

Who Founded the Pirita Convent?

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Summary

Abstract: This article examines the background of people who were involved in founding the Pirita convent. The founding of the convent was a joint undertaking of various groups of people. In addition to Hanseatic merchants, local vassals and the landowner, the Teutonic Order also contributed to it.

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Balthasar Russow's *Livonian Chronicle* lists three wealthy merchants as founders of the Pirita convent: Hinrich Schwalberch (Swalbart), Hinrich Huxer and Gerlach Kruse, who gave everything they had to the convent and became brothers there. This bit of information travels from one Pirita-related publication to another, although we know hardly anything about these men. The aim of the current article is to examine the background of these people, which will enable us to get a better overview of the social and political background of the founding of the Pirita convent.

Tallinn sources do not mention these three merchants. Gerlach Kruse came from the town of Söderköping in Sweden. From 1406, his brother was canon of the Linköping bishopric and from 1415 stayed at the Brigittine abbey of Vadstena. However, the same family name occurred in many Hanseatic towns, mostly among more important people. The founders of the convent were probably a part of this group as well. The little we know about the elite of the Tallinn merchants gives reason to believe that they were open to the outside world to a considerable extent. During the heyday of the Hansa period, merchants

in the Baltic Sea region were very mobile; the leading posts were acquired not by those who could boast of their long-time stay in one place, deep roots or great ancestors, but by those who had relatives sitting in the magistracies in other Hanseatic towns. This Hansa merchant elite, the 'leading group' (*Hansische Führungsgroupe*), has also been described as 'beyond-towns', and this phenomenon was extremely significant in keeping the Hanseatic league together. Looking at these connections in the context of founding the Pirita convent, even if the founders' ties to Tallinn were not direct, they did exist via Hansa. We can but agree with Tore Nyberg, who a long time ago classified monasteries established near Tallinn, Lübeck and Stralsund as Hanseatic establishments (*Hanseatische Gründungen*).

A convent, however, could not be founded only by a group of enthusiasts. An important role in founding other Brigittine monasteries was played by overlords. In the local Estonian context, the role of the Teutonic Order has so far been unfairly neglected. When two anonymous men visited Vadstena in 1407 and spoke of their intention of founding a convent, the *Vadstena Diarium* also mentions that the Teutonic Order had given permission to found an order and had allocated land for it. The name of the Livonian master of the Teutonic Order, Konrad von Vietinghoff, crops up among the founders of the convent in the bull of Pope Johannes XXIII ('anti-pope') in 1411, which officially confirmed the Pirita convent.

The Teutonic Order and the Brigittines had quite a few features that led to a mutual attraction. Each had an aristocratic element. The Order was a religious order of knights, whose social base was predominantly the lower ranks of the German aristocracy. St. Birgitta was descended from the Swedish

high nobility and the second book of her Revelations, written in Sweden between 1344 and 1349, largely deals with the problems of the nobility. Birgitta was concerned that the ideals characterising the noble orders in the 12th and 13th centuries were disappearing. Lofty aims had been replaced by greed and disloyalty. Birgitta's clear aim was to reconnect the knights with the church. Her revelations favoured the ideology of crusades, which might have made her ideas acceptable to the Teutonic Order. However, Birgitta did not utter a call to arms for a war against the pagans; rather, she advocated a peaceful mission to bring them to the Christian faith. The new order never materialised, but Birgitta's criticism of the knights and her innovative programme no doubt had an impact on the existing religious orders of the knights.

Birgitta's criticism can be seen as constructive, strengthening the ties between the two orders, whereas it is rather difficult to explain the collaboration between the Teutonic Order and the Brigittines in the Baltic Sea area in the early 15th century. The relations of the Order with the newly established Kalmar Union were tense, but at the same time dynamic, depending to a great extent on the conjunctural policy of the moment. After the death of his guardian Queen Margareta in 1412, the King of Denmark Erik of Pomerania attempted to turn the Vadstena abbey into a religious centre of the Kalmar Union which would be closely connected to his court. Erik's dynasty was also directly connected to the earlier Brigittine monasteries Syon Abbey in England and Maribo in Denmark. Erik presented a demand to the Teutonic Order to return northern Estonia to Denmark, and the plan found supporters among Harju-Viru vassals. The founding of the Pirita convent occurred before the time of King Erik and, as a result, the Teutonic Order must have

felt quite secure in the Baltic Sea region.

What is probably more important is the fact that, although she was a Swedish saint, Birgitta's ideas were perceived in the early 15th century not just as Scandinavian, but as something much wider, as an innovation of the whole Catholic Church, involving not just monastery reform but also, for example, the ending of the schism. During those decades, the Brigittine movement was especially topical and this would explain the support of the Teutonic Order for their activities in the Baltic.

The relations between the Pirita convent and the town of Tallinn, however, were tense. In a 1413 letter to the Order's Grand Master in Prussia, Tallinn complained about the convent being too close to the coast and that it could thus become a nest of pirates and pose a threat to the harbour. At the same time, it should be emphasised that the security risk was not the only argument of the citizens of Tallinn against the convent. The correspondence expresses a worry about pious donations pouring out of town or, in other words, that there would be increasing competition among the church institutions in Tallinn. Controversy about the location of the Brigittine convent lasted for some time, and even the Livonian Masters of the Order became more cautious. The doubts of the Teutonic Order might have appeared only in connection with the Danish king Erik's specific plans to re-conquer Estonia that fall in the same decade. Still, the Order overcame its doubts quite quickly. In 1416/17 Siegfried Lander allowed the founding of stone buildings at Pirita. In a letter to Tallinn, the Master asked for permission to use the Tallinn quarries. Pirita also asked permission in 1437 via the Livonian Master. These messages further deepen the impression that Tallinn and Pirita had communication problems.

The inhabitants of the convent included representatives of prominent patrician families of Tallinn. On the other hand, the town complained even in the early 16th century that it had no convent where the daughters of its citizens could find shelter. The fact that Pirita was not a suitable place for the descendants of ordinary burghers indicates the elitist nature of the convent. It could be summarised that the Pirita convent, situated outside the Tallinn town borders, was not entirely isolated from the town's religious and social life, but did not play any significant role in it either.

According to Tore Nyberg, the aristocratic element had very little impact on establishing the Pirita convent. However, written sources and the tombstones surviving in the church tell a different story. The participation of Harju-Viru vassals in building the convent is evident in the letter of the Livonian Master Siegfried Lander von Sponheim to Tallinn in 1416/17. Among other things, the letter mentions that the vassals allowed stones from their domains to be used in construction work. Analysing the existing sources, the knight-hood's clear support of the Pirita convent is revealed: the main donation was land, but large sums of money were not infrequent either. These were influential families whose control stretched to Virumaa in the east, although the lands given to the convent were situated in the parishes around Tallinn (Jõe-lähtme, Juuru and Rapla). Compared with donations by the citizens of Tallinn, mostly less than 20 marks, we can say that the convent existed due to the support of the nobility. One of the prominent persons here is Elsebet Po-debusk from the Danish high nobility, who spent her last days in the convent as a nun. Her part in alleviating the tensions between King Erik and the Teutonic Order and her remarkably generous donations to Pirita prob-

ably played a significant role in the development of the convent, whose roots were in Scandinavia.

It has to be admitted, in summary, that the founding of the convent cannot be exclusively ascribed to one or the other social group; rather, it happened thanks to the collaboration of very different forces, such as the Teutonic Order, Hanseatic merchants, the local nobility and the Vadstena abbey.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir
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