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The Beginnings of, and the Legal Basis for, the Formation of Knighthood in the Danish Principality of Estonia (13th–14th Centuries)

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Abstract

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In 1219, northern Estonia unwittingly became the site of an extraordinary social experiment. Thanks to a victorious battle fought on 15 June 1219 by Danish King Valdemar II during the Crusades near the future city of Reval against pagan inhabitants, an immediate Christianization campaign ensued, beginning with the recording of all existing settlements. Granting of the first vassal fiefs was initiated, which can be determined according to an annex to the so-called *Liber Census Daniæ* from around 1241. Royal North-Estonian vassals had formed a corporation called “universitas vasallorum per Estoniam constituta” in 1259, which constituted the power elite in the Duchy of Estonia after the sale of Estonia to the Teutonic Order in 1346. Estonian vassal fiefs were recognized by the Teutonic Knights as hereditary in 1397, yet vassals of the Livonian bishops received similar privileges only over 100 years later.

It is rare in historiography to encounter a situation where certain phenomena and historical changes can be observed almost from the moment of their occurrence, as typically—especially in the case of social transformations—these are long processes that develop gradually, and their beginnings are ambiguous and difficult to identify precisely in available source material. The present paper deals with such a specific confluence of events in the realm of colonial conquests, as well as medieval Livonia, which was incorporated into the circle of Latin Christian civilization from the 1180s. Even more spectacular is the situation of its northern part, namely Estonia, where the beginning of the Christian era and the associated institutions of state and feudal society can be pinpointed almost to the day.¹

¹ For basic works on the course of the Christianization of Livonia, see: ARBUSOW, Leonid. *Grundriß der Geschichte Liv-, Est- und Kurlands*. Riga : Jonck und Poliewski-Verlag, 1918; JOHANSEN, Paul. *Nordische Mission, Revels Gründung und die Schwedensiedlung in Estland*. Stockholm; Wahlstroem/Widstrand : Kungliga Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens Handlingar, 1951; BENNINGHOVEN, Friedrich. *Der Orden der Schwertbrüder. Fratres Militiæ Christi de Livonia*. Köln; Böhlau : Ostmitteleuropa in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart, 1965; CHRISTIANSEN, Eric. *The Northern Crusades and the Catholic Frontier 1100–1525*. London : Macmillan, 1980; NYBERG, Tore. *Deutsche, dänische und schwedische Christianisierungsversuche östlich der Ostsee im Geiste des 2. und 3. Kreuzzuges*. In NOWAK, Hubert Zenon (ed.) *Die Rolle der Ritterorden in der Christianisierung und Kolonisierung des Ostseegebiets*. Toruń : Wydawnictwo UMK, 1983, pp. 93–114; MACCARRONE,

This watershed moment occurred in the spring of 1219² when a Danish fleet landed on the southern coast of the Gulf of Finland near the future town of Reval (present-day Tallinn). The fleet brought an international army of crusaders and vassals of the Danish king, including the Slavic prince of Rügen, Wizlaw I. Leading the expedition were King Waldemar II and Archbishop Andreas Sunesen of Lund, accompanied by three bishops, including the Estonian hierarch Theodoric,³ who was to foot in the territory of his diocese for the first time. On 15 June 1219, a decisive battle took place against the Estonian natives in which the Christians emerged victorious despite an initial advantage held by the indigenous people who had exploited the element of surprise against the unsuspecting crusader forces.⁴

Some time within the following few months, most likely before the king's return to Denmark, a mass baptism campaign was launched targeting the indigenous population. The program was carried out by at least a dozen missionaries and was accompanied by a record of the most important settlements encountered along their path.⁵ It is likely that during this time, the first feudal grants were also made to royal vassals, although no deeds confirming such legal actions have survived from this period, much like the entire 13th century.

