

Medieval Estonia. An Introduction

Jüri Kivimäe

The medieval world never knew a kingdom called Estonia. All textbooks of Baltic, as opposed to Estonian, history deal with Medieval Livonia (German *Livland*, later *Liefland*)¹ and not with medieval Estonia. This statement does not mean that there was no territory or region called Estonia in the Middle Ages. The exact meaning of 'Estonia' is the territory settled by Estonians, where the Estonian language is spoken. This definition delineates a territory which has been more or less stable from the prehistoric times up to the modern period. A small comment must be added – medieval Estonia did not know either people called Estonians or a common Estonian language² Instead of Estonians we can find several tribes and several dialects spoken by them in this territory in the early 13th century. We cannot answer the question to what extent these people acknowledged the relationship of the Estonian tribes and dialects in general, in other words, whether they imagined the Estonian territory as an entity, but at least they differentiated it from the territory of the Livic (Livonian) people, the Latgallians and other neighbouring areas. Yet the medieval usage of the name of the region 'Estonia' only referred to Northern Estonia since it was under Danish rule. The Danish king (queen) was also titled '*dux Estoniae*' ('*ducissa Estoniae*') in the 13th century and the Danish possessions in Northern Estonia were called '*Estonia*' or '*terra Estoniae*' (that way accepted in the peace treaty of Stensby in 1238)³ The German equivalent of the Latin '*Estonia*' – '*Estland*' – became the most common synonym of Northern Estonia through the centuries⁴.

The modern political map of Europe, on the contrary, does not know a state called Livonia. This is some sort of historical paradox that the Livonians or Livic people, who once gave their name to the Eastern Baltic confederation of feudal states, are almost forgotten today as a Finno-Ugric minority and eventually dying out by the end of this century. Medieval

¹ Reinhard Wittran, "Baltische Lande – Schicksal und Name. Umriss der äußeren geschichtlichen Wandlungen seit dem 13. Jahrhundert im Spiegel des Landesnamens." In: *Baltische Lande*. Hrsg. von Albert Brackmann und Carl Engel. Bd. I. Ostbaltische Frühzeit. Hrsg. v. Carl Engel. Leipzig, 1939. S. 480-484.

² Even in the early 19th century the Estonians referred to themselves as '*maarahvas*' (country people) and the Estonian language as '*maakeel*' (native language).

³ Cf. Friedrich Georg von Bunge. *Das Herzogthum Estland unter den Königen von Dänemark*. Gotha, 1877. S. 84; Thomas Riis. *Les institutions politiques centrales du Danemark 1100-1332*. (Odense University Studies in History and Social Sciences. Vol. 46.) Odense University Press, 1977. P. 323.

⁴ In that case '*Estland*' excludes the southern part of Estonia, belonging actually to Northern Liefland in later history.

Europe was aware of Livonia as the common term of territories covering modern Estonia and Latvia. Yet the meaning of the Livonian statehood was rather strange already in the Middle Ages. The political structure of medieval Livonia consisted of the state of the Livonian Order (or the Teutonic Knights, ca. 67 000 square kilometres), the archbishopric of Riga (c. 18 000 sqkm), the bishopric of Tartu/Dorpat (c. 9 600 sqkm), the bishopric of Saare-Lääne/Ösel-Wiek (c. 7 600 sqkm) and the bishopric of Courland (c. 4 500 sqkm).⁵ Medieval Livonia was a typically feudal, fragmented confederation of states and the reasons for this political structure go back to the period of the German-Danish conquest in the early 13th century.

The discovery of the Eastern Baltic coastal areas by German merchants (the so-called *Aufsegelung Livlands*⁶) eventually happened after the founding of Lübeck in 1159/1160. Of course, the modern Estonian and Latvian territories were known to the Scandinavians already in the Viking age and the survival of the people of *Aestii* and the place names *Astlanda*, *Rafala*, *Eysysla* etc., in Nordic sagas and chronicles⁷ are remnants of these early medieval communications. We cannot deny the existence of early medieval Estonian history with its own political events, social order and original popular culture, but we are not able to bring it to the light of written history. We also cannot deny the contacts and conflicts of Estonian tribes with the Nordic world, Russian areas and even with Western tradesmen and Christian missionaries in these centuries, but excluding some exceptional information, it all belongs to the undiscovered world of history, which the collective memory has forgotten. This is the reason why the traditional history-writing has used the following watershed: the period before 1200, i.e. the beginning of the German-Danish conquest, belongs to the prehistory of Estonia and medieval history (as written history) begins with the German-Danish conquest.⁸

We can hardly estimate the level of the political organisation and social order of Estonians on the eve of the conquest. Despite the fact that a centralised system, political unity and a network of towns were missing, we can assume that the political and social life in general was progressing towards the feudal system. This development was, however, then interrupted by foreign conquest and violent christianisation in the form of a late crusade.⁹ The possible alternative to this political turning point in Estonian history would have been the christianisation of Estonian tribes by the incorporation of the territory into Russia, but the realisation of this alternative was blocked by the Tatar-Mongol invasion of Eastern Europe.

