

Prisoners of war in the Baltic in the XII-XIII centuries

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Abstract

Warfare was cruel along the religious borders in the Baltic in the twelfth and thirteenth century and oscillated between mass killing and mass enslavement. Prisoners of war were often problematic to control and guard, but they were also of huge economic importance. Some were used in production, some were ransomed, some held as hostages, all depending upon status of the prisoners and needs of the slave owners.

Key words

Warfare, prisoners of war. Baltic studies. Baltic crusades. Slavery. Religious warfare. Medieval genocide.

Resumen

La guerra fue una actividad cruel en las fronteras religiosas bálticas entre los siglos XII y XIII, que osciló entre la masacre y la esclavitud en masa. El control y guarda de los prisioneros de guerra era frecuentemente problemático, pero también tenían una gran importancia económica. Algunos eran empleados en actividades productivas, algunos eran rescatados y otros eran mantenidos como rehenes, todo ello dependiendo del estatus del prisionero y de las necesidades de sus propietarios.

Palabras clave

Guerra, prisioneros de guerra, estudios bálticos, cruzadas bálticas, esclavitud, guerra de religión, genocidio medieval.

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If you were living in Scandinavia and around the Baltic Sea in the high Middle Ages, you had a fair chance of being involved in warfare or affected by war, and there was a considerable risk that you would be taken prisoner. For many, the risk of being killed was probably even greater than of spending years in slavery. It all depended, however, on where you lived, on your social status, and on your age and gender.

The main focus here is on the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Often, Scandinavian historians have considered this period one of transition, in which the last remnants of a widespread Viking Age slavery disappeared. It has been claimed, that slavery became abolished with the adoption of Christianity in the eleventh to the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. The situation is actually much more complicated - and prisoners of war continued to have an important economic function in Scandinavia also in this period¹.

The Baltic Sea was a fluid border area, navigated by both Orthodox and Latin Christians as well as by various groups of pagans². Southern Scandinavia and Norway became Christianised around year 1000, Sweden and Finland during the twelfth century. Most of the areas in what is now Northern Germany, from the North Sea to the River Oder, were inhabited by Wends who also became Christian, but returned to paganism shortly afterwards in the late tenth century³. They became the target for continuous warfare from their neighbours, and conversion became one of the goals of war. After the First Crusade's conquest

of Jerusalem in 1099, the concept of crusading was immediately

1 Ruth MAZO KARRAS, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988, argues convincingly that slavery was common in Scandinavia until the mid fourteenth century. Niels SKYUM-NIELSEN, "Nordic slavery in an international setting", *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 11 (1978-79), pp. 126-148, dates the end of slavery till the mid thirteenth century.

2 Kurt Villads JENSEN, "The Blue Baltic Border of Denmark in the High Middle Ages: Danes, Wends and Saxo Grammaticus", *Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices*, ed. David Abulafia and Nora Berend (eds), Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002, pp. 173-193; Nils BLOMKVIST, *The Discovery of the Baltic. The Reception of a Catholic World-System in the European North (AD 1075-1225)*, Brill, Leiden, 2005; Ane BYSTED, Kurt Villads JENSEN, Carsten Selch JENSEN, John LIND, *Jerusalem in the North. Denmark and the Baltic Crusades, 1100-1522*, Brepols: Tournhout, 2012.

3 BYSTED et al, *Jerusalem in the North ...*, chapter 2.

adapted to the Baltic. Christians were fighting for “*our Jerusalem in the North*”⁴, and the taking of prisoners was probably made easier if they belonged to another religion.

Different church political entities competed in the armed mission during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for example the bishopric of Riga, allied with the Teutonic Order, and the archbishopric of Lund, see of the primate of the north and with papal legatine power to lead the mission against the infidels in the Baltic⁵. In wintertime, the armies moved over frozen lakes and rivers and could get far inland, and when spring came, the first fleets set out for raiding, conquering, and missionizing along the coasts.