The successful crusade to Estonia can be considered the culmination of the political accomplishments of the Danish monarchy, which at that time also held control over most of the North German lands located along the southern coasts of the Baltic Sea (Nordalbingia with Schleswig and Holstein, Mecklenburg, West Pomerania), including Lübeck. This allowed for the control and potential blockade of the crusade movement to Livonia. However, their favourable streak

Michele (ed.) *Gli inizi del cristianesimo in Livonia-Lettonia. Atti del colloquio internazionale di storia ecclesiastica in occasione dell'VIII centenario della chiesa in Livonia (1186–1986)*, Roma, 24–25 Giugno 1986. Città del Vaticano : Libreria editrice Vaticana, 1989; HELLMANN, Manfred (ed.) *Studien über die Anfänge der Mission in Livland*. Sigmaringen; Thorbecke : Vorträge und Forschungen, Sonderband, 1989; MÜHLEN VON ZUR, Heinz. *Livland von der Christianisierung bis zum Ende seiner Selbstständigkeit (etwa 1180–1561)*. In PISTOHKORS VON, Gert (ed.) *Baltische Länder*. Berlin : Siedler Verlag, 1994, pp. 26–172; MURRAY, Allan Victor (ed.) *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier (1150–1500)*. Aldershot; Burlington USA; Singapore; Sydney : Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001; FONNESBERG-SCHMIDT, Iben. *The Popes and the Baltic Crusades 1147–1254*. Leiden : Brill, 2006; BOMBI, Barbara. *Novella plantatio fidei. Missione e crociata nel Nord Europa tra la fine del XII e i primi decenni del XIII secolo*. Roma : Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 2007; MURRAY, Allan Victor (ed.) *The Clash of Cultures on the Medieval Baltic Frontier*. Farnham : Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009; TAMM, Marek – KALJUNDI, Linda – JENSEN, Carsten Selch (eds.) *Crusading and Chronicle Writing on the Medieval Baltic Frontier. A Companion to the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*. Farnham : Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011; SKYUM-NIELSEN, Niels. *Estonia under Danish Rule*. In MURRAY, Allan Victor (ed.) *The North-Eastern Frontiers of Medieval Europe. The Expansion of Latin Christendom in the Baltic Lands (The Expansion of Latin Europe, 1000–1500, volume 4)*. New York : Routledge, 2016, pp. 203–226.

2 The sailing season on the Baltic Sea traditionally began after Easter, which in 1219 fell on 7 April. So it was the *terminus post quem* for the departure of the sea expedition.

3 NIELSEN, K. Torben. *The Missionary Man: Archbishop Anders Sunesen and the Baltic Crusade, 1206–21*. In MURRAY 2001, p. 114; BENNINGHOVEN 1965, pp. 156–158.

4 *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*. *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex Monumentis Germaniae Historicis separatim editi* 31. Edited by Leonid Arbusow and Albert Bauer. Hannover : Hahn, 1955, p. 154, cap. 23. 2; REBANE, Peter. *Denmark, the Papacy and the Christianization of Estonia*. In MACCARRONE 1989, p. 196; MÜHLEN VON ZUR 1994, pp. 50–53; FONNESBERG-SCHMIDT 2006, pp. 143–144; CHRISTIANSEN 1980, pp. 156–157; BENNINGHOVEN 1965, pp. 156–157.

5 JOHANSEN, Paul. *Die Estlandliste des Liber Census Daniae 1*. Kopenhagen; Reval : Hagerup H./Wassermann. F., 1933, p. 50; NIELSEN 2001, pp. 95, 114.

unexpectedly came to an end in May 1223 when King Waldemar along with his eldest son was imprisoned on the islet of Lyø by his vassal, Count Henry of Schwerin, during a hunting expedition.⁶ He remained in captivity for almost two and a half years, during which time his international dominion began to crumble. Its ultimate demise occurred after an unsuccessful attempt to regain the North German territories, culminating in Denmark's defeat in the Battle of Bornhöved on 22 July 1227.⁷

Around the same time, the Order of the Sword Brothers managed to gain control over Danish possessions in northern Estonia for over a decade. However, Waldemar succeeded in reclaiming a significant portion of the overseas colony due to the fortunate—from the Danish perspective—defeat of the Sword Brothers by pagan Lithuanians in 1236 and the signing of the Stensby Peace Treaty with the Teutonic Order, the legal successor of the Sword Brothers, in 1238. As a result, two out of the three northern Estonian provinces, Harju and Viru, were returned to Denmark.⁸ This marked the beginning of Danish rule in northern Estonia which lasted until 1346, only interrupted briefly in 1343 by a major pagan uprising by the indigenous population and the subsequent sale of the duchy to the Teutonic Order three years later.⁹ Until that point, the knighthood in the Danish provinces of Harju and Viru had managed to attain and solidify a politically dominant position in the political and social landscape of Estonia.¹⁰ This is evident when comparing their privileges, especially the matter of hereditary fiefs, with the situation of the knighthood in the neighbouring bishoprics of Livonia (Dorpat, Ösel, Courland, Riga) and those territories under the control of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order.¹¹

