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“Heir to his Name and Blood”: The Valdemarian Kings of Denmark and the Slavs, 1168–1241

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“Heir to his Name and Blood”: The Valdemarian Kings of Denmark and the Slavs, 1168–1241

LARS KJÆR

This article examines the relations between the Valdemarian rulers of Denmark and their Slavic allies and subjects around the Baltic. The article examines John H. Lind’s work on the marriage alliances between the Danish royal family and the Rurikid’s in the twelfth century and explore how Valdemar I, Cnut VI and Valdemar II utilised these and other connections in their relationship with Slavic elites. On this basis, the article argues that the relationships were stronger than has often been recognised and that the Valdemarian Empire in large part was created and maintained through the cultivation of such links with local elites.

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One of the most interesting developments in medieval history in recent years has been an increasing appreciation of the strength and importance of the connections between Western – including Scandinavian – Europe and the Slavic east.¹ In this, John H. Lind was a pioneer.²

In this article, I will use Lind’s work as the starting point for a reassessment of the connections between the Valdemarian rulers of Denmark – Valdemar I (r. 1157–1182) and his sons, Cnut VI (r. 1182–1202) and Valdemar II (r. 1202–1241) – and their Slavic neighbours, allies and subjects. Between the negotiated surrender of Rügen in 1168 and the sale of Estonia to the Teutonic Order in 1346, the kings of Denmark were also rulers of an empire that incorporated vastly different peoples,

¹ See especially the work of Christian Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus’ in the Medieval World*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 2012, and now Christian Raffensperger, *Rulers and rulership in the arc of medieval Europe, 1000–1200*, Routledge: London 2024. For a comprehensive introduction to the Slavic people in the Middle Ages: Eduard Mühle, *Slavs in the Middle Ages Between Idea and Reality*, Leiden: Brill 2023.

² I would like to thank the editors and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on the article and Wojtek Jezierski, Gustavs Strenga and Erik Niblaeus for discussions of the topic.

cultures and lands.³ During its hey-day, c. 1168–1223, the empire steadily expanded to incorporate, besides Denmark and Rügen, Mecklenburg (1184), Western Pomerania (1185), Nordalbingiga (i.e. Holstein and surrounding territories) (1201), Viken (1204), Eastern Pomerania (1210) and Estonia (1219).⁴ The strength of the empire rested in part on its military forces, but just as much on its economic vitality – thanks not least to the herring trade that flourished in Lund, Rügen and Lübeck – supported by the salt imported over the Elbe from Lüneburg, where Valdemar I's daughter, Helene, was duchess by marriage to the Welf, Wilhelm of Lüneburg.⁵

Yet, in Danish historiography the Valdemarian Empire has traditionally been considered a doomed project. Already in 1898, Kristian Erslev pointed out that the Danes' conquests 'throughout suffered from the great lack, compared with the Germans that the conquests were not accompanied by colonisation'.⁶ A century later, in 2002, the same point was being made by the historian Ole Fenger: 'an oath of homage from princes in these lands [e.g. the lands conquered by the Valdemarians] did not make them Danish lands, no more than a Danish king's homage to the emperor made Denmark German'. In the long run, the logic ran, the empire could only have been stable if it had been based on an ethnic Danish take-over of the conquered lands.⁷

Measuring the strength of the empire by the degree to which Danes settled the conquered

³ Thomas Foerster, 'Crossing the Aps and Crossing the Channel. The 'Empires' of Frederick I and Henry II', in Alheydis Plassmann & Dominik Büschken eds, *Staufen and Plantagenets: Two Empires in Comparison*, Bonn University Press: Göttingen 2018, 71–119, argues cogently against using the term 'empire' for polities that were not so termed by contemporaries. Roland Scheel: 'Byzantium – Rome – Denmark – Iceland: Dealing with Imperial Concepts in the North', in Christian Scholl, Torben R. Gebhardt & Jan Clauss eds, *Transcultural Approaches to the Concept of Imperial Rule from Iceland to Jerusalem*, Peter Lang: Frankfurt 2017, 245–94, 272–9 however, shows Danish chroniclers described the Valdemarian realm as an imperium. To his examples we should add the court-sponsored *Annales Valdemarii's* focus on Valdemar II's role as king-maker during his intervention in Norway in 1204, when he made (*constituit*) Erling Stenvæg king, *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, Erik Kroman ed., Selskabet for udgivelse af kilder til Danmarks historie: Copenhagen 1980, at 77. King-making, was, as shown in Bjorn Weiler, 'Crown-giving and King-making in the West ca. 1000-ca. 1250', *Viator* 41 (2010), 57–87 an imperial attribute. More importantly for my purposes is the theoretical definition, for which see Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2008, 9: 'An empire is a large composite and differentiated polity linked to a central power by a variety of direct and indirect relations, where the center exercises political control through hierarchical and quasi-monopolistic relations over groups ethnically different from itself'. Empires are a distinct form of polity and the history and characteristics of the Valdemarian empire are best understood when read with that analytical perspective.