These religious wars are described in several narratives from the decades around 1200⁶, and they were cruel. The general impression from the sources is one of mass killing, or - if practically possible - enslavement of the enemies. In 1210, a Christian army set out from Riga against the pagan Estonians:

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- 4 The formulation in a letter from before 1108, from the bishop of Magdeburg to princes and kings in the North, exhorting them to fight against the pagans and gain the same spiritual benefits as the crusaders to Jerusalem; in *Urkundenbuch des Erzstifts Magdeburg. Teil 1 (937-1192)*, F. Israël & W. Möllenberg (eds), Landesgeschichtliche Forschungsstelle, Magdeburg, 1937, pp. 249-252, no. 193. Cf. Giles CONSTABLE, “The Place of the Magdeburg Charter of 1107/08 in the History of Eastern Germany and of the Crusades”, *Vita religiosa im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Kaspar Elm zum 70. Geburtstag*, Franz J. Felten und Nikolas Jaspert (eds.), Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, Berlin, 1999, pp. 283-99.
- 5 Iben FONNESBERG-SCHMIDT, *The Popes and the Baltic Crusades 1147-1254*, Brill, Leiden, 2007.
- 6 The two main narratives referred to in this paper are Saxo from c. 1200 and Henry of Livonia who ended his chronicle in 1227. SAXO, *Gesta Danorum. Danmarkshistorien*, vol 1-2, Latin ed. Karsten FRIIS-JENSEN, Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab and Gads, Copenhagen, 2005. His work was translated into English: SAXO GRAMMATICUS, *The History of the Danes*. Books I-IX, transl. and comm. Peter Fisher and Hilda Ellis Davidson, D. S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1979-1980; and *Danorum Regum heroumque historia. Books X-XVI*. The text of the first edition with translation and commentary by E. Christiansen, Oxford: B.A.R., Oxford, 1980-1981. HENRY of Livonia *Henrici Chronicon Livoniae*, Leonid Arbusow et Albertus Bauer (eds.), Hahn, Hannover, 1955. Translation: *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia. Henricus Lettus*, Tranlated and edited by James A. Brundage, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004. English quotations from Henry of Livonia in this article are taken from Brundage's translation. Other important sources for warfare and prisoners are HELMOLD of Bosau who died c. 1177: *Helmoldi presbyteri Chronica Slavorum*, G. H. Pertz (ed.), Hahn, Hannover, 1868; and his continuator ARNOLD of Lübeck who died c. 1212. *Arnoldi Chronica Slavorum*, J.M. Lappenberg (ed.), Hahn, Hannover, 1868.

“Then the army spread into all the roads and villages, killed many people in every spot, and followed the remainder into the adjoining provinces, captured from them their women and boys, and reassembled at the fort. On the following day and the third day, they went out and laid waste everything and burned what they found and took horses and innumerable flocks; for of the latter there were four thousand oxen and cows, not counting horses, other flocks, and captives, of whom there was no count. Many of the pagans, moreover, who escaped through flight to the forests and the ice of the sea, perished in the freezing cold”⁷.

This was the typical pattern, repeating itself, expedition after expedition, year after year. Men killed in the first attack, women and children taken captives, but when the crusaders returned a second time and when military control had been secured, also men were taken prisoners. This way of conducting war seems to have been common both to Christians and to pagans⁸.

The handling of male prisoners posed a number of logistical problems⁹. They had to be guarded. After a successful war in the 1210s, for example, the pagan Lithuanians moved back home through the high snow in one long row, with 1000 prisoners in the middle and their own soldiers in the front and behind. Suddenly they saw footprints before them in the snow, they feared an ambush, stopped, and collected the army in a square formation, to scare away an attacking enemy, and apparently also to protect and control their prisoners¹⁰.

