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# Saint Mary and the Dragon-Killer

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## *Saint Mary and the Dragon-Killer*

Penetra nos mosteiros e nas dioceses, desce ao pavo para o dia 8 de Dezembro ser guardado como de preceito. O jejum, na vigilia era só de conselho, e raramente o foi de obrigação.

O officio litúrgico foi variando de diocese para diocese: *Felix namque es* (mosteiro do Pombeiro); *Gaude Mater Ecclesia* (Porto), *Ecce stella Maria* (Evora, 1528); *Sicut liliūm inter spinas* (Evora, 1548).

Assim se firmou a festa litúrgica da Imaculada na Europa ocidental, no país mais do oeste, Portugal católico e mariano onde a Virgem apareceu em 13 de Maio de 1917.

Dr. Ambrósio DE PINA, S.J.

### SAINT MARY AND THE DRAGON-KILLER

*Marian devotion — Livonia — 12th — 13th centuries*

*The Christian expansion to the east coast of the Baltic Sea illustrates the diversity of the missionary movement in the Middle Ages. In some instances this religious expansion mingled with political expansions, for example in the Byzantine, Carolingian and Germanic kingdoms.*

*Livonia (modern Latvia), the subject of the following article, received the Christian faith first through the Byzantine Church during the "period of Kiev" (which ended with the Mongol invasion c. 1240). In the 12th century, from the west, came the Augustinian canon Meinhard of Segeberg, who evangelized the area, centering on Üxeküll from about 1180 on. After him, Albert, the first local bishop (consecrated in 1199) founded Riga, which became his episcopal city in 1201, and began to organize a crusade. He eventually founded the Military Order of the Knights of the Sword to assist him.*

*Dr. Urban's article gives an indication of the complexity and historical difficulty involved in considering the history of marian devotion in the various Baltic countries (an almost-untouched area of scholarship) especially with regard to Byzantine and Latin missionary activities.*

The competition among saints in the middle ages was intense and full of consequences, as numerous examples illustrate. Saints tended to support national, regional, and local loyalties; and who does not recognize and thrill to the old war-cries: "For England and St. George!" and "San-

tiago!" These were hardly limited to non-Christian opponents; and competition was not restricted to the battlefield. The fact was that money was limited, and the votaries of one cult or another had to attract pilgrims and supporters, a need which involved a high degree of salesmanship; much propaganda, and an occasional use of outright fraud or force.

One very interesting little example of this is found in Livonia, where the supporters of the Virgin Mary found themselves in competition with the supporters of St. George. Those two essential Byzantine figures were each at the height of a newfound popularity, a popularity that politicians tried to turn to their own advantage; and in the attempt, the politicians gave rather interesting attributes to both the dragon-killer and the Blessed Virgin. This aspect of popular piety perhaps deserves more attention than it has received.

Not quite three decades into the thirteenth century, the following portrait of the Virgin Mary was drawn by the major chronicler of Livonia:

... Quod Mariam matrem eius offenderat, que maris dicitur stella, quapropter et ipsa certam ipsi viam non ostendit. Taliter idem miles expulsus a Lyvoniam rediit in Daciam, abrenunciando deinceps in terra beate virginis regalem advocaciam. Sic, sic maris stella suam semper custodit Lyvoniam; sic, sic mundi domina terrarumque omnium imperatrix specialem suam terram semper defendit; sic, sic regina celi terrenis regibus imperat. Nonne imperat, quando reges multos contra Lyvoniam pugnantes exacerbavit? Nonne exacerbavit, quando regem magnum Woldemarum de Plosceke venientem in Lyvoniam cum exercitu subitanea morte percussit? Numquid non regem magnum Nogardie, qui Lyvoniam prima vice despoliavit, regno suo statim privavit, ut a civibus suis turpiter expelleretur. Et alium regem Nogardie, qui secunda vice Lyvoniam depredavit, per Tataros occidit? ... Ecce Dei mater, quam mitis circa suos, qui fideliter ei deserviunt in Lyvoniam, qualiter ipsa semper defendit eos a cunctis inimicis suis, quamque crudelis circa illos, qui terram ipsius invadere sive qui fidem et honorem filii sui in terra ipsa conantur impedire! Ecce quot et quantos reges ipsa exacerbavit! Ecce quot perfidorum et paganorum principes ac seniores de terra delevit, quoties victoriam suis de inimicis concessit! Semper enim hactenus vexillum suum in Lyvoniam et preeundo et subsequendo defendit ac de inimicis triumphare fecit. ... Ipsam tam mitem matrem misericordie time, ipsam Dei matrem adorate, ipsam tam crudelem vindicatricem, de