⁴ See John. H. Lind, Carsten Selch Jensen, Kurt Villads Jensen & Ane L. Bysted, *Danske korstog. Krig og mission i Østersøen*, Høst & Søn: Copenhagen 2004; Lars Kjær, *Valdemar den Store: Borgerkrigens barn*, Gad: Copenhagen 2022 and Lars Kjær, *Valdemar Sejv: Imperiebyggeren*, Gad: Copenhagen 2023.

⁵ For the herring trade: Carsten Jahnke, *Das Silber des Meeres: Fang und Vertrieb von Ostseehering zwischen Norwegen und Italien (12.–16. Jahrhundert)*, Böhlau: Cologne 2000.

⁶ Kr. Erslev, *Valdemarernes storhedstid: studier og omrids*, J. Erslev: Copenhagen 1898, 240: 'havde helt igennem lidt af den store mangel, sammenlignet med tyskernes, at landvindingerne ikke var ledsagede af kolonisation'. See also Grethe Jacobsen, 'Wicked Count Henry: The Capture of Valdemar II (1223) and Danish Influence in the Baltic', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 9 (1978), 326–38. For greater appreciation of the strengths of the empire, see Niels Skyum-Nielsen, *Kvinde og slave*, Munksgaard: Copenhagen 1971, 152–4, 308; Erich Hoffmann, 'Die Bedeutung der Schlacht von Bornhöved für die deutsche und skandinavische Geschichte', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Lübeckische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 57 (1977), 9–37; Thomas Riis, *Studien zur Geschichte des Ostseeraumes IV: Das mittelalterliche dänische Ostseeimperium* (University of Southern Denmark Studies in History and Social Sciences 256), University Press of Southern Denmark: Odense 2003, 74 with an apt comparison between the Valdemarian and later British empires.

⁷ Ole Fenger, *Gyldendal og Politikens Danmarkshistorie 4, Kirker rejses alle vegne, 1050–1250*, Gyldendal/Nordisk Forlag: Copenhagen 2002, 324–5: 'En lensed fra fyrster i disse lande til en dansk konge skaber ikke danske lande, så lidt som danske kongers lensed til kejseren gjorde de danske lande tyske'.

lands, however, both misunderstands the nature of the Valdemarian realm and underestimates the strength of the ties established between the Danish kings and their subjects. As we will see, the Valdemarians cultivated relationships with existing local elites and developed a court culture that brought in elements from across the empire and, alongside rich material rewards, made service to the Valdemarian rulers honourable and attractive.⁸

To explore how this was achieved, I will begin with Lind's article on marriage-alliances between the Danish royal family and the Rurikids, the princely family of Rus'. This seminal article was published in the Danish *Historisk tidsskrift* in the first issue of 1992.⁹ This was a fortuitous moment, only months after the collapse of the USSR, in which societies on both sides of the former Iron Curtain were ready to reassess historical connections between East and West. It's worth noting the novelty of this approach: since the turn of the millennium, Danish medieval history has been proudly international in outlook, but in 1992 it was still overwhelmingly domestic in its focus.¹⁰

I'll begin by briefly outlining Lind's argument: the article is not available in English and offers an important contribution and, in one case, a correction, to the recent crop of studies of the relations between the Rurikid and Western princely houses. Thereafter I explore the ways in which the royal family commemorated their Slavic inheritance and utilised it in its relations with their subjects and allies and in attempts to legitimise further conquests.

The Slavs and the Danish Civil War

Towards the end of the 1110s tensions within the Danish royal family were rising. King Niels (r. 1104–1134), the last of the sons of King Sven Estridsen, was reaching the end of his long life. After him the Danish elite and free-holding peasants would choose the next king at the regional assemblies. Two candidates from the royal family emerged as dominating, King Niels' son, Magnus, and his cousin Cnut Lavard, son of the previous king, Erik I 'Ejegod'.¹¹ In his article from 1992, Lind argued that Cnut Lavard had sought to strengthen his position viz-a-viz Magnus by creating a network of alliances and conquests in Mecklenburg and Pomerania, it was as part of this that he married Ingeborg, daughter of Prince Mstislav of Novgorod, c. 1117. Magnus struck back by marrying Princess Richiza of Poland in c. 1128, inserting a wedge between Cnut's Pomeranian and Rus' alliance.¹²

On 7 January 1131 the conflicts broke into the open when Magnus killed Cnut in Haraldsted Skov on Zealand. As Lind shows, the alliance with Novgorod remained a key factor in the civil war that followed. Cnut's brother, Erik II 'Emune', emerged as leader of a rebellion against Niels and

⁸ On this as characteristic of successful empires: Barkey 2008, 9–27.