7 HENRY of Livonia XIV,10: *“Et divisit se exercitus per omnes vias ac villas, et interfecerunt populum multum in omnibus locis et persequebantur eos in provinciis adiacentibus et ceperunt ex eis mulieres et pueros et convenerunt ad castrum. Sequenti die ac tercio circueuntes omnia vastaverunt et incenderunt que invenerunt et equos et pecora innumerabilia acceperunt. Erant enim boum et vaccarum quatuor milia, exceptis equis et aliis pecoribus et captivis, quorum non erat numerus. Multi eciam paganorum, qui in silvis et in glacie maris per fugam evaserunt, frigore congelati perierunt”*. For Henry of Livonia, see now *Crusading and Chronicle Writing on the Medieval Baltic Frontier. A Companion to the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*, Marek TAMM, Linda KALJUNDI, and Carsten Selch JENSEN (eds.), Ashgate, London, 2011.

8 Female prisoners in war have been relatively little studied, especially for Northern Europe, as remarked in John GILLINGHAM, “Women, Children, and the Profits of War”, in *Gender and historiography. Studies in the earlier middle ages in honour of Pauline Stafford*, Janet L. Nelson, Susan Reynolds and Susan M. Johns (eds.), Institute of Historical Research, London, 2012, pp. 61-74.

9 Discussed detailed in Sean MCGLYNN, *By Sword and Fire. Cruelty and Atrocity in Medieval Warfare*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2008), pp. 91-140, especially pp-133-140.

10 HENRY of Livonia IX,1.

It was difficult to move with a huge group of prisoners, because they had to be guarded, and because their own people would attempt to liberate them. *“Returning slowly over the ice, we halted for ten days, because of the booty and the prisoners, being on the outlook for the pagans”*¹¹, one of the Nordic crusaders wrote.

The fate of the prisoners on march was uncertain. Sometimes their conquerors were attacked and faced defeat and decided to kill as many of the prisoners as possible, before they fled. Sometimes the conquerors rejected the attack and gained victory, but let out their rage on the prisoners: *“They beheaded all the men whom they had brought along as prisoners, in order to take vengeance upon those lying and unfaithful nations. They divided the spoils and together they praised Him Who is always blessed”*¹².

In some rare instances, the prisoners were used in terror-warfare. In 1210, Christian crusaders went up to a pagan fort:

*“If you will renounce the worship of your false gods,’ said their leader Berthold, ‘and will believe with us in the true God, we will return these captives alive to you. We will accept you in the charity of our brotherhood and will join you to us in the bonds of peace.’ The pagans would listen to nothing about God or the Christian name. ... they prepared themselves for war, and with their shouting they jeered and mocked at the <Christian> army. The Christians, however, having taken all the captives and slaughtered them, threw them into the moat and threatened to do the same to those who were in the fort”*¹³.

11 HENRY of Livonia XXII,8. *“Et revertentes paulatim in glacie decem diebus propter captivos et predam moram fecimus, exspectantes eciam Osilienses aut alios Estones, si forte ad bellandum contra nos sequerentur”*.

12 HENRY of Livonia XXVI, 13. *“et viros omnes, quos captivos duxerant, capite truncaverunt, ut fieret vindicta de prevaricatoribus et infidelibus illis nationibus. Et spolia dividentes collaudabant eum, qui semper est benedictus”*.

13 HENRY of Livonia XIV, 11. *‘Si’, inquit, ‘renunciaveritis culture deorum vestrorum falsorum et nobiscum in Deum verum credere volueritis, vobis captivos istos vivos restituemus et vos in fraternitatis caritate nobiscum vinculo pacis colligabimus.’ At illi Deum ac nomen christianorum omnino audire dedignantes bellum magis comminatur, armis Theuthonicorum, que in primo conflictu in porta castris rapuerant, induuntur et in summitate castris gloriantur, ad pugnam se preparant et clamore suo exercitum subsannando irrident. Russinus autem et Letti comprehensis captivis omnibus et trucidatis in fossatum proiciunt et eis, qui in castris erant, id ipsum comminantur”*.