Let us go back to the early 13th century beginnings. The turbulent early years of the Christian era in northern Estonia undoubtedly had a significant impact on the development and composition of the local knightly class. After the initial feudal grants by the Danish king before 1223, two subsequent phases followed (1226–1236), during which the lands were distributed successively by the papal vice-legate Johannes, the Order of the Sword Brothers, and the papal legate Baldwin von Alna.¹² Such phases may have been related to the expulsion and deprivation of fiefs from the previous vassals of the Danish king. The restoration of Danish sovereignty in 1238 once again brought changes to the composition of the royal vassals and finalized the formation of this social class, which became the basis of the royal power elite in the Duchy of Estonia.¹³

Thanks to preservation of the so-called Estonian list in the Danish tax records (*Estlandliste des liber census Daniae*),¹⁴ certain observations can be made

6 NIELSEN 2001, p. 115; BENNINGHOVEN 1965, p. 180.

7 ARBUSOW 1918, p. 35.

8 ARBUSOW 1918, p. 31; BENNINGHOVEN 1965, p. 364; CHRISTIANSEN 1980, p. 145.

9 ARBUSOW 1918, pp. 63–64.

10 ARBUSOW 1918, pp. 65–66.

11 GERNET VON, Axel. *Forschungen zur Geschichte des baltischen Adels vol. 1 (Die Harrisch-Wirische Ritterschaft unter der Herrschaft des Deutschen Ordens bis zum Erwerb der Jungingenschen Gnade)*. Reval : Franz Kluge-Verlag, 1893, pp. 85–86.

12 JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 69–72.

13 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 697.

14 It was first published as a supplement to the so-called *Liber Census Daniae tempore Regum Waldemarii II et Christophori confectus*, see *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum Medii Aevi*, vol. 7. Edited by Jacobus Langebek and Petrus Fridericus Suhm. Havniae : Nicolaus Möller, 1792, pp. 507–625

regarding the personnel of the knightly class in the early period after the restoration of Danish rule in northern Estonia in 1238. The main portion of the list—covering the historical provinces of Denmark proper—was recorded in 1231, while the addendum—encompassing the northern Estonian provinces—was likely created in 1241, possibly commissioned by the bishop of the newly established diocese of Reval, a suffragan of the Archdiocese of Lund.¹⁵ This register documents the parishes existing at that time within the Danish territory and the settlements within their areas, and provides their sizes measured in Haken¹⁶ as well as the names of vassals who held them in feudal possession. Unfortunately, the use of this register for research on the northern Estonian knighthood is hindered by the fact that in most cases, the surnames of the vassals are not given. Names are sometimes preceded by the word *dominus* (probably referring to the most distinguished individuals). This complicates and sometimes even prevents definite cross-referencing with figures known from other sources. On the other hand, the presence of annotations such as *expellere* or *removere* suggests that violent changes of ownership had previously taken place. Notes such as *non a rege, sine rege, absque rege*, and even *tenet [...] iniuste*¹⁷ appearing next to other names may indicate an uncertain legal basis for the feudal title held by these individuals to specific properties. Such remarks are present in over 90 entries. Since it is estimated that the total number of legitimate vassals in Harju and Viru listed in the *Liber Census Daniae* (hereinafter referred to as LCD) was around 130 individuals,¹⁸ it is clear that the changes recorded significantly reshaped this class.

The LCD records established a pattern that remained characteristic of Estonia in later centuries. The eastern province of Viru became the domain of large-scale fiefdoms, while the western part of the Danish territory, i.e., Harju, was dominated by smaller fiefs, which resulted in a numerical advantage of Harju vassals over Viru vassals.¹⁹ This indicates that from the beginning, the knightly class was a highly heterogeneous group in terms of wealth. In the LCD, 15 individuals belonged to the group of large vassals, with estates ranging from 60 to 400 Haken, 36 individuals maintained fiefs ranging from 30 to 59 Haken and the remaining 78 individuals held small fiefs of less than 10 Haken.²⁰

(543–553, 621–625). It was published *Aelteste Ehtsländische Landrolle. Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch nebst Regesten, vol. 1 (1093–1300)*. Edited by Georg Friedrich von Bunge. Reval : Kluge und Ströhm-Verlag, 1853, pp. 811–818. German translation *Adels- und Gütergeschichte Est- und Livlands in Uebersetzungen und Auszügen, vol. 1 (Dänische und Ordenszeit)*. Translated and edited by Georg Friedrich von Bunge and Robert von Toll. Reval : Kluge und Stroem, 1856, pp. 1–8, no. 1.