⁹ John H. Lind, 'De russiske ægteskaber. Dynasti- og alliancepolitik i 1130'ernes danske borgerkrig', *Historisk Tidsskrift* [Denmark] 16 (1992), 225–63, with English summary at 262–3.

¹⁰ See discussion in Michael H. Gelting, 'Det komparative perspektiv i dansk højmiddelalderforskning. Om Familia og familie, Lið, Leding og Landeværn', *Historisk Tidsskrift* [Denmark] 99 (1999), 146–88.

¹¹ For different interpretations of the conflict, see Lars Kjær, 'Political Conflicts and Political Ideas in Twelfth-Century Denmark', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 13 (2017), 61–100 and Kim Esmark, 'Messy Conflict. Socio-Political Competition and War in Denmark, c. 1128–1137', in Hans Jacob Orning, Kim Esmark & Jon Viðar Sigurðsson eds, *New Perspectives on the 'Civil Wars' in Medieval Scandinavia*, Brepols: Turnhout 2024, 97–164.

¹² See also John H. Lind, 'Knes Kanutus: Knud Lavard's Political Project', in John Bergsagel, David Hiley & Thomas Riis eds, *Of Chronicles and Kings: National Saints and the Emergence of Nation States in the High Middle Ages*, Museum Tusulanum Press: Copenhagen 2015, 103–28.

cemented his alliance with Novgorod by marrying Ingeborg's sister, Malmfred. Niels and Magnus, in turn, struck back by arresting the Novgorod merchants who were trading in Denmark, probably to dissuade further support for the rebel party. This, first, round of the Danish civil war culminated with the battle of Fodevig, 4 June 1134, where Magnus Nielsen was killed, and Erik II Emune seized power.

Lind follows the fates of Cnut and Magnus' widows: Richiza seems to have travelled back to Poland, where she married the Rurikid Volodar Glebovich of Minsk, then in conflict with Ingeborg's branch of the Rurikid family, the descendants of Volodymir Monomakh. Lind suggests, Richiza did this to establish a power base for her young son, Cnut Magnusson, in anticipation of future struggles, for Ingeborg and her young son Valdemar was spending the civil war in Rus'.

The information that Valdemar I 'the Great', the future hero of the Danish nation, had spent his childhood in the East derives from *Knytlinga saga* (c. 1250). The saga narrates that

When the holy lord Knud fell, his wife Ingeborg was pregnant, and that winter, while she was staying with her father King Harald [Mstislav] east in Garðaríki, she gave birth to a baby boy, and called him Valdemar[.]¹³

The Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1208), on the other hand, focused on Valdemar's upbringing among the Danish magnate family, Hviderne, in central Zealand. Saxo notes that Absalon, son of the Hvide magnate Asser Rig, was Valdemars' 'foster brother' (*collectede suo*) – literally, his milk-brother. That is certainly not the case – Absalon was 2 ½ years older than Valdemar – but the image of the future archbishop and future king together at Zealand's bosom proved irresistible to Danish historiography.¹⁴

Lind, however, shows that there are weighty reasons for taking *Knytlinga saga's* information seriously: Saxo also shows awareness that Ingeborg had been away from her husband when the murder took place and appears to have corrected some of the stories that came his way in view of this, *Knytlinga saga's* information is detailed and serves no obvious narrative agenda. The saga, furthermore, is aware of the changing position of Ingeborg's father, Mstislav, who was introduced as prince of Novgorod (*konungr austr í Hólmgarði*) when Ingeborg and Cnut married in c. 1117, but as ruler of all Rus' – *Garðaríki* – when Valdemar was born in 1131.¹⁵ Mstislav had become grand prince of Kyiv in 1125, after the death of his father Volodymir Monomakh. As Lind notes

it is unlikely that an author working alone in the middle of the thirteenth century could make this distinction on his own. It suggests that *Knytlinga* here really repeats an older, authoritative source for the information.¹⁶

We can now make a good guess at whom *Knytlinga saga's* 'authoritative source' was. Michael

¹³ '*Knytlinga saga*' in *Danakonunga sögur*, Bjarni Guðnason ed., Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1982, ch. 93, 256, trans. adapted from *Knytlinga Saga: The History of the Kings of Denmark*, Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edwards trans., Odense University Press: Odense 1986, 134.

¹⁴ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, Karsten Friis-Jensen ed., Peter Fisher trans., Oxford: Clarendon Press 2015, ch. 14.17.3, vol. 2, 1076.

¹⁵ *Knytlinga saga*, ch. 88, 246.

¹⁶ Lind 1992, 234: 'En sådan distinction kunne en forfatter der arbejdede midt i 1200-tallet næppe gøre på egen hand. Det taler istedet for, at Knytliga her virkeligt gengiver en ældre autoritativ kilde for oplysningen.'

