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### a Counterfactual Perspective

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# The Reception of Medieval Europe in the Baltic Sea Region

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## Europeanisation around the Baltic Sea

A Counterfactual Perspective

Jes Wienberg

What if?

What if? What would have happened, if individuals had made different decisions in the past, or if famous battles had ended differently? Would the process of Europeanisation have had a different character, direction or timetable? Or could it even have been a totally different process, resulting in a totally different mentality and material culture around the Baltic Sea?

Imagine if Sweden had become Islamic in the Viking Age? Or if the Mongols had conquered Europe back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century? Could it have happened? Yes, definitely!

What if the Estonian uprising of 1343 had been successful? What if the Danish King Valdemar the (so-called) Victorious had not been kidnapped in 1223? Or what if Bernard of Clairvaux had chosen to study in Germany, instead of joining the Cistercians in 1112? Would then the history or only the story of the Europeanisation process have been different?

In the CCC project we have described and analysed the process of Europeanisation around the Baltic Sea between 1100 and 1400. We have seen Europeanisation as a tidal wave washing over the shores of the Baltic from the south and the west to the north and the east. We have seen the process

of Europeanisation as an irresistible force, changing people, culture and society in almost every respect. But, as yet, we have not discussed whether this process was actually inevitable, or whether it could have had a different course.

Instead of synthesising my studies of church architecture around the Baltic Sea, I intend to discuss the Europeanisation process from a counterfactual perspective. After some general comments on this perspective, and a few words on the concept of Europe and Europeanisation, I will present some 'what if' stories. Some are borrowed from the literature, and some are my own contributions. The twofold aim is partly to open the way for a discussion on the question of whether the Europeanisation process was unavoidable, and partly to emphasize the importance of key figures and events in our reconstructed, or rather constructed, past.

Counterfactual history

Counterfactual history means the opposite of the history that actually happened. Counterfactual history involves daring to write what might have happened if this and that. It is a history of 'What if?' – a history of alternatives in the past.

The philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote a famous counterfactual thesis in 1660 concerning the importance of the nose of Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. Another early example of the genre is by Louis Napoléon Geoffroy-Château, who in 1836 wrote a story about Napoléon, where he was not defeated at Waterloo, but instead became emperor of the world. A more recent example where the counterfactual analysis is used is by an American economic historian, Robert W. Fogel. In 1964 he analysed what would have happened to the economy of the United States without the spread of railroads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

Counterfactual history had its breakthrough in the 1980s and 90s together with other post-modern criticisms of the 'great narrative'. Counterfactual history is one among several experiments with the established genres of history. It is close to the 'historical novel' and to science fiction, with the difference that science fiction is reversed into the past. The examples of counterfactual history come mainly from the Anglo-American world and from Scandinavia. In Sweden we have the fascinating anthology, *Tänk om... Nio kontrapunktiska essäer* [What if... Nine counterfactual essays].<sup>2</sup> And in Denmark a similar anthology was published recently, *En anden historie. Ni alternative Danmarkshistorier* [Another history. Nine alternative histories of Denmark].<sup>3</sup>

The counterfactual perspective is a reaction to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which emphasized conjunctures and structures. Both Marxist history and the Annales School looked for social and economic relations, denying the importance of individuals and events. As a paradox the same century was formed by individuals and events. Poli-

tical leaders – such as Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Churchill, Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Walesa and Mandela – put their very personal fingerprint on developments.

The theoretical basis of the counterfactual perspective is chaos theory, the theory of unstable, non-linear systems, where very small effects at certain points can cause great changes. The classic poetic example is known as the 'butterfly effect': The flap of the wing of a butterfly in Brazil may later provoke a hurricane in Texas. In a similar way the past might be viewed as an unstable system. The past has always been open in different directions. However, when we know what actually happened we become blind to the alternatives, which were real to the actors in the past. And there has been a false 'Dogma of Large-Large', according to the American historian Donald McCloskey, that great changes need great causes.<sup>4</sup>

It is hardly a secret that traditional or structural historians dislike counterfactual history. In the German world, we find few examples of 'Wie es eigentlich (nicht) gewesen'. Benedetto Croce has spoken of 'anti-historical absurdities', E. P. Thompson has called it 'ahistorical shit' and E. H. Carr has called it 'unscientific'.<sup>5</sup>