15 JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 115–116.

16 Hake(n) is the name of a traditional, pre-Christian unit of land measurement used to calculate the amount of dues (tributes) and/or military obligations (in medieval sources, Latin names like *uncus* and *mansus* were used). It represented an area that could be plowed in one day using a single plow with a full team; a horse plus oxen. Its size is estimated to be between 0.33 and 1.07 hectares. JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 227–228; BUNGE VON, Friedrich Georg, *Das Herzogthum Estlands unter den Königen von Dänemark*. Gotha : F. A. Perthes, 1877, pp. 211–214.

17 JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 118–119.

18 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 680. The exact number cannot be given, because often vassals are referred to only by name, i.e. in the case of frequent occurrence of people with the same name, it is impossible to tell whether it is one person or many.

19 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 682.

20 JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 680–682.

Using only personal names—a fallible but the only available criterion in this case—it can be noted that most vassals had names suggesting a German ethnic affiliation, although it cannot be ruled out that there were also Danes among them. However, considering that German quickly began to dominate in Estonia as the language of sources, it is not incorrect to state that the majority of their owners should be considered Germans. Most, if not all, likely originated from the northern regions of Germany, primarily from the border provinces of Schleswig and Holstein,²¹ which had long been under Danish influence, as well as from Westphalia.²² It is estimated that around 80% of all fiefs belonged to vassals of German origin, around 18% to Danes and only 2% to vassals of Estonian origin.²³

This last figure shows that the local population was almost entirely excluded from significant participation in the new power elite, which was likely due to the widespread reluctance of the previous tribal leaders to enter into agreements and ally themselves with newcomers who imposed a new faith and burdens such as tithes. On the other hand, it may also echo a lack of trust in the indigenous people who, from the moment Danish crusaders arrived in the vicinity of the future Reval, were perceived as—from the Christian perspective—faithless; unwilling to accept the new faith, but prone to rebellion and conspiring with the Rus' from Novgorod, who were considered schismatics.

Only 10 individuals on the Estonian list in the LCD can be regarded as locals. Based on the nicknames, which clearly indicate ethnic affiliation, Clemens Esto,²⁴ Herman Osilianus²⁵ and Albert de Osilia²⁶ were likely indigenous.²⁷ Johannes Lator Piscium²⁸ and Henricus Lapidica²⁹ may have also been locals because their surnames (fish carrier, stonemason) are associated with occupations and suggest individuals of low status, unless the entire are derogatory in nature. Two individuals, Peter³⁰ and Werner,³¹ bestowed with the surname *Tolk*—commonly used in reference to interpreters—seem to have been accepted among the royal vassals in exchange for services rendered to the new territorial rulers, which they may have provided personally due to the knowledge of some Germanic dialect.

Throughout the register, there are only three names that can be considered Estonian: *Asæ-Leus* who owned 13 *Haken* of land,³² *Uillelemp* with five

21 BUNGE VON 1877, pp. 92–93.

22 GERNET VON 1893, p. 4.

23 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 682; SKYUM-NIELSEN 2016, p. 209.

24 According to Johansen, the small vassal families of *Like*, *Guldene* and *Watzel* may have descended from him. JOHANSEN 1933, p. 746.

25 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 546.

26 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 547.

27 Their surnames are derived from the Latin name of the largest Estonian island in the Baltic Sea, referred to as “*Eysysla*” in Scandinavian sources and “*Ösel*” in German ones. Its modern Estonian name is “*Saaremaa*.” It can be presumed that these surnames were associated with people originating from or residing on the island, thus the conclusion that they were indigenous.

28 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 547.

29 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 552.

30 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 544.

31 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 549.

32 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 544.