Prisoners had to be guarded while in enemy territory, but sometimes the conquerors sub-delegated it to others. The Danes on the southern island of Falster were Christians and acknowledged the Danish king as their lord, but it was commonly known in the twelfth century that they guarded prisoners of war for pagan Wends on expeditions in Denmark, until the Wends returned to their homes in what is now Northern Germany. Sometimes the Danish king would prepare punitive expeditions against the Falstrings, but there was also an understanding, one source claims, that inhabitants on Falster acted out of fear for the pagans, not because of sympathy for them¹⁴. In practise, Falster may have functioned as a neutral zone where you could exchange prisoners or redeem them.

In other instances, the guardians were more problematic. German knights from Riga had allied with the pagan Semigallians, living south of Riga, whom they gave the Lithuanian and Estonian prisoners to guard. The Semigallians soon killed most of the Estonian prisoners with the sword, because “*they were old enemies*”¹⁵. The Christians did not reproach the Semigallians for this killing, however, because there were still plenty of prisoners and of booty to be divided among the warriors.

If prisoners were of proper status, they were of high value in political negotiations. Several peace treaties that are mentioned in narrative sources included the demand that prisoners were liberated, and that the losing part gave new, highborn prisoners as hostages to secure that peace be upheld. Such prisoners could be traded to a third party. The pagan people of Sakkala in northern Estonia secured the support of Orthodox Novgorod against the Latin crusaders by handing over their important German prisoners to the prince of Novgorod¹⁶.

We know very little about what prisoners of war actually did when they were kept in the military camps. They may probably have been set to hard manual labour, but nothing is noted about it except from one small glimpse from 1168. When the pagan Wends in Arkona were defeated and commanded to drag the huge wooden idol out of the temple to be destroyed, they feared the revenge of their god and left

14 SAXO 14.22.2.

15 HENRY of Livonia IX,4.

16 HENRY of Livonia XXVII,3.

the job to other pagans who were their prisoners of war, and to foreign merchants, because “*it is always better to let the wrath of the gods fall upon such despicable people*”¹⁷.

The handling of prisoners of war was a large scale business and well organized, both on Christian and on pagan side of the religious border. Around 1130, a young Dane was taken prisoner by the Wends and chained to a peasant, so he could not escape. The situation was desperate because the young man had been captured for the third time, so he feared that his family would no longer redeem him. Maybe they did not have the economic means, maybe they did not feel obliged any more if he was so stupid that he continued to be taken by the Wends¹⁸. In any case, at night he killed his guardian whose leg he cut off so he himself could get loose and run away, but he was tracked down by Wendic bloodhounds. It gives an impression of the extent and organization of taking captives during war, if a society had bloodhounds specially trained to find escaping prisoners. The young man was beaten, chained, and locked up together with other Christians, but soon liberated by the miraculous intervention of Saint Olaf of Norway, buried in the cathedral in Trondheim more than a thousand kilometre further north. As in so many other religious border areas, also Scandinavian saints became specialised in liberating prisoners of war during the twelfth century and later¹⁹.

Prisoners have been sold as slaves, either at temporary markets near the battle field or on regular markets in larger cities. In 1171, 700 Danes were offered on the market in the pagan Wendic city of Mecklenburg after a series of successful raids against Denmark, but there were too few buyers on that day to get them all sold²⁰. Around the same time, clerics envious on Abbot Wilhelm in Denmark pondered whether they should kill him or catch him and sell him on a market as slave to the

17 SAXO 14.39.33. “*Igitur oppidani simulacro urbe egerendo funes inicere iussi, cum id pristinae religionis metu per se ipsos exsequi non auderent, captivis exterisque quaestum in urbe petentibus, ut illud egerent, imperabant, ignobilium hominum capita divinae irae potissimum obiectanda ducentes*”.

18 “Magnussona saga,” in Snorri STURLUSON, *Heimskringla*, vol. 1-3, Bjarni AÐALBJARNARSON (ed), Hid Íslanzka Fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1979, vol. 28, pp. 238-277, here chapter 39.