The values of a counterfactual perspective are several:

1. It puts the focus on the openness of history, which we do not see, when today we are sitting with the answers.
2. It emphasizes the importance of events and individuals.
3. It is a necessary complement, when we analyse causal relations in the past. Finally, I think there is a fourth reason for its popularity, which is seldom mentioned:

Europeanisation spontaneously evokes associations with the European Union and the process of creating a New Europe after the fall of the Soviet Empire. However, in the CCC project the concept of Europeanisation has been used to characterize the transformation of the countries around the Baltic Sea, and here especially the Eastern Baltic, between 1100 and 1400.<sup>6</sup>

It would be no secret to the participants of the CCC project that the use of the concept 'Europeanisation' has been the subject of lively discussion. And surely there are alternatives, such as civilisation, Germanisation, feudalisation or Christianisation. But each of these concepts is just as controversial or typical of its time as Europeanisation.

As a late confessor I would declare that I find the concept of 'Europeanisation' excellent both as a metaphor and as an analytical tool of the CCC project, because the transformation of the Baltic Sea region has its origin in the Western or Catholic Christianity, which later defined itself as European.

It is in Catholic Christianity that we find the initiative and force behind the four formative elements in the Europeanisation process: Christianisation, crusade, trade and colonisation – represented by the sign of the cross, the sword, the scales and the plough. Researchers choose concepts which they find relevant to their own present context, when they reconstruct (or construct) the past. And we are in fact forced to use later concepts as analytical tools, because there are no contemporary words which include the wide range of changes we want to study as holistic processes. Just as medieval people did not know that they were living in the Middle

4. It brings a liberating freedom in the style of both thinking and writing – free from institutional rules – which gives pleasure to both the historian and the public.

However, attempts have been made to formulate certain rules of method which counterfactual history should follow, in order to be acceptable. First, a new perspective opens up for bold new stories about the past, then, not surprisingly, a methodology is formulated.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion, this is only an attempt by counterfactualists to gain acceptance as a part of the institutional paradigm. The rules unnecessarily constrain the potential of the perspective.

#### Europe and Europeanisation

The concept of Europe may have several meanings. First of all Europe means an idea. The idea may be a Christian society, or it may be a certain capitalist spirit. Often Europe is simply defined as a geographical space stretching to the Ural Mountains, just as I learned in school. Or Europe is supposed to end at the western border of Russia, as I have heard recently in Estonia.

The concept of Europe, as we know it, was originally meant as a sacred topography. The concept of Europe was given a new meaning as a Christian slogan by Pope Pius II in 1459. It was a slogan to unite Catholic Christianity against the Osman Turks after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The Pope used the concept in his attempt to revive the Crusades.<sup>7</sup> Thus the concept of Europe, like other concepts of identity, is based on an opposition between 'us' and 'the other'.

More counterfactual stories

The period of 1100–1400 around the Baltic Sea presents an infinite number of colourful individuals and bloodstained battles. If we read the splendid survey 'The Northern Crusades' by the historian Eric Christiansen, we have almost too many individuals, events and battles to choose between.<sup>16</sup> There are so many situations where the counterfactual perspective might be applied. I have decided to select just a few events, individuals and years: the Estonian Revolt of 1343, the Danish Empire in 1223 and Bernard of Clairvaux in 1112.

The Estonian revolt

In 1343 there was a great revolt in Estonia. Germans and Christians were killed regardless of age and gender, in total 1800 people. Houses and churches were burnt, including the monastery of Padise. The castle of Peude on Ösel/Saaremaa was taken and the inhabitants were killed. The castles of Hapsal/Hapsalu and Reval/Tallinn were under siege. It is mentioned that the Estonians did not want to be Christian any longer. In two battles the Teutonic Order finally succeeded in suppressing the revolt. And according to the medieval sources 12 000 heathens were killed.<sup>17</sup>

The revolt is interesting, because it reveals that there was in fact an alternative to the ideology of Europeanisation. If only the Estonians had won the two battles, we would have seen an extinction of the European material culture and mentality, which had been forced on the eastern side of the Baltic. If necessary Lithuania, which remained pagan until 1386, might have functioned as a model. However, I do not find it