H. Gelting and Lars Boje Mortensen's investigations of Saxo Grammaticus and *Knytlinga saga* suggests, to my mind conclusively, that the author made use of *Gesta Danorum* but incorporated oral sources from, among other places, the royal court.¹⁷ The saga relates that Óláfr Þórðarson 'hvítaskáld'

Stayed with [Valdemar II], acquiring much learning from him, and had a great many remarkable stories to tell.¹⁸

Óláfr Þórðarson stayed at the Danish court in the winter of 1240–1241 and was either the author of *Knytlinga saga*, or an important source for the author.¹⁹ I'll return to the question below, but it is likely that the information about Valdemar I's origin was among the 'remarkable stories' that Óláfr had from the king's son and successor.

Saxo may well have been aware that Valdemar had spent his early childhood in Rus'. He does not explicitly claim that Valdemar had been born in Denmark, but simply omitted any discussion of his early childhood beyond noting that he had been fostered with the Hvide family.²⁰ *Knytlinga saga's* information may explain why Valdemar received a name from the Rurikid dynasty at birth – being named after his great-grandfather Volodymir Monomakh.²¹ When Valdemar was born in January 1131, a week after his father's murder, Ingeborg probably expected a future in Rus' rather than in Denmark for her fatherless son.

That was not to be, Mstislav died in 1132 and his children and brothers were soon in conflict, Ingeborg probably travelled to Novgorod together with her brother Vsevolod, but in 1136 Vsevolod was ousted in a rebellion by the people of Novgorod. Ingeborg and Valdemar travelled back to Denmark where, according to Saxo, they were present in 1137, it was likely at this point that Valdemar became the foster-child of the Hvide family. Twenty years later, in 1157, Valdemar emerged as sole king of Denmark, in part through the support of the Hvide family, but also thanks to his marriage and alliance with another Danish Rurikid, Sofia, daughter of Richiza of Poland and Volodar Glebovich, the half-sister of Cnut Magnussen, who had emerged as the leading figure in that branch of the royal family after Cnut Magnussen's death.²²

¹⁷ Michael H. Gelting, 'Saxo Grammaticus in the Archives', in Leidulf Melve & Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn eds, *The Creation of Medieval Northern Europe: Christianisation, Social Transformations, and Historiography: Essays in honour of Sverre Bagge*, Dreyer Forlag: Oslo 2012, 322–45; Lars Boje Mortensen, 'A Thirteenth-Century Reader of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*', in Melve & Sønnesyn eds 2012, 346–55.

¹⁸ *Knytlinga saga*, ch. 127, 315: 'Með honum var Óláfr Þórðarson ok nam at honum marga frædði, ok hafði hann margar ágættligar frásagnir frá honum', trans. Pálsson & Edwards, *Knytlinga saga*, at 175.

¹⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld and Oral Poetry in the West of Iceland, c. 1250: The Evidence of References to Poetry in the Third Grammatical Treatise', in M. C. Ross ed., *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2000, 96–115, at 97–8.

²⁰ On the importance of the connection between the Hvide-family and Valdemar I for Saxo, see Lars Hermanson, *Släkt, vänner och makt: en studie av elitens politiska kultur i 1100-talets Danmark*, Göteborgs universitet, Historiska institutionen: Gothenburg 2000.

²¹ For other explanations: Raffensperger 2012, 101–3; Christian Raffensperger, *Ties of Kinship: Genealogy and Dynastic Marriage in Kyivan Rus'*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 2016, 117, this otherwise excellent study needs revision on this point in light of Lind's work, which does not appear to have been used.

²² See Kjær 2024, 88–97.

The Valdemarian Family and the East

Once, while we were discussing Lind's work over beers at the International Medieval Conference in Leeds, a leading Danish crusade historian remarked to me that knowing that Valdemar I and Sophia spoke Old East Slavic at home really changed one's mental picture of twelfth-century Denmark. Of course we don't, frustratingly, know in what language(s) the royal couple spoke to each other or their kids. We know, thanks to Saxo, that the Danes used translators when negotiating with Slav rulers in Nordalbingia, but even so, what understanding of Eastern Slavic Valdemar I and Richiza had brought with them, and perhaps imparted to their children, would have been helpful in navigating the multiple – sometimes conflicting – obligations and interest around the Baltic Sea.²³

Thanks to Óláfr Þórðarson and his uncle Snorri Sturluson we know much about the Icelandic skalds who frequented the Valdemarian court,²⁴ while the German chronicler Arnold of Lübeck paints a vivid picture of the impact of German culture at the Danish court – a development also noted, deplorably, by Saxo Grammaticus.²⁵ In comparison, we know little about the role of Slavic culture at the Valdemarian court. Clearly German culture and German immigrants had a massive impact in both Denmark and the Western Slavic realms, but the fragmentary evidence indicate that the Valdemarian also made much of the connections in the East.