19 E.g. Michael GOODICH, “The miraculous military escape in canonization documents”, *Lives and Miracles of the Saints. Studies in Medieval Hagiography*, Michael E. Goodich (ed), Ashgate, Aldershot, 2004, XIX, pp. 1-16.

20 HELMOLD of Bosau, cap. 109.

pagan Wends²¹. Connections existed, and such transactions of selling or smuggling prisoners from one side to the other seem to have worked finely across the religious borders.

Pagan slaves were transported by ships to Denmark and to other Scandinavian countries, but apparently not all were put to work during the voyage. Saxo related around 1200 how one of the magnates of Zealand sailed home from Mecklenburg with only a few prisoners of war. When they approached the coast, he commanded most of his men to leave the oars and stand in the middle of the boat, so that the neighbours believed he had come home with a large crowd of slaves²². Apparently, prisoners did not row. Maybe it has required too much coordination and training for at newly acquired crew of slaves; maybe the prisoners in this case were of too high status?

When the conquerors had brought prisoners back to their own homelands, the treatment of them depended to a wide extent upon their status. Several groups can be clearly distinguished here.

The sources repeatedly mention children taken prisoners. They have probably been included in the households as underprivileged servants and later, when they grew up, been put to harder works. Some, however, got a special role in the missionary work. In the larger and more important peace agreements, bishops received as hostages boys ‘from the better families’, 2 or 3 or up to 30, or they bought boys on the slave markets. These were baptised and given an ecclesiastical education, and as adults they were ordained as priests and send back to work as missionaries among their own people. They were now completely loyal to the Christian church, but they spoke the local language of their origin. John from Wirland in northern Estonia, for example, had been bought by the bishop of Riga and came back as adult and converted many, and in the end, the local Estonians cut off his head and cut his body in small pieces and thereby helped him to gain the crown of martyrdom²³. In spite of the pagan resentment against them, which may have been stronger because they had a local background, we must assume that these boys have had a significant role in the long-term spreading of Christianity in pagan areas.

21 “Sancti Willelmi abbatis vita et miracula,” in *Vitae sanctorum danorum*, M.Cl. Gertz (ed), G.E.C. Gad, Copenhagen, 1908-1912, pp. 300-377, here p. 328.

22 SAXO 14.23.28.

23 HENRY of Livonia X,7.

Another group of prisoners were women, mentioned again and again. The narrative sources are very discreet about the fate of these women. Some have probably been abused, as you would expect in any warfare at any time. This is, however, mentioned only once in a single source, and then it is claimed that only pagans were perpetrating such deeds. Pagans violate women and virgins, it is claimed, pagans take 2 or 3 of them as wives, although pagans should not mix with Christians, and they sell the women on markets to other pagans²⁴. Something similar could actually have been the case also in Christian societies, in spite of the Christian sources discretely omitting any mentioning of it. It would explain why the Scandinavian inheritance laws found it necessary to state that the children of a female slave and a free man can inherit, only if the father recognized the child. It has not been uncommon that Christian men had children with their female slaves, be they prisoners of war or acquired in other ways²⁵. In addition to this, women have of course also worked with many other different tasks in the household.

The huge majority of male prisoners of war were used as physical labour force. Most tilled the fields, maybe breaking new land, which some studies of place names seem to indicate. There are several Vindebys on the marginal soil in Denmark, and they may actually have been named after a population of Wends²⁶. Many prisoners of war became slaves on the farms that the crusaders took over or founded in the lands they had conquered²⁷.

Some prisoners of war were used for other kind of hard physical work. The regulations of the royal naval organization from the thirteenth century specified that each boat could bring four slaves with them, for cooking and for emptying the boat for water on the tour. These prisoners or slaves could be treated arbitrarily and violently. There is a medieval Nordic expression for 'beating like you beat a slave', that means crippling another person; and slaves were marked by cutting

24 HENRY of Livonia XXX,1.

25 Niels SKYUM-NIELSEN, *Kvinde og Slave*, Munksgaard, Copenhagen, 1971, pp. 257-260, cf. also Niels SKYUM-NIELSEN, "Nordic slavery in an international setting"; Ruth MAZO KARRAS, *Slavery and society in medieval Scandinavia*. Most recent Thomas LINDKVIST and Janken MYRDAL (eds.), *Trälar. Ofria i agrarsamhället från vikingetid till medeltiden*, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, 2003.