With an Islamic Sweden and a Christian Denmark the situation in the Baltic Sea area would have been very unpredictable. The frontier of Europeanisation would have gone through the forests of Sweden or the Sound. In the worst scenario, if we believe the thesis by Samuel Huntington, we would have had a border between two clashing civilisations.<sup>14</sup>

Mongolian Europe

Europe might have become part of a great Mongolian empire! That is the claim of the historian Kurt Villads Jensen in his new anthology 'Another History'.<sup>15</sup>

In 1241 a Mongolian army led by Khan Qaidu easily defeated Duke Henry of Silesia and his German-Polish knights at Liegnitz in present-day Germany. Then the Mongolians surprisingly withdrew, maybe because of the death of the Great Khan Ögöday. If instead they had proceeded, Europe would have been open to a massive invasion.

In 'Another History' Jensen speculates about what would have happened, if Denmark had been occupied, and what the course of political history would have been with a Danish king, still Christian, but subordinate to the Khan. We might have seen a European currency of dinars, a common Persian language, freedom of religion and a Europe developing peacefully, industrialising by the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The inexplicable withdrawal of the Mongolians in 1241, an accidental event, changed the course of European history. If they had stayed in Europe, we might still have had a 'Europeanisation' of the Baltic Sea, but its character would definitely have been changed. Maybe we could then have had a CCC project focusing on the concept of 'Asianisation'.

Islamic Sweden

Imagine if Sweden had become Islamic in the Viking Age! This was a realistic possibility according to an article 'Counterfactual Archaeology', by the classical archaeologist Dominic Ingemærk.<sup>11</sup>

Vikings from Sweden had close contact with the caliphate in Baghdad. Important testimony to these eastern contacts is provided by the great amount of Arabic silver found on Gotland and the mainland. Christianisation has disguised the many influences from the East. And according to Ingemærk the Vikings might very easily have brought Islamic faith back to Sweden. In fact some sources mention people, maybe Vikings ('*våringar*'), in the service of Byzantium, who had converted. And according to the archaeologist Erik Sperber, who has done work on balances, weights and weighing, there must have been an Islamic community in Birka in Sweden.<sup>12</sup> However, as another, and maybe more likely, alternative, I would propose that Sweden might just as easily have been Christianised from the east, thus becoming Greek-Orthodox.

To demonstrate the arbitrary nature of the process Ingemærk has taken an example from Nestor's Chronicle. In the 980s Prince Vladimir wanted to choose a suitable religion. He received representatives from four religions – the Islamic, the Roman Catholic, the Greek Orthodox and the Jewish – and then chose the Greek Orthodox, because he was impressed by the beauty of its service.<sup>13</sup> If he had chosen Islam it would have been possible that Sweden would also have become Islamic instead of Christian. However, Denmark, with its western contacts, would still have become Christian according to the counterfactual history of Ingemærk.

Ages, people by the Baltic Sea had no concepts for the process which deeply affected their lives.

Now my only question is whether we could conceive alternatives to the process of Europeanisation. Was the Europeanisation in fact an irresistible and inevitable process? Might the process have had a different course? Or, even worse, might there have been totally different alternatives?

Counterfactual stories: Islamic Sweden and Mongolian Europe

We can find examples of counterfactual history concerning all periods. But most examples treat rather modern events, and very many the Second World War: What would have happened if Napoleon had won at Waterloo in 1812? What would have happened if Germany had invaded Britain in 1940, or if Adolf Hitler had been killed in the attempted assassination in 1944?<sup>9</sup>

In the Swedish anthology 'What if... Nine counterfactual essays', the prolific historian Dick Harrison raises a few counterfactual questions of medieval history:<sup>10</sup> What if the Roman Empire had survived? Would Charlemagne have become Emperor, if he had kept out of Lombardic Italy? What would have been the consequences of the crusades, if Fredrik Barbarossa had not drowned? And how would Europe have developed if it had not been hit by the Black Death?