During the Livonian crusade the territory of Estonia was conquered (1208 – 1227) and divided among the Teutonic Knights, the Catholic church (the bishoprics of Oesel-Wiek and Dorpat) and the Danish Kingdom (Northern Estonia). The majority of the Estonian elite (*seniores, meliores*) was killed or assimilated, the people were baptised and turned into feudal peasants.¹⁰ The traditional peasant culture and popular beliefs remained under pressure from

⁵ Cf. Norbert Angermann. *Gotthard Kettler. Ordensmeister in Livland und Herzog von Kurland*. Bonn. 1987. P.1.

⁶ See Paul Johansen. "Die Legende von der Aufsegelung Livlands durch Bremer Kaufleute." In: *Europa und Übersee*. Festschrift für Egmont Zechlin. Hamburg, 1961. P. 42-68.

⁷ Cf. Leonid Arbusow, "Die mittelalterliche Schriftüberlieferung als Quelle für die Frühgeschichte der ostbaltischer Völker." In: *Baltische Lande*. Bd. 1. Ostbaltische Frühzeit. P. 172.

⁸ See Toivo U. Raun. *Estonia and the Estonians*. (Studies of nationalities of the USSR). Stanford, California, 1987. P. 15.

⁹ William Urban. *The Baltic Crusade*. DeCalb. 1975.

¹⁰ Harri Moora. Herbert Ligi. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaftsordnung der Völker des Baltikums zu Anfang des 13. Jahrhunderts*. Tallinn. 1970.

the official Christian culture. The dialectic of the conquest includes also the political integration of this territory into Catholic Europe with respect to all elements of statehood and public law, despite the fact that Estonia was only the colonial borderland¹¹ of medieval Europe. Moreover, the conquest was not only the turning point in Estonian political history, but it brought the essential connection to Western European Catholic culture with all its principal components – the Roman alphabet, medieval literacy and education were introduced, Christian churches and abbeys were erected, – regardless of how unacceptable and strange it was for the pagan or newly baptised Estonians. If we compare the historical fate of the Estonians with some other territories conquered during the German expansion eastwards – the Slavic territories in Eastern Germany, ancient Prussia – we must underline that the so-called Livonian crusade was not followed by the colonisation of the German peasants.¹² This difference from the history of Western Slavs and Prussians explains why the Estonians were not assimilated during the Middle Ages and the Estonian language survived in its daily contact with Middle Low German. Typically of German colonial areas, a large number of local places were at the same time referred to with different names, Estonian and German. We probably will never know what was the oldest name for Tallinn as the greatest town in medieval Estonia. The Hanseatic world had entirely accepted '*Reval*' which has Finno-Ugric roots (*Rävåla*), and the modern name '*Tallinn*', first mentioned in records of c. 1536, has also Estonian origin (*Taanilinn* or Danish town).¹³

The formation of the political and social structure was typical of a feudal society, although the indigenous population (generally called in the Middle Ages as non-Germans, '*Undeutsch*') belonged almost entirely to the peasantry (c. 95 % of the total population in Estonia, estimated for the 1550-ies to 250,000 – 280,000) as the lowest estate of the feudal hierarchy and the Germans overwhelmingly formed the ruling class. The great Estonian uprising of 1343 – 1345¹⁴ can be interpreted as the last effort of the aborigines to change the political order, but it only resulted in the end of Danish rule over its colony in Estonia, which was sold to the Teutonic Knights in 1346 and delivered to the Livonian Order in 1347. So medieval Estonia came entirely under German domination. The political structure of Old Livonia has been usually classified as a confederation of small feudal states that can be treated as parts of the Holy Roman Empire.