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inimicis suis placatam vobis reddite, terram ipsius deinceps impugnare nolite, ut ipsa sit vobis mater. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Now, to many this "land of the Blessed Virgin" may be unknown. What happened was that missionaries to the natives in what is today Latvia and Estonia dedicated the region to her in hope of attracting more priests and crusaders. Perhaps this was done by the first bishop to maintain himself successfully in the region, a German Augustinian monk from Segeberg in Holstein. About 1186 he founded a convent of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Uexküll, where he had a very small following among the natives. Certainly the land had been dedicated to her by the time the third bishop moved the convent to Riga: "Postea . . . transtulit et cathedram episcopalem cum tota Lyvonia beatissime Dei genitricis Marie honori deputavit."<sup>2</sup>

Pope Innocent III encouraged this by issuing crusading bulls, by establishing a special crusading order, and by the gift of a Bible from the hand of Pope Gregory.<sup>3</sup> All of this redounded to the glory of the Virgin, and to the profit of the Bishop of Riga, who was her protégé.

How did the Bishop of Riga use the popularity of the Virgin? First, he made the argument that the crusade was to defend Her Land. How many medieval minds could resist that thought? Second, and as important, he took the "pilgrims" immediately to St. Mary's for Mass, where they gave free will offerings of considerable value, and dedicated themselves to the holy war. Before they left the bishop had the funds to continue the crusade, and the men necessary to garrison his castles and fill the ranks of his army. These two uses never changed, and his propagandists kept the connection between the Virgin and the crusade in the popular mind.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae* (ed. Leonid Arbusow, and Albert Bauer, 2nd edition, Hannover, 1955), pp. 178-181.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 14, 18, 20-1.

<sup>4</sup> We have no description of a sermon except in the most general terms: ". . . per vicos et plateas, per civitates et castra querens, quis se murum pro domo Domini opponat, quis crucis signum sibi affigat, ut mare transeat, ut in Lyvoniā vadat ad consolationem paucorum, qui ibi remanserant." *Ibid.*, p. 74; on the other hand, we do have a description of the bishop's plea to Pope Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council: "Sicut, inquit;

But the course of history never runs smoothly. Though the Bishop of Riga was making headway in his crusade, he was troubled very much by the Welf-Hohenstaufen conflict in Germany, by the ambition of the Danish monarch, and by competing crusades. These drained off the supply of warriors so that in some years he could barely defend his new conquests, much less expand. His solution, one probably suggested by an aggressive Cistercian co-worker, was to create a crusading order. He did this with the clear understanding that such orders tended to be troublesome and untrustworthy. But, since they brought in skilled troops willing to stay through the terrible Livonian winters, and would cost relatively little, he was willing to take the chance.<sup>5</sup>

This order, known popularly as the Brothers of the Sword (more formally as the *Militiae Christi*), was indeed ambitious, aggressive, and untrustworthy. Within a short time they were demanding one-third of all the lands conquered, and when the bishop refused, they went to

‘pater sancte, terram sanctam Ierosolimitanam, que est terra filii, sanctitatis tue studio fovere non desinis, sic Lyvoniā, que est terra matris, consolationum tuarum sollicitudinibus hactenus in gentibus dilatam etiā hac vice desolatam derelinquere non debes! Diligit enim filius matrem suam, qui, sicut non vult terram suam perdi, sic nec vult terram matris utique periclitari.’ Cui respondit summus pontifex et ait: ‘Sicut terram filii, sic et terram matris paterne sollicitudinis nostre studiis semper promovere curabimus.’” *Ibid.*, p. 132; the bishops of the area were notorious for their widespread activities. They had to recruit armies to conquer their sees.

