8 (Stuttgart, 2010).


4 To quote only a recent study, again from a decidedly archaeological perspective, touching on many issues in topics about the saints: Maciej Salamon, Marcin Woloszyn, Alexander Musin and Perica Špehar, eds., *Rome, Constantinople and Newly-Converted Europe. Archaeological and Historical Evidence* (Krakow, Leipzig, Rzeszów, Warsaw, 2012).


8 A topic that has been addressed frequently lately, see the very recent Constance Brittain Bouchard, *Rewriting Saints and Ancestors. Memory and Forgetting in France (500–1200)* (Philadelphia, 2015).