During the Hanseatic expansion towns were founded in Estonia and granted German civic rights. Reval, Wesenberg (Rakvere) and Narva had been granted a Lübeck charter already under Danish rule. The other Estonian medieval towns – Dorpat (Tartu), Old and New Pernau (Pärnu), Fellin (Viljandi), Hapsal (Haapsalu) and Weissenstein (Paide) received the civic rights of Riga (based on a Hamburg-Riga charter). The urban population was recruited from immigrant merchants and craftsmen of German origin, as well as Estonian peasants. Still in

¹¹ The concept of colonialism has been strongly underlined by Hans Kruus. "L'Esprit du moyen âge estonien." In: *Liber saecularis*. Litterarum Societas Esthonica 1838–1938. Tartu. 1938. P. 292-300.

¹² Charles Higounet, *Die deutsche Ostsiedlung im Mittelalter*. München, 1990. P. 224.

¹³ Andrus Saareste. "Tallinna praegusest nimest" [About the modern name of Tallinn]. In: *Eesti Kirjandus* 1934. nr. lk. 120-127. nr. 4, lk. 164-167. For this collection of articles the historical place names used in the medieval period have been preferred to the modern names – Reval instead of Tallinn. Dorpat instead of Tartu etc.

¹⁴ P. Peter Rebanc. "The *Jüröö Mäss* (St. George's Night Rebellion) of 1343." In: Arvids Ziedonis, Jr., William L. Winter. and Mardi Valgemäe, eds., *Baltic History*. Columbus, Ohio, 1974. Pp. 35-48.

terms of their organisation, architecture, lifestyle and everyday culture the Estonian towns were typically German, preserving some specific non-German and colonial features.

The three classic medieval centuries in Estonian history are sometimes collectively called the Hanseatic Age. These 300 years left a deep impact on the social, economic and political life of Estonia.¹⁵ First, it must not be forgotten that medieval Livonia was not the final station of the great East-West axis of the Hanseatic trade. For the Hanseats Estonia functioned mainly as the transit area on their way to the Russian markets and first of all to Novgorod. Riga, Reval and Dorpat as the three leading Hanseatic towns in Livonia played not only the role of serving the Hanseatic transit trade to Russia but they acquired rather independent trading priorities during these centuries. The trivial truth is that Riga and Reval as Baltic seaports and leading cities of their economic and commercial hinterlands acquired such socio-political importance that they have preserved the position of capital cities and metropolis until this day.¹⁶ We can even conclude that the medieval towns in Estonia as well as in Livonia had the leading position in the infrastructure of the whole region.

The significance of the Estonian territory for medieval Europe was greater than during its subsequent history. Reval as Hanseatic town had a monopolistic position in the trade of the Eastern Baltic and the Gulf of Finland region. Reval and Dorpat together controlled the commercial relations of Western merchants with Novgorod and Pskov. The economic hinterland of Reval included also the coastal areas of Southern Finland.¹⁷ In terms of its commodity circulation, Reval surpassed Stockholm in the 15th and early 16th century. The commercial contacts of the Hanseatic merchants of Reval and Dorpat reached not only Lübeck in Germany but customarily also Bruges, Amsterdam, Antwerp, London and even Lisbon.¹⁸ A great deal of Western merchandise was brought to local markets and, vice versa, the commercial activities of the Hanseats brought some merchandise of Estonian origin to the Western markets. This concerns first of all rye produced by Estonian peasants and transported to the West where it was in great demand.¹⁹ Of course, the Baltic grain-trade was not able to provide all the overcrowded Dutch, Spanish or Portuguese cities with grain, but the local exports of rye had a certain place in European trade and in the late medieval and early modern division of labour.

The direct communications with Central and Western Europe were usual and normal for medieval Estonia. Fresh information from Western Europe reached Estonia in two-three weeks during the navigation period.²⁰ The presence of Western merchandise such as salt,

¹⁵ Paul Johansen. "Die Bedeutung der Hanse für Livland." In: *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*. 65./66. Jg., 1940/1941. Weimar. 1941. Pp. 1-55.

¹⁶ See Jüri Kivimäe. "Tallinn ja Hansa. Ühe ajaloolise struktuuri piirjooni." [Tallinn and the Hansa. The margins of a historical structure]. In: *Looming*. 1988/3. Lk. 376-387.

¹⁷ Gunvor Kerkkonen. "Finland – natürliches nördliches Hinterland Revels." In: *Wirtschaftliche und soziale Strukturen*. Festschrift f. W. Abel. Göttingen. Hannover. 1974. P. 525.