26 Kurt Villads JENSEN, "Blue Baltic Border ...".

27 Sven EKDAHL, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War during the Fighting between the Teutonic Order and Lithuania", *The Military Orders. Fighting for the Faith and Caring for the Sick*, Malcolm Barber (ed) Variorum, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 263-269.

their nose open²⁸. An abbot wrote around 1200, that “*it is ridiculous that the slave believes he is equal with the master, when it is in the power of the master to do whatever he wants to the slave*”²⁹.

Slaves could be set free by their master. Again, we have very few sources about how it worked in practise in the Baltic area. One such is the testament from 1201 of Bishop Absalon who had been a leading figure in the crusades against the Wends. He manumitted a number of female slaves, including some former free women whom his official “*had received in slavery*”, which does not sound as prisoners of war, but rather economic slavery. Absalon also manumitted the cook Christian, “*who had been taken prisoner and enslaved, but unjustly*”³⁰. Justly or not, he had apparently continued as a slave until his master died.

The religious wars from the border areas around the Baltic were described with some details in the narrative sources, while warfare between Christians are less well represented in the sources, at least as concerns the taking of prisoners. An exception is the prisoners of high social status. They represented an economic value, and a possible political allied if they could be persuaded to change side. When the Danish King Svend Grathe won a victory against a rival to the throne in the 1150s, he captured a number of magnates. His bishop suggested to do like a good gardener: take away and uproot the weed – all plants that are of no use, that is: “*kill them all*”³¹. In stead, all were left free to go - some because they swore him allegiance, some because they paid him, and others simply because of the mildness of the king, which must be an attempt to secure future supporters who were so high ranking that it would be an affront to demand them to swear an oat of loyalty. Svend only let two be killed, and that was because of some crime they had committed, not because they had joined in a war against him.

The sum for ransoming a high ranking prisoner in Scandinavia is known only in very few cases in the Middle Ages. One concerns the most spectacular prisoners of the time, King Valdemar II of Denmark who in 1223 was captured together with his son and crown prince by one of his vassals, Henry of Schwerin, and kept in prison for two years in Germany.

28 Niels SKYUM-NIELSEN, “Nordic slavery ...”, pp. 135-136.

29 *Diplomatarium Danicum*, Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab (ed), Ejnar Munksgaard, Copenhagen, 1938 –), 1:3, II, no 56.

30 *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:4 no 32.

31 SAXO 14.4.9; BYSTED et al, *Jerusalem in the North*, Chapter 7.

Negotiations were complicated, because Valdemar in secret had taken the cross to Jerusalem and therefore had full papal support, while the German Roman Emperor Frederic II showed interest in buying Valdemar to press him to cede huge areas in the border zone between Denmark and the empire. In the end, Valdemar was released against a sum of 45.000 marc silver, equipment and horses for 100 knights, and all the gold of the Queen except her crown³². An earlier demand that he should also leave for two year on a crusade was not met. And in the end, Valdemar paid only part of the sum and was released from the rest by the pope.

Warfare in the Baltic in the twelfth and thirteenth century produced an astonishing number of prisoners of war, who were treated very differently according to status. They were of decisive economic importance, because of the huge ransoms that some of them had to pay, but especially as labourers in the agriculture. All this necessitated the establishing of procedures and institutions that seem to be similar to what we find in other countries with a religious border, although their existence can sometimes be more difficult to prove in Scandinavia because of the few sources.

Fecha de presentación: 16 de marzo de 2017

Fecha de aceptación: 30 de mayo de 2017

32 *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:6 nO 16; no 17; no 42.