One of these is a small cross-shaped reliquary found among the royal graves in Ringsted in the 1600s that brings us closer to the royal family itself. The cross was quickly attributed to Valdemar II's famously pious queen, Dagmar, on whom more below, but may in fact have belonged to Queen Sophia. The front shows the crucified Christ, while the back depicts Christ as ruler and judge of the world, flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. Above and below Christ we see two saints, with their names written in Greek, St Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom, both of whom were important in Eastern Christendom.

In 2021 Lizaveta Dubinka-Hushcha demonstrated the very close similarities between the Dagmar Cross and the, now lost, 'Euphrosyne Cross' commissioned by another Rurikid, St Euphrosyne of Polatsk (c. 1110–1173) in 1161. The two crosses probably originated in the same workshop in Polatsk and this raises tantalising questions about the connections Sofia maintained with relatives in her father's homeland.²⁶

By lucky chance, we know a bit more about Sophia's connections with her paternal land. A visiting Danish pilgrim informed the monks of Canterbury Cathedral about how St Thomas Becket had helped the Danes after a ship carrying back the queen's messenger, Clemens, and gifts from her

²³ In Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ch. 14.47.7, vol. 2, 1378, we are told that Absalon pressured the translator to give hostile interpretation to the Slavic prince Otimar's proposals to Valdemar I, in order to prevent a negotiated surrender.

²⁴ 'Skáldatal', *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, Finnur Jónsson ed., Legati Arnamagnæani: Copenhagen 1880, 283–4, on Valdemarian court culture and the empire, see Kjær 2024, 126–55.

²⁵ Arnold of Lübeck, *Chronica Slavorum*, J. M. Lappenberg ed. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum in Folio 21), ch. 3.5, 146–8. On Saxo and the Germans, see now Erik Niblaeus, 'Saxo and the Germans', in Lars Boje Mortensen & Thomas K. Heebøll-Holm eds, *A Companion to Saxo Grammaticus*, Brepols: Leiden 2024, 279–304.

²⁶ Lizaveta Dubinka-Hushcha, 'National Shrines and Women's Power: The History of Sophia of Minsk, Queen of Denmark', *Journal of Belarusian Studies* 11 (2021), 105–23.

father Volodar Glebovich had been captured by Pomeranians in 1177.²⁷ This suggests a more regular exchange between the two courts. The objects obtained from the East played an important role in the Danish court culture. The Valdemarian kings and queens were buried in their full finery, dressed in expensive silk garments and – in the case of Valdemar I – with a lead tablet recording his achievements for posterity. The grave was a place to show the connections and prestige of the family. The ‘Dagmar Cross’ – with its clear visual demonstration of links to the East – was part of this programme.²⁸

We find another hint at the place that the connection to the East played in the dynasty’s identity on the Ebstorf *mappa mundi*. This world map was probably a copy of a one produced at the court of either Helene of Lüneburg or her son Otto. It shows a striking interest in sites connected to the wider Valdemarian family. As Armin Wolf has shown, the map ignores large cities such as Munich and Frankfurt, but depicts the castle of Helene’s sister, Sophia, who had married the count of Orlamünde. It also depicts Polatsk, the seat of the Queen Mother Sophia’s family’s ancestral principality. It’s inclusion an indication that this link, just as the connection to Orlamünde, was important to Helene and her son.²⁹

An heir to his name and his blood

Valdemar II was born 28 June 1168, two weeks after the Rügen elite submitted to his father after the siege of Arkona.³⁰ The name indicates that the royal family was, from the moment the empire got started, aware of the advantages that their Slavic inheritance could have in building bridges with other elite groups. Rügen had not – although it’s often depicted in that way in Danish historiography – been conquered. The island’s surrender and conversion had been negotiated, albeit under intense military pressure, and Valdemar I – in turn – now ensured that it’s prince, Tetislav, could continue to reign in face of protests from Valdemar’s allies in the campaign, Prince Bugislav I and Casimir I of Pomerania.³¹

By choosing a name that recalled their joint Rurikid ancestry – and which was already in use among the Western Slav princely families – the Danish royal couple drew attention to their Slavic ancestry.³² Saxo Grammaticus gives us a sense of how the name’s history was utilised by the Valdemarians. Saxo described how a daughter of the English king Harold Godwinson, had fled to Denmark after the Norman Conquest of 1066, here Sven Estridsson arranged her marriage to

²⁷ William of Canterbury, *Vita, Passio, et Miracula S. Thomæ Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi, auctore Willelmo, monacho Cantuariensi*, James Craigie Robertson ed. (Rolls Series 67), Stationery Office: London 1875, ch. 6.166, at 543.

²⁸ See Nils Engberg, ‘Valdemar 1. den Store og Sophie’, in Karin Kryger ed., *Danske kongegrave, bind. 1*, Museum Tusulanums forlag: Copenhagen 2014, 273–85, and Nils Engberg & Karin Kryger, ‘Valdemar 2. Sejr, Dagmar og Berengaria’, in Kryger ed. 2014, 303–21.