¹⁸ Cf. Jüri Kivimäe. "Reval-Lübeck-Amsterdam: The triangle of trade on the eve of the Livonian War (1554-1557)." In: *From Dunkirk to Danzig. Shipping and Trade in the North Sea and the Baltic, 1350-1850*. Essays in honour of J. A. Faber. Hilversum, 1988. Pp. 299-315.

¹⁹ Jorma Ahvenainen. *Der Getreidehandel Livlands im Mittelalter*. (Societas Scientiarum Fennica. Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum XXXIV 2). Helsinki-Helsingfors. 1963. Pp. 112-117.

²⁰ Gunnar Mickwitz. *Aus Reveler Handelsbüchern*. Zur Technik des Ostseehandels in der ersten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts. (Societas Scientiarum Fennica. Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum. IX. 8.) Helsingfors. 1938. P. 157.

spices, cloth, wines, paper, later on printed books etc. affected not only urban consumption but also the noblemen and peasants in the countryside. The most interesting research question is what kind of impact these cultural contacts and items had left on Estonian peasants.²¹ We believe that the language barrier between the Germans and the Estonians was at least in the towns not so significant. The everyday communication required an elementary knowledge of the other language both on the part of the Germans and the Estonians. The large number of Middle Low German loan-words in Estonian date back to the Hanseatic age.²² All possible influences of the Hanseatic trade on the mentalities and everyday life of this country should not be positively overestimated. The political attitudes and decisions of the Livonian towns were usually determined by the egoistic profit-motive, and their behaviour towards the Livonian statehood was presumably confrontational.

The four major political forces of Livonia represented their interests on the Livonian diets (*Landtag*), established in the 1420ies,²³ but these assemblies were not able to avoid the political fragmentation and they even neutralised the tendencies towards political centralisation. The weakness of the Livonian political system became important during the great political changes in the Baltic region. The formation of the great centralised feudal monarchies of Russia, Poland-Lithuania, Denmark and Sweden sharpened the question of the political hegemony in the Baltic Sea region (the so-called Baltic question).²⁴ The typically medieval confederation of the Livonian states remained the only weak link but had an important strategic position and controlled trade routes between the East and West. These were the reasons why Livonia became the object of territorial and political pretensions of the neighbour countries, especially of Russia. The so-called 'Russian threat' (*Rusche gefahr*) was a permanent item in the public opinion of Livonia in the early 16th century. This can be attributed to the war between Russia and Livonia in 1501–1503 which ended with the defeat of Russian troops and guaranteed peace for Livonia for about half a century but let the feeling of uncertainty and permanent danger in the minds of the Livonians at the same time. In spite of the favourable commercial conjuncture, the medieval spirit prevailed in Livonia until the new winds from Europe started to change the Livonian society.

The Reformation, which divided Germany into different confessions, spread directly from Wittenberg to Livonia. Concerning the Livonian towns with their Hanseatic merchants and craftsmen of German origin, the Lutheran Reformation was accepted in principle similarly as it had been in the other Northern German Hanseatic towns. The meaning of the Reformation was many-sided, far more than only the Reform of the Christian church – it also resulted in a reform of the education, school system and social work, and caused changes in everyday religiosity. Although we are not able to estimate how good Christians the Estonians or non-Germans were during the Reformation era, the fight against the Catholic church influenced the cultural life of the Estonians. Following the introduction of Lutheranism and the evangelic

²¹ Paul Johansen, Heinz von zur Mühlen, *Deutsch und Undeutsch im mittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Reval*. (Osteuropa in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Bd. 15.) Köln, Wien, 1973. Pp. 387-390.

²² Cf. Valentin Kiparsky, *Fremdes in Baltendeutsch*. (Mémoires de la Société Néo-Philologique de Helsingfors XI.) Helsinki–Helsingfors, 1936. *Passim*.

²³ Priit Raudkivi, *Maapäeva kujunemine*. Peatükk Liivimaa 14. – 15. sajandi ajaloost. (The Formation of the *Landtag*.) Tallinn, 1991.

²⁴ Walther Kirchner, *The Rise of the Baltic question*. (University of Delaware Monograph Series 3.) Newark, 1954; cf. David Kirby, *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period*. The Baltic World 1492 – 1772. London, New York, 1993. Pp. 107-113.

liturgy, the Estonian congregations in the towns were granted with churches. The regular service in Estonian required printed Estonian catechisms and other literature²⁵ That way, the Reformation impacted a direct impetus to the birth of literary Estonian which remained one of the creative factors of the formation of Estonian national culture and identity. The parallel existence of a spoken language and a literary language, of popular culture and literary culture, of the Protestant church and the Catholic church, as well as of the knights of the Livonian order and the Hanseatic merchants as potential international entrepreneurs in Estonia around 1550 makes it possible to see the gradual transformation of the medieval society in Estonia towards the new, early modern social and political order. The precondition of this transformation was the fall of the political structure of Livonia which happened during the Livonian War (1558–1583). Therefore the Russian invasion of the Estonian territories in 1558, the establishment of Swedish power over northern Estonia and Reval in 1561 as well as the capitulation of the southern regions to Poland in 1561 mark the collapse of medieval Livonia. The early modern territorial state in Estonia was born through the purgatory of the long period of wars (1558–1625)²⁶ But even the new rulers of this country were carrying on the spirit of colonialism and feudal order. These specific lines in Estonian history conserved many aspects of medieval everyday life for subsequent centuries.

²⁵ Jüri Kivimäe. "Die kulturellen Einflüsse der lutherischen Reformation in Estland im 16. Jahrhundert" In: *Reformation und Nationalsprachen*. (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. Wissenschaftliche Beiträge 1983/34.) Halle (Saale). 1983, Pp. 59-82.

²⁶ David Kirby, *Northern Europe*. P. 107 where he called this the period of the Livonian Wars (1558 – 1621).

QUOTIDIANUM ESTONICUM

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON GERHARD JARITZ

SONDERBAND V

QUOTIDIANUM ESTONICUM
ASPECTS OF DAILY LIFE IN MEDIEVAL
ESTONIA

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JÜRI KIVIMÄE

AND

JUHAN KREEM

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Inhaltsverzeichnis/Table of Contents/Sommaire

Preface.....	7
Jüri Kivimäe, Medieval Estonia. An Introduction.....	8
Juhan Kreem, „ultima germanorum & christianorum prouintia“. Outlines of the Image of Livonia on Maps from the Thirteenth to the Middle of the Sixteenth Century ...	14
Marek Tamm, Les miracles en Livonie et en Estonie à l'époque de la christianisation (fin XIIème - début XIIIème siècles).....	29
Erik Somelar, <i>Van des keisserlichen Lübischen Rechtes wegen</i> . Circumstances of Criminality in Medieval Reval.....	79
Tiina Kala, The Church Calendar and Yearly Cycle in the Life of Medieval Reval.....	103
Mihkel Tammet, Some Aspects of Herbal Medical Treatment on the Example of Medieval Reval.....	111
Inna Pölsam, Essen und Trinken in den livländischen Städten im Spätmittelalter.....	118
Katrin Kukke, Les lois somptuaires de Reval.....	128

Preface

The idea to publish a special Estonian or Baltic issue of *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* has been discussed already for a couple of years with Gerhard Jaritz and Christian Krötzl. Initially the idea was based on the first experience of studying medieval everyday life and mentalities in a small seminar-group at Tartu University. This optimistic curiosity of discovering a new history or actually a history forgotten long ago, has been carried on. The research topics of Katrin Kukke, Inna Põltsam and Erik Somelar originate from this seminar. However, all contributions of *Quotidianum Estonicum* were written especially for this issue.

Besides that, this collection of articles needs some comments. First, it must be admitted that the selection of aspects of everyday life published here is casual and represents only marginally the modern situation of historical research and history-writing in Estonia. The older Baltic German and Estonian national scholarship has occasionally referred to the aspects of everyday life. Yet the ideology of '*histoire nouvelle*' has won popularity among the younger generation of Estonian historians only in recent years. These ideas are uniting a small informal circle of historians and archivists around Tallinn City Archives, represented not only by the above mentioned authors but also by the contributions of Tiina Kala, Juhan Kreem, Marek Tamm and Mihkel Tammet. Secondly, we must confess the disputable aspects of the title *Quotidianum Estonicum*. Medieval Europe knew Livonia but not Estonia and Latvia which territories it covered over 350 years. There may be even reproaches towards the actual contents that it is too much centralised on Tallinn/Reval, but it can be explained with the rich late medieval collections available at Tallinn City Archives.

We wish above all to thank Eva Toulouse, Monique von Wistinghausen, Hugo de Chassiron, Tarmo Kotilaine and Urmas Oolup for the editorial assistance. Our greatest debt of gratitude is to Gerhard Jaritz, without whose encouragement and support this issue could not have been completed.

Jüri Kivimäe, Juhan Kreem, editors