Haken,³³ and Hildælempæ,³⁴ who possessed 14 Haken of land in two villages.³⁵ However, it appears that their lineages quickly underwent Germanization as the son of one of them already bore the Christian name Johannes. Moreover in 1277, he sold his estates to the Cistercians from the Dünamünde monastery.³⁶ It seems that only the descendants of Asæ, presumably his son Johannes de Loyse and Yaldis de Loys, who bore an Estonian name, retained the memory of their Estonian ancestors for a longer period.³⁷ Of course, it cannot be ruled out that the Estonian list included other baptized Estonians, mostly lacking nicknames or surnames, who would be sought among the minor vassals. However, their descendants, like the son of Hildælempæ/Uldelempe/Uillelemp, assimilated completely with the influx of German knighthood, most likely in the second generation.

The relatively small percentage of Danish origin among the royal vassals in contrast to those of German origin may seem surprising. After all, the crusade to Estonia in 1219 was an undertaking of the Danish king and the Danish Church, so it would be natural to expect the people of Denmark to benefit the most from it. However, in this case, we seem to observe a similar phenomenon to what Stella Maria Szacherska noted regarding the fate of Danish Cistercian foundations in Western Pomerania (Eldena, Dargun, Kolbatz) a few decades earlier. Although all of these foundations were affiliated with the Danish abbey of Esrum, their communities quickly became German. According to Szacherska, like other Scandinavian countries, this was due to the limited population potential of Denmark necessitating the acceptance of individuals of German origin into the monasteries in the absence of willing local candidates.³⁸ Similarly, it is likely that in the case of vassals, only a few individuals from Denmark proper chose to undertake the costly crusade to distant lands. Therefore, these “shortcomings” could be supplemented by a larger number of knights of German origin who were more willing to participate.

In the early period after the restoration of royal authority in Estonia, the knighthood lived in a quasi-barracked manner. Their headquarters became the fortified castle on the so-called Castle Hill (“Domberg”), where alongside the bishop’s cathedral, the so-called small castle (*castrum parvum*)—built by the Sword Brothers and later the residence of the royal governor (*capitaneus, praefectus*)—and a so-called *castrum magnum*³⁹ gradually emerged, perhaps consisting initially of a series of smaller houses or “Burgsitze.”⁴⁰ Below, on the

33 JOHANSEN 1933, p. 548.

34 JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 549, 746.

35 JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 272, 549.

36 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch nebst Regesten 1/3: Nachträge zu den zwei ersten Bänden und Fortsetzung 1368–1393*. Edited by Georg Friedrich von Bunge. Reval : Kluge und Ströhm-Verlag, 1857, pp. 75–76, no. 453a: “emerunt alodium unum, quo situm est in villa fratrum eorundem, quae dicitur Pugete, contra Iohannem, filium quondam Uldelempe, cum omnibus attinentiis suis, in agris videlicet, pratis, pascuis, silvis, atque piscaturis, cultis et incultis.”

37 Johansen recognized him as Asæ’s grandson, but that’s not clear from the diploma lesson. It is probably safer to talk about their kinship. JOHANSEN 1933, p. 747. Yaldis de Loys appears as a witness on the diploma, see: *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/3*, pp. 75–76, no. 453a.

38 SZACHERSKA 1968, pp. 56–58.

39 NOTTBECK – NEUMANN 1896, p. 6.

40 NOTTBECK – NEUMANN 1896, p. 10.

slope and at the foot of the hill, the town of Reval began to develop probably from around 1230, governed by Lübeck law from 1248.⁴¹ Both parts of the town never legally united. Even after the construction of city walls, they remained spatially separated and governed by different laws as the “Domberg,” also known as the Upper Town, was subject to feudal law—later territorial law. It seems that the Viru vassals were the first to leave Castle Hill. As early as 1252, the town of Wesenberg is referred to as their vassal seat.⁴² It is not known when the royal vassals began to move to their fiefs to rural areas,⁴³ but it is estimated that the process began around 1280.⁴⁴ Certainly, it was well underway before 1343. Otherwise, the great anti-Christian uprising of 1343, which only affected the province of Harju, would not have caused such significant losses among the local knighthood. It is estimated that as a result, approximately 47 knightly families out of around 80 confirmed sources for the first half of the 14th century ceased to exist.⁴⁵ Fortunately, the walls of Reval halted the rebels.