Friedrich Georg von Burge, *Livland, die Wege der deutschen Weibbischofe* (Leipzig, 1875); When the crusaders arrived, “De quorum adventu civēs et alii in Riga morantes valde gavisī obviam eis exeunt et cum reliquis tam episcopum quam omnem comitatum ipsius honorifice suscipiunt.” *Heinrici*, p. 20; This triumphal entry into the city, repeated with every arrival of ships from the west, presumably concluded with a special Mass, at which time the crusaders renewed their vows. Apparently what happened was that certain crusaders preferred to hear Mass at St. Jacob’s or St. George’s. The Swordbrothers tried to attract crusaders to their chapel—just as in other ways they made every attempt to undermine the Bishop of Riga—and with success. The bishop forbade the practice. Eventually a papal legate, called in to resolve more pressing problems, made a final disposition. The Swordbrothers’ chapel was free from episcopal regulation and open to crusaders. Friedrich Georg von Bunge, *Liv-, Est-, und Kurländische Urkundenbuch* (XII Vols., Riga, Reval, 1857-75), III, §LXXXII, §LXXXIIa.

<sup>5</sup> The best book on this subject is by Friedrich Benninghoven, *Der Orden der Schwertbrüder* (Cologne, 1965). Another would be Gisela Gnegel-Waitschies’ *Bischof Albert von Riga: ein Bremer Domherr als Kirchenfürst im Osten* (Hamburg, 1958).

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the pope and emperor.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the knights attempted to attract the "pilgrims" to their chapel, St. George's, where they would donate their gifts and offer their services.<sup>7</sup> As the bishop resisted them, he made Mary a party symbol!

Soon the bishop and the crusading order were quarreling over the pilgrims and their right to choose between St. Mary's and St. George's. It would be very interesting to know more about this dispute, whether or not the relative merits of the two patrons were argued, but afterwards the victors made a nearly successful attempt to remove all evidence that the quarrel had even occurred.<sup>8</sup> The resolution of the conflict came in two stages. First, a papal legate confirmed the rights of the Swordbrothers in 1226, and allowed the crusaders to choose between the chapel of St. George and St. Mary's. Most of the pilgrims chose St. George's, and went there to make their free-will offerings and offer themselves for military service to the Swordbrothers. Second, after the death of Bishop Albert, civil war raged for almost a decade. The Swordbrothers were completely triumphant, but after their annihilating defeat in the forests of Samogithia, the Teutonic Knights were invited in to replace them. The prestige of the adherents of the Virgin sank terribly.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This conflict between bishop and crusading order is as important as the war against the heathens. Eventually the crusading order triumphs so completely that we tend, incorrectly, to look upon the Baltic lands as its personal preserve.

<sup>7</sup> *Urkundenbuch*, I, §LXXXIII.

<sup>8</sup> This critical controversy cannot be documented, but the whole controversy was so embarrassing that each of the parties—the Bishop of Riga, the citizens of Riga, the Swordbrothers, the Danes, and the papal legate—decided it was best to suppress all mention of it. A later embarrassment, the kidnapping of the Archbishop of Riga, came to light almost a generation after the incident. See *Zeugenverhör des Franciscus de Moliano* (ed. August Seraphim, Riga, 1918). Little wonder that any questions regarding the Virgin or St. George would not survive to our time.

<sup>9</sup> Early in the crusade, when the Bishop of Riga was at the height of his power, he could call upon thousands of warriors. Benninghoven, *Schwertbrüder*, pp. 400-405; by 1290 the Master of the Teutonic Knights could remark that the episcopal forces were quite insignificant, being only eighteen Germans and three hundred natives. *Urkundenbuch*, I §DXXXVIII; with the decline in his military power, the archbishop could not claim the exclusive support of the Virgin. And similarly, the popular image of the Virgin was "Marien, der voven mîn, / der himelischen kunigîn," not that of the bishop shouting in battle, "Monstra te esse matrem, Monstra te esse Matrem." *Heinrici*, p. 129.

Unlike Athena expelling Poseidon from Athens, St. George did not replace the Virgin as the principal saint in the Baltic region. The Virgin retained her popularity, but she had a different public image. She was now the mother, the ideal woman, the lady. But in 1290 the Teutonic Knights looked to her as their patroness, and one could write.

dô wart gelobet Jhêsus Crist,  
 der alles lobes wirdic ist,  
 und die liebe mûter sin,  
 Mariâ die vrowe mîn.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Livländische Reimchronik* (ed. Leo Meyer, Paderborn, 1876), 12014-8.