

Northern Estonian Church Life in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century: The Religious Environment in Which the Pirita Monastery Emerged

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Summary

Abstract: In 1346 the King of Denmark sold northern Estonia to the Teutonic Order, whereupon the Tallinn diocese experienced problems brought about by the Order's power. The biggest problem was the interdict of 1354 declared on the Order territories. Following the relations between the church and the overlord makes it possible to better understand the history of the Tallinn diocese and its religious institutions in the 14th century, about which there is rather scant information.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Teutonic Order, Danish rule in Estonia, Bishopric of Tallinn

In the political history of Livonia, the Tallinn bishopric, unlike the Riga, Tartu or Ösel-Wiek bishoprics, does not seem very interesting, as the Tallinn bishop lacked any secular power in his diocese and his impact on political life was thus small. Besides, the fourteenth century offers rather less information about the Tallinn bishop and the entire northern Estonian church life than the following period. The history of the Tallinn diocese of that era has thus been little explored. In order to partially fill the gap, the current article examines the relations of the Tallinn bishop with his overlords: first with the King of Denmark and then with the Teutonic Order.

Compared with the rest of Livonia, the northern Estonian church stood out for its relations with Scandinavia, which began during the Danish time and survived until the end

of the Middle Ages. The Tallinn bishop remained the suffragan to the Lund archbishop until the arrival of Lutheranism, and the Tallinn Dominican friary belonged to the Dominican province of *Dacia*. For the upkeep of the Tallinn bishopric, the King of Denmark had, in 1240, donated 120 plough-lands. Most of the privileges of the Tallinn diocese monasteries and all privileges of the Dominican friary date from the Danish period.

Ignoring the canon law, the king nominated the Tallinn bishops himself. In 1277, Queen Margareta gave up the right to appoint bishops to the Tallinn chapter, but the authenticity of the relevant document cannot be proved, and in reality the kings continued appointing bishops.

The small amount of information about relations with Lund have given cause to presume that, after the sale of northern Estonia, the Tallinn bishop became a *de facto* suffragan to the Riga archbishop. This theory is supported by the fact that, in 1428, the Tallinn bishop participated in the Riga provincial council, but it is not known what status the bishop had there. Not a single document has been found in the papal archives that would prove the placing of the Tallinn bishopric under the subordination of the Riga archbishopric. The subordination of the Tallinn bishop to Lund was also emphasised in the bishop's letters to the Danish king in the sixteenth century.

The change of the overlord due to the 1346 sale of northern Estonia seems to have been essential: the sole secular power of the Danish king was replaced by the corporate power of a religious order. With the deal, the Teutonic Order also received the rights of the Danish king in the Tallinn diocese, and continued appointing the bishop of Tallinn.

The Order's position in northern Estonia strengthened after the suppression of the St.

George's Night Uprising. In October 1343, the higher clergy of the Tallinn bishopric and secular dignitaries declared that they had to accept the help of the Teutonic Order, as it was impossible to bring the erring Estonians to heel. Several fourteenth-century sources describe the savagery and wavering faith of Estonians, and the ensuing threat to the Christian colony. At the same time, the Riga archbishop sent complaints to the papal curia about the damaging activities of the Teutonic Order on the Livonian church. Accusations against the semi-pagan Estonians and the Order's Livonian branch are often quite similarly worded.

In 1354, when the Order, despite the demand of the papal emissaries, refused to give up the properties occupied in the Riga archbishopric, the pope declared an interdict against the Order, which, with short intervals, lasted for about 30 years. Until the Riga archbishopric was incorporated into the Order in the late fourteenth century, the interdict remained the most powerful weapon of the papal curia against the Order. The interdict forbade church services and the administration of sacraments within the territories of the Order.

As a new Order area, the Tallinn bishopric also found itself under the interdict. How strictly the church penalty was exercised is not known, but it certainly worried the Tallinn bishop and the town council, as shown in the letter to the pope from 1355 asking that the interdict be lifted. The letter emphasises that the Tallinn diocese belongs to the Lund archbishopric. The Order's Livonian branch has the power over this territory only by authorisation of the Prussian master, and due to the insecure situation of the bishopric in the neophyte surroundings. Although the letter had probably no positive results and the Order did nothing to lift the interdict, the town of

Tallinn remained a firm supporter of its new overlord.

During the last quarter of the fourteenth century, the schism of 1378 played an increasing role in the relations between the Teutonic Order and the papal curia. Pope Clement VII (1378–1394), who resided in Avignon, approved Albertus Hecht as Bishop of Tartu, who had been appointed by the chapter but had not managed to get official confirmation from the pope in Rome. Urbanus VI (1378–1389) in Rome set the Order against Hecht, advising the Order to arrest the bishop and keep him imprisoned until further orders from Urbanus, and to support Urbanus's own favourite for the Tartu bishop's office, Dietrich Damerow.

Damerow was appointed in 1379, but was able to take up his position in the bishopric only in 1385. Damerow was keen to be independent, and formed a coalition against the Order, an act which was followed by hostilities, ending in the defeat of the Tartu bishop and reconciliation at the Danzig peace negotiations in summer 1397. In this conflict too, Tallinn wholly supported its overlord.

One of the ways to expand its power that the Teutonic Order persistently tried to realise in its territories in Prussia, Estonia and Livonia was the incorporation of the bishoprics of these areas: the Order wished to make sure that the chapter only consisted of Order priests and that the bishops were elected from among members of the Teutonic Order. This was not always completely successful and was not only dependent on the Order. To make a bishop's election dependent on his belonging to the Order required papal approval. By the end of the fourteenth century, the incorporation of the Riga archbishopric was completed. In 1397, Pope Bonifacius IX declared that the Riga archbishop must be a member of the Teutonic Order. In the Tallinn

diocese, the case was decided separately for each bishop. During the fourteenth century, the issue did not come up very frequently, as the term of office of Tallinn bishops was usually quite long. There were only four bishops between 1298 and 1403, whereas between 1403 and 1509 there were six, and in 1509–1561, nine. The first Tallinn bishop appointed during the reign of the Order, Ludovicus de Monasterio, joined the Order soon after he had received a papal bull of provision. Several later bishops were already members of the Order or joined when appointed, as did Ludovicus. It was only in the second half of the fifteenth century that some prelates occupying the position of the Tallinn bishop did not belong to the Teutonic Order.

Compared with other Livonian bishops, the income of a Tallinn bishop was small, and he often had difficulties in paying his duties to the papal curia. The Order helped the bishop in this obligation and in extending the date of payment, a fact that naturally increased the bishop's dependency on the Order.

Comparing the attitude of the Teutonic Order and the Danish king towards the northern Estonian church, the Order's power over the religious life of the Tallinn diocese was not favourable. In the course of half a century, the Order did not establish a single church institution in the area, and its donations to the northern Estonian church were rather modest. It was also possible that the financial means of the bishopric had been largely distributed during the Danish period, and there was nothing much left in the diocese, where a substantial part of the land belonged to the vassals.

The 1354 interdict that was placed on the Tallinn diocese is shown in the sources as extremely unfavourable, primarily because of the hostile neophytic environment. Even

though the relevant texts are distorted by rhetorical excesses, the St. George's Night Uprising remained for decades the ideological weapon of the colonial powers, particularly in the papal curia. Hardly any attempt was made to get rid of the borderland status, especially when the Order had to fend off the pope's accusations of non-Christian behaviour. This need for justification, lasting hundreds of years, helped to confirm the idea of the singularity of medieval Livonia, and its remarkable task at the borders of western Christianity.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir
proof-read by Richard Adang*