²⁹ Armin Wolf, ‘The Ebstorf “Mappamundi” and Gervase of Tilbury: The Controversy Revisited’, *Imago Mundi* 64 (2012), 1–27, at 10.

³⁰ Valdemar’s birth is noted in the *Annales Valdemarii* under the year 1170, alongside the description of the surrender of Rügen, see *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, at 76. The chronology of these annals are out by about two years. It seems that the annalist knew that Valdemar’s birth occurred on the same year as the taking of Rügen and placed them together under this year. For the dating of the taking of Rügen, see Saxo Grammaticus, *Danorum regum heroumque historia, Books X–XVI*, Eric Christiansen trans. and commentary, Oxford 1980–1981, at vol. 3, 834–5.

³¹ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ch. 14.39.24–46, at vol. 2, 1290–1310.

³² Helmold, *Cronica Slavorum*, Bernhard Schmeidler ed. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi 32) Hahn: Hannover 1937, ch. 1.38, at 73.

Volodymir Monomakh of Kyiv, Valdemar I's great-grandfather. Saxo explains:

A later heir of his blood and his name, his grandson by a daughter, became the ruler of our own day. So on the one side British, on the other Eastern blood flowed into our leader at his propitious birth and created an embellishment for both races through his shared lineage.³³

The Valdemarians joint heritage – the Danish court insisted – made it a royal dynasty that people in both East and West could take pride in.

Queen Sofia's descent from the Piast dukes of Poland was also utilised, prominently in 1185 when Prince Bugislav I was compelled to recognise the sovereignty of Cnut VI. By then the Valdemarian empire had expanded to also encompass the lands of Mecklenburg, not least thanks to the military and diplomatic initiatives of prince Jaromar of Rügen, whose alliance with one of the feuding princes of Mecklenburg and capture of the other, had led to their submission to Cnut VI. The Danish king had left the two princes in charge after organising a new division of the principality between them.³⁴ In 1185, the aging Bugislav had to demonstrate his submission to the young Cnut VI by kneeling in front of him. Cnut VI, however, cut short the ceremony and raised Bugislav up because he was 'touched by regard for his kinship with Bugislav's sons through his mother'.³⁵ Anastasia, the duchess of Pomerania, was the Dowager Queen Sofia's cousin, and her sons, Bugislav II and Casimir II, Cnut VI's great cousins. By drawing attention to his family connections with the future generation of Pomeranian princes and using them as an occasion to show honour to the duke, Cnut VI combined the celebration of his sovereignty over Pomerania with a demonstration of his connections to the Pomeranian princely family.

Valdemar II seems to have employed their maternal inheritance even more directly. In a, much-debated, charter from thirteenth-century Pomerania, we find a discussion of the castellany of Słupsk, which controlled the eastern border of Valdemarian Pomerania. According to the charter

When the illustrious prince Władysław the older, duke of Poland, ruled the same castellany of Słupsk as well as Poland, because of the carelessness and negligence of the same [Władysław], King Valdemar of Denmark, asserting, as is true, that he was through his mother of the Polish princely line, seized the castellany and held it for many years.³⁶

Polish historians have shown that this charter should be read in connection with a campaign that Valdemar II undertook in 1205. The Danish court annals, the *Annales Valdemarii*, states that here he had a meeting with the new duke of Poland, Władysław III Spindleshanks.³⁷ The outcome of

³³ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ch. 11.6.3, at vol. 2, 800–1, adapted translation: 'nostri temporis dux, ut sanguinis, ita et nominis heres, ex filia nepos obuenerit. Itaque hinc Britannicus, inde Eous sanguis in salutarem nostri principis ortum confluens communem stirpem duarum gentium ornamentum effecit.' On the name: Andrew M. Drozd, 'Vladimir: What's in a Name?', *Germano-Slavica* 12 (2000–2001), 5–28.

³⁴ Arnold of Lubeck, *Chronica Slavorum*, ch. 3.4, at 146.

³⁵ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 16.8.9, at vol. 2, 1538–9.

³⁶ *Pommersches Urkundenbuch* 1, 786–1253, Klaus Conrad ed., 2nd edn, Böhlau: Cologne 1970, nr. 86: 'illustri principe seniori Wladislao duce Polonie in eadem castellania Slupensi sicut et in Polonia dominante, per eiusdem incuriam seu negligenciam rex Dacie Waldmarus asserens se, sicut uerum est. per auiam suam de stirpe principum Polonie processisse Slupensem castellanniam occupauit et pluribus annis tenuit occupatam'.

³⁷ *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, 77: 'ubi dux Lodizlauus occurrit domino regi'.

the meeting seems to have been a re-drawing of interest-spheres in Pomerania, as part of which Valdemar II was assigned Słupsk.³⁸ Later complaints by Henry of Schwerin and his wife Audacia, who also claimed to be the heiress to the castellany, state that Valdemar II had seized it with force or, at least, unlawfully (*per violentiam occupata*),³⁹ but the charter suggests that he had, at least, sought to make his expansion seem legitimate by reference to his Slavic inheritance.