Estonia’s isolation from the Danish homeland, with contact only possible during the Baltic sailing season (April to the end of September) facilitated the rapid establishment of an independent position for the local knighthood. No Danish king visited these lands after 1222. The supreme authority was represented only by royal governors sent from Denmark, who as “outsiders,” did not garner much support among the locals. This, in turn, favoured their consolidation, especially during an ongoing conflict with the local bishop that existed almost from the very beginning of the colony. The bishop of Reval, unlike all the other bishops in Livonia, did not have his own territorial domain but only relatively small proprietary possessions granted by the Danish king.⁴⁶ Therefore, the key issue for the bishop was determining the amount of tithes owed to him and demanding their delivery to Reval.⁴⁷ This became a source of dispute with the vassals, whose interest on the other hand, was to delay the collection and delivery of grain to Reval.⁴⁸ The conflict intensified when the vassals began to establish estates, often forcing the local population to move to these estates and depriving the bishop of a portion of his tithes.⁴⁹ As inferred from the preserved charters, the vassals acted in solidarity against the bishop and by no later than 1259, they formed a corporation called the “Universitas Vasallorum per Estoniam Constituta,”⁵⁰ to which all royal vassals belonged, regardless of their wealth

41 MÜHLEN VON ZUR, Heinz. *Studien zur älteren Geschichte Revals. Gründung – Einwanderung – Bürgerliche Oberschicht*. Zeulenroda : Sporn, 1937, pp. 13–14; NOTTBECK – NEUMANN 1896, pp. 10–11.

42 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, p. 302, no. 239: “omnibus hominibus nostris, in Revalia et Wesenbergh constitutis.” JOHANSEN 1933, p. 169.

43 It seems that in the 13th century, this process was just beginning. JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 272, 740.

44 JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 274, 740.

45 GERNET VON 1893, p. 48.

46 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, p. 215, no. 166; p. 265, no. 207.

47 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, pp. 225–227, no. 172; p. 227, no. 173; JOHANSEN 1933, p. 203.

48 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, p. 214, no. 165; pp. 425–426, no. 337; p. 447, no. 352; JOHANSEN 1933, p. 146.

49 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, pp. 583–584, no. 467; pp. 589–590, no. 475; p. 601, no. 487; *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch nebst Regesten 1/2 (1301–1367)*. Edited by Georg Friedrich von Bunge. Reval : Kluge und Ströhm-Verlag, 1855, pp. 17–18, no. 611; JOHANSEN 1933, p. 274.

50 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, pp. 425–436, no. 337; p. 605, no. 491: “consiliarii

status,⁵¹ and which independently carried out legal actions—later approved by the king. From 1284, the corporation had its own, unpreserved, seal of knightly corporation.⁵²

Feudal law, to which the vassals were subject, was customary law and was not written down until 1315, in what was referred to as the “Waldemar-Erichsche Lehnrecht.”⁵³ In the introduction to this feint of rights, it was mentioned that some of its provisions had previously been violated, hindering the exercise of power by noble individuals. Therefore, King Eric Menved (1286–1319) ordered its codification to avoid similar problems in the future.⁵⁴ The first points of the law illustrate the exceptional situation of Estonian vassals; after a change on the royal throne, each vassal was obliged to personally appear before the new king within one year to swear their feudal oath. For the local vassals, this meant undertaking a sea voyage to Denmark. Due to the often uncertain political situation—possible raids by pagan Lithuanians, Karelians and Rus’ people—as well as a distrustful attitude towards the locals,⁵⁵ the ruler kindly agreed that they could make their appearance sometime within the following three years, with one-third of their rank appearing each year. Throughout the Danish period in Estonian history, the throne of Denmark changed hands six times, including once in only a two-year interval. However, preserved sources do not indicate an increased presence of Danish vassals at the royal court in the years following a change in ruler—possibly due to their limited numbers. Another problem arises from the fact that the vassals did not have their own ships and would have to pay merchants for the opportunity to travel. It seems unlikely, both logistically and financially, that this obligation was fulfilled directly. It would be more natural for them to swear their feudal oath to the royal governor sent from Denmark, but according to feudal law, he had the primary right to administer justice.⁵⁶ Therefore, this provision may have been introduced in the written version of the law only from 1315, as the only source confirming the king’s expectation of the arrival of Estonian vassals to swear their feudal oath to him dates to 1321, after Christopher II ascended the Danish throne. Though, this was subject to the condition that there would be no pagan or Rus’ invasion during that time. The king indeed intended to send his governor to Estonia, who would naturally arrive by ship, indicating that the king expected some of his Estonian vassals to take advantage of the return voyage to travel to Denmark.⁵⁷

domini regis Daciae per Estoniam constituti, nec non et universi vasalli terrae Revaliae.”