Now I will mention two counterfactual hypotheses which might be relevant to the Europeanisation of the Baltic. Let us call them Islamic Sweden and Mongolian Europe.

realistic to imagine that the Estonians could have resisted the Teutonic Order and other Christians in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

#### *The Danish Empire*

A Danish Empire was created around the Baltic Sea during the half-century after the capture of Arkona on Rügen in 1169. Under the rule of kings Valdemar the Great, Canute and Valdemar the Victorious the Empire expanded along the southern coast of the Baltic Sea – from Jutland in the west to Estonia in the east. The climax of Danish power came with the victory at Reval/Tallinn in 1219, and when the German bishop Albert of Riga accepted Danish suzerainty over Livonia. And the importance of this Danish Empire, when we want to understand the development of, for example, the architecture of the countries around the Baltic, has recently been stressed by researchers such as the Estonian art historian Kersti Markus and by myself.<sup>18</sup>

The Danish Empire is an excellent example of the importance of single events and individuals when the whole situation is uncertain. The Danish expansion along the southern coast of the Baltic was only possible because the German Empire was weak. The German Empire was in conflict with Italian towns, and there was an internal conflict between two dynasties, the Hohenstaufs and the Welfs. And the pope wanted a strong power in the North, behind the back of the German Emperor.<sup>19</sup>

The Danish Empire might well have collapsed in 1219. When the Estonians surprisingly attacked the Danish camp at Reval/Tallinn, they killed Bishop Theoderic, because they believed that they had found King Valdemar.<sup>20</sup> However, here we do

not have to speculate about 'What if this or that?', because what did not happen in 1219, in fact happened in 1223. The king was not killed – he was kidnapped. In the morning after a hunt on the little Danish island of Lyø the king and his son were kidnapped by a German vassal, Count Henry of Schwerin. They were kept in prison for 3 years. And when they were finally released in 1225, after paying a high ransom, only Fernern, Rügen and Estonia still remained under Danish control. The defeat at Bornhöved in 1227 merely underlined this fact. A single event befalling an individual had meant the collapse of the Danish Empire around the Baltic Sea.

#### *Bernard of Clairvaux*

If we really want to construct a counterfactual story, where the course of Europeanisation changes direction, I would suggest a closer look at a single person in the core area early in the process. The area is Burgundy and the name is Bernard, later known as Bernard of Clairvaux. No other person influenced European history in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century as he did. Bernard, born in 1090, joined the Cistercian order in 1112, only 22 years old, with thirty of his friends and relatives. He founded the abbey of Clairvaux in 1115, wrote the rules of the Knight Templars, later copied by the Orders of the Sword Brothers in Riga. He initiated the second crusade in 1145. And he founded 163 monasteries in Europe.<sup>21</sup>

The nobleman Bernard was set on an ecclesiastical career. He was on the point of setting out for studies in Germany, when he decided to join the Cistercians in Cîteaux. We need only to imagine that he actually went to Germany, to see a different Euro-

peanisation, at least if we connect the process with the Cistercians and a Catholic world system, as Nils Blomkvist has done.<sup>22</sup> Bernard could not know it, but what might have been a small step for a man, became a giant leap for Europe and Europeanisation.

#### Four theses and one question

To facilitate further discussion, I will summarize my essay in four theses and one question:

#### *Theses*

1. Counterfactual story-telling is a useful complement to factual history.
2. Europeanisation was neither inevitable nor the only possible process.

3. Alternatives in the past were: an Islamic or Greek-Orthodox Sweden, a Mongolian Europe and a pagan Eastern Baltic.
4. In unstable situations single events and individuals were crucial to the future course of development, e.g. Valdemar the Victorious and Bernard of Clairvaux.

#### *Question*

5. Are there other forces, events or individuals, which were more important than those I have mentioned above?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Dahlberg 2001, p. 322, 325, 329.
- <sup>2</sup> Andersson & Zander 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> Dahlberg 2001.
- <sup>4</sup> On chaos theory, archaeology and history: Wienberg 1989; McCloskey 1991; Reisch 1991; Gerding & Ingemark 1997; Juhlin 1997; Ingemark 1999.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Dahlberg 2001, p. 324.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Ingemark 1999, p. 25ff.
- <sup>7</sup> Christensen 1988, p. 67ff.
- <sup>8</sup> Blomkvist 1993, also cf. Bartlett 1993, p. 269ff.
- <sup>9</sup> Examples in Andersson & Zander 1999; Dahlberg 2001.
- <sup>10</sup> Harrison 1999.

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