Other princes in and around the empire responded in kind and emphasised their membership of the Valdemarian royal family. Vartislav III of Pomerania, son of Casimir II and the Dane Ingrid – a member of the royal family – proudly proclaimed it on his seal, which read: ‘Duke Vartislav, of the blood of the kings of the Danes’.⁴⁰ Otto of Lüneburg, Albert of Orlamünde – Valdemar’s nephew and regent in Northern Germany – and his brother Hermann of Orlamünde, all used the Valdemarian royal emblem, the blue lion, on their seals.⁴¹ The dynasty provided a prestigious connection that stretched across ethnic boundaries.⁴²

Governing and Celebrating the Empire

The most striking demonstration of the seriousness of the connections that the Valdemarians were establishing with their Slavic subjects was the change that Cnut VI introduced to his royal title. Sometime between 1187 and 1193, Cnut IV expanded his title from *rex Danorum* to *rex Danorum et Slavorum*. We are frustratingly ill-informed about the change, even the timing can only be reconstructed from comparing royal charters issued before and after, but it was more than a marker of domination.⁴³ As king of the Slavs, Cnut VI took on responsibilities for the wellbeing, spiritual and material, of his new subjects that went far beyond what he had had as a conqueror. He was now committed, in principle and before God, to govern both peoples equally.⁴⁴

This idea was, largely, borne out in practice. From Rügen’s negotiated surrender in 1168 onwards, the Valdemarians governed by leaving established elites and political structures in place, as we’ve seen in the case of Rügen, Mecklenburg and Pomerania. In both Nordalbiniga and in Viken (Eastern Norway) – they governed through a combination of locally-connected kinsmen and

³⁸ For this interpretation and introduction to the field, see Błażej Śliwiński, ‘Przynależność państwowa ziemi słupskiej w XII i w początkach XIII w. czyli o historiograficznym micie przynależności ziemi słupskiej do księstwa sławieńskiego’, *Gdańskie Studia z Dziejów Średniowiecza* 9 (2003), 273–89, at 276–7 and Edward Rymar, ‘Księstwa zachodniopomorskie w pierwszym okresie wpływ.w dąskich (1187–1211)’, *Studia z dziejów średniowiecza* 17 (2013), 143–80, at 161–9. For an English introduction, see Stella Maria Szacherska, ‘Valdemar II’s Expedition to Pruthenia and the Mission of Bishop Christian’, *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 12 (1988), 44–75.

³⁹ *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:5, ed. Niels Skyum-Nielsen, Ejnar Munksgaards forlag: Copenhagen 1957, nr. 217.

⁴⁰ *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:6, ed. Niels Skyum-Nielsen, Reitzel: Copenhagen 1979, nr. 49: ‘Ducis Worzlai consanguinei regis danorum’.

⁴¹ Nils G. Bartholdy, *Det danske kongeväben. Fra Valdemarerne til Frederik VI*, Museum Tusulanums Forlag: Copenhagen 2021, 38–62.

⁴² See generally Robert Bartlett, *Blood Royal: Dynastic Politics in Medieval Europe*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2020.

⁴³ See *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:3, ed. C. A. Christensen & Herluf Nielsen, Reitzel: Copenhagen 1977, nr. 143, 189.

⁴⁴ On the differences between kings and conquerors: David Bates, *William the Conqueror*, Yale University Press: New Haven 2016, 253, on the obligations of kingship: Björn Weiler, *Paths to Kingship in Medieval Latin Europe, c. 950–1200*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2021.

exiled elites whom they helped regain and enhance their power. In 1201 Cnut VI and Valdemar II conquered Nordalbingia with assistance of their Slavic allies and local Holstein aristocrats, many of whom had previously been in exile in Denmark and who were now given positions of power in Holstein.⁴⁵ In 1204, Valdemar II intervened in support of the Bagler-faction in the Norwegian civil war and inserted one of them, his kinsman Erling Stenvæg, as king.⁴⁶ When the Valdemarians did introduce non-locals to rule in the provinces, they choose people from the same ethno-linguistic group: c. 1203–1204 Albert of Orlamünde, son of Valdemar II's sister Sofia and her husband Count Siegfried of Orlamünde, was made count of Holstein and surrounding German lands.⁴⁷ After the death of Bugislav I of Pomerania in 1186, Vartislav of Stettin had been appointed to govern alongside the dowager duchess Anastasia on behalf of the under-age dukes. In 1187, however, Vartislav was deposed and sent into exile, probably because he had tried to break away from Valdemarian control, and replaced as regent by Jaromar of Rügen, while a Slavic aristocrat from Mecklenburg, Rozwar, was appointed castellan of Stettin.⁴⁸