51 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, pp. 425–436, no. 337: “et approbante tum divitum tum pauperum universitate.”

52 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, p. 605, no. 491: “praesens scriptum sigillis dicti domini episcopi et consiliariorum et totius terrae fecimus communiri.”; *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 36–37, no. 621: “una cum sigillo communitatis nostrae.”

53 *Altlivlands Rechtsbücher zum Theil nach bisher unbenutzten Texten*. Edited by Georg Friedrich von Bunge. Leipzig : Breitkopf und Härtel-Verlag, 1879, pp. 55–70; SKYUM-NIELSEN 2016, p. 209.

54 BUNGE VON 1879, pp. 55–56. Einleitung: “Aleine doch under desser meinen tiit der vorbenomeden konige dat recht an etliken stucken gebraken si, wente dat recht nicht beschreven was; dorch dat so licht dat recht under dem volke bister, to hindernisse de herchop unde des landes. Dorch dat so heft de edle konink Erich, de nu is, gegeven unde beschreven unde bestediget, mit eade unde mit vulbort sines rades unde sines gemeinen rikes, solk recht, also hir beschreven steit.”

55 *Altlivlands Rechtsbücher*, p. 56, Art. 1, § 1–2.

56 *Altlivlands Rechtsbücher*, pp. 66–70, Art. 43–58.

57 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 133–134, no. 680.

The main duty of a vassal was loyalty to the king and defense of the country at their own expense against “heathens” (*heidenschop*) and other unspecified invaders. In the event of capture, they had to pay ransom using their own funds and could not expect reimbursement for any losses, even if all their wealth was lost.⁵⁸ The provisions of the feudal law mentioned here do not specify the exact military obligations of vassals, but they do describe how the knightly “equipment” (*heerweide*) should look, which was to include the best horse with a saddle, two horses for the squires and customary weapons.⁵⁹ There is no evidence of any dependence of the size of the fief on military obligations. One of the charters intended for the Cistercian convent of Reval includes a reservation that although they may acquire land, it can only be parts of villages to prevent them to be entirely excluded from the burdens of feudal law, as such immunity belonged to the convent. Similarly, if the nuns were to sell any lands, they would again be subject to feudal law and their new owners would be obliged to perform military duties for the Crown.⁶⁰

The laws of Waldemar and Eric primarily focus on provisions in the field of civil law, or more precisely family law, especially the protection of childless widows or unmarried daughters.⁶¹ During the period under discussion, the right to a fief passed exclusively to direct male relatives, and even that required royal approval within a year of the vassal’s death. Therefore, it was more advantageous to hold the fief undivided by brothers or perhaps even by a broader family community.⁶² It was only in 1329 that King Christopher II granted orphaned maidens the right to lifelong enjoyment of fiefs, which previously should have reverted to the royal domain after the death of their fathers.⁶³ In this way, the ruler weakened Estonia’s defensive potential, but since he had transferred Estonia to one of the nobles a few weeks later—despite promises never to dispose of Estonia—it can be presumed that, faced with a major political crisis in Denmark itself, matters of a distant colony ceased to interest him. However, for the vassals of northern Estonia, this was a crucial issue and it is not surprising that after changing suzerains in 1346 and obtaining confirmation of their previous privileges from the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order,⁶⁴ they sought approval from the Grand Master the following year for the privilege of allowing women to enjoy fiefs for life.⁶⁵ The recogni-

58 *Altivlands Rechtsbücher*, pp. 56–57, Art. 3, § 1–3.

59 *Altivlands Rechtsbücher*, p. 63, Art. 28, § 1: “Ein ridder ervet dat beste perd mit dem sadel, twe knechtperde, einen somer mit dem sadele unde mit allem, dat men plach darto to hebbende, unde alle wapen, de de ridder to sinem live vörde.”

60 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 39–40, no. 623; pp. 40–41, no. 624.

61 GERENET VON 1893, p. 72–73.

62 GERENET VON 1893, p. 74; JOHANSEN 1933, pp. 752–753.

63 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 243–244, no. 737.

64 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 416–417, no. 859: “honorabiles viri, milites militares et vasalli, eandem inhabitantes terram, castris et munitionibus resignatis, dictum magistrum et suum ordinem concorditer et gratanter in dominum acceptarunt, promisimus eis data fide firmiter, volentes de cetero eos, sicut nostros tenemur, ubilibet prosequi specialis amoris et promotionis affectione, quo supradictus magister generalis omnia iura, gratias et libertates, eis succesivis temporibus a regibus Daciae indulta, quae probabiliter et manifeste ostendere possunt, fore rationabilia et iusta, meliorando ea potius quam peiorando, ratificaare et confirmare eis debet suis litteris, appensione sigilli sui communitis.”

65 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 432–433, no. 874.

tion of the rights to orphaned fiefs by the Order, regardless of gender and up to the fifth degree of kinship—which practically equated to recognizing their heritability—occurred 50 years later, thanks to the provisions of the so-called Jungingen's Grace.⁶⁶

Only during the rule of the Teutonic Order do we know about provisions regarding the military obligations of the local knighthood. It was established that once a year, the Master of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order organized an *expeditionem ac reisam*, for which all Estonian vassals, both secular and clerical, were obliged to provide three horsemen for every 100 units of land within the area bound by the Narova and Dvina rivers at their own expense, including one well-armed German and two locals equipped with at least helmets and shields, with provisions. Only in the case of expeditions south of the Dvina, most likely to Lithuania, did the Teutonic Order cover the costs and losses.⁶⁷ This also applied to the inhabitants of Reval, who held land under feudal tenure. The city redeemed itself from participating in expeditions to Lithuania and Rus' by giving the Order a portion of its urban patrimony and 200 silver marks for the renovation of a small castle on Castle Hill.⁶⁸ Additionally, they committed to providing the Order with one ship and a well-armed crew of 25 people in the event of a maritime expedition.⁶⁹ It cannot be ruled out that at that time, the extent of vassal obligations was only recorded and not increased compared to the Danish period. It is evident that the stability of customary law was the most important value for the knighthood, as it had been upheld for generations, hence the vassals' declarations of readiness to defend their ancient rights in solidarity against any attempts to violate them.⁷⁰ However, there is no information regarding opposition to the Teutonic regulations, although it should be noted that in the aftermath of the anti-Christian uprising in 1343, during a situation of widespread trauma, it was easy to obtain consent to increased burdens in exchange for guarantees of security.

Conclusion

The sense of their own importance and the antiquity of their rights, as well as a belief in the decisive role of the North Estonian knighthood in the conversion of pagan Estonians and the establishment of a Latin bulwark against the followers of the schismatic Eastern Church, persisted throughout the Middle Ages and even intensified during the Reformation. This was because the major

66 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch nebst Regesten 1/4 (1394–1413)*. Edited by Georg Friedrich von Bunge. Reval : Kluge und Ströhm-Verlag, 1859, pp. 42–43, no. 1756.

67 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 458–459, no. 900; GERNET VON 1893, pp. 64–65.

68 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 446–447, no. 890; NOTTBECK – NEUMANN 1896, p. 26.

69 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1/2*, pp. 444–445, no. 889; GERNET VON 1893, p. 67.

70 *Liv-, Esth- und Curländisches Urkundenbuch 1*, p. 605, no. 491: “nos unanimiter esse confederatos et fide data connexos, primo in hoc, quod ius dominorum nostrorum fovere volumus et promovere [...] secundum iustitiam et aequitatem; deinde in omnibus ius nostrum proprium, quod a dominis nostris habemus secundum antiquitas leges terrae nostrae, ad invicem volumus communiter defensare, et si etiam aliquis ipsas antiquas leges nostras et ius nostrum antiquam infringere attemtaverit, compromisimus illud defendere una manu.”

cities in Livonia quickly embraced the “religious novelties,” while the conservative knighthood held onto their old faith for several more decades, considering it an essential part of their collective consciousness and ethos. The Danish king, the founder of the Christian colony in northern Estonia, was also remembered, as the local estates owed their privileges and key institutions to him.