This strategy did not prevent internal conflict: Jaromar used his position to vastly enlarge Rügen's mainland possessions. But it did mean that the Valdemarian kings could maintain a position as – more-or-less – neutral arbiters. A charter composed at the Danish royal court c. 1194 speaks of a conflict (*discordia*) between Jaromar, on the one hand, and Anastasia and the 'eastern slavs (*Sclauos orientales*)', i.e. the Pomeranians, on the other, about the lands claimed by Jaromar. To discuss this, Jaromar and Anastasia's representatives, including Rozwar, appeared before Cnut VI. Here they had agreed, in the words of the charter:

That they would rather that our people should have friendship with one another than be in improvident discord[.]

and had agreed to place the decision in Cnut VI's hands, who – as in Mecklenburg – arranged a re-division of the disputed territory.⁴⁹

The great exception was Estonia, conquered in 1219, here Valdemar II had secured papal recognition that he could seize all the lands that he conquered from the pagans and a detailed overview of fiefs from the end of the reign show that he had settled supporters from Germany, Pomerania and Denmark in Estonia. Recent research, however, has highlighted that some native magnates were

⁴⁵ Arnold of Lübeck, *Chronica Slavorum*, 6.13, at 220–1, see Hans-Joachim Freytag, 'Die Eroberung Nordelbingens durch den dänischen König im Jahre 1201', in Hans E. Horst Fuhrmann & Klaus Wriedt eds, *Aus Reichsgeschichte und Nordischer Geschichte. Karl Jordan zum 65. Geburtstag*, E. Klett: Stuttgart 1972, 222–43. Generally for Danish rule in Nordalbingia, see Hans-Otto Gaethke, 'Knut VI. und Valdemar II. von Dänemark und Nordalbingien, 1182–1227' (Part I–III), *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Schleswig-Holsteinische Geschichte* 119–21 (1994–1996), 21–99, 7–76 and 7–44.

⁴⁶ *Boðlunga sögur* (S), Þorleifur Hauksson, Sverrir Jakobsson & Tor Ulset eds, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, 2 vols, Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag: Reykjavík 2013, vol 1, p. 3–49, chs. 1–4, pp. 3–8, *Boðlunga sögur* (L), *ibid*, vol 1, pp. 53–146, 53–69, on Erling Stenvæg and his family, see now Knut Arstad, 'Ribbungopprøret mot birkebeinerkongedømmet og Magnus-ættens krav på tronen i Norge på 1200-tallet', *Collegium Mediaevale* 33 (2020), 23–50.

⁴⁷ Oliver Auge, 'Dynastiegeschichte als Perspektive vergleichender Regionalgeschichte: Das Beispiel Albrechts II. von Orlamünde (*nach 1182; † 1245)', *Zeitschrift für Thüringische Geschichte* 72 (2018), 9–40.

⁴⁸ *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler* 76; Rymar 2013, 143–80, at 147–52; Edward Rymar, *Barnim I: książę Słowian na Pomorzu (ok. 1220/21–1278)*, Wydawnictwo Avalon: Kraków 2022, 38.

⁴⁹ *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:3, nr. 202: 'uolentes nostros magis amicitiam exercere quam ob aliquid minus prouide discordare'.

able to navigate the new political landscape and maintain or develop their existing power base.⁵⁰

The importance of local elites was reflected in the various channels of communication used by the Valdemarian rulers. The Slav and German elites were given places of honour in the ceremonies of the royal court: in 1186 Bugislav I carried Cnut VI's sword at the Easter procession in Roskilde before returning to Pomerania loaded with presents.⁵¹ Albert of Orlamünde was knighted during the Christmas festivity in Lund in 1202, following Valdemar II's coronation.⁵² Great ceremonies were organised to maximise opportunity for the empire's elite to participate: Valdemar II's coronation in Lund in 1202 was followed by a second acclamation in Lübeck in August 1203 where he was celebrated by an 'infinite multitude' including leading ecclesiastical and secular princes of Denmark, Nordalbingia, Rügen and other Slavic principalities.⁵³ In 1218, Valdemar II had his son, Valdemar the Younger, crowned in Schleswig with the participation of the bishops of the entire empire, including the visiting bishops of the Baltic realms – which Valdemar II hoped to add to his realm. The *Annales Valdemarii* took pride in listing the number of bishops, abbots, dukes and counts in attendance. It's interesting to contrast the ceremony with the one his father had held in 1170, when Cnut VI was crowned in Roskilde, in the middle of Zeeland. The centre of gravity in Danish politics had moved south, to encompass the new territories.⁵⁴

The great Church festivals were sometimes celebrated in the new territories: in April 1216 Valdemar II celebrated Easter at Usedom together with Bugislav II and Casimir II and the secular and ecclesiastical magnates of Pomerania.⁵⁵ Three weeks later, Valdemar issued a charter confirming all the grants that the princes of Rügen and Pomerania had granted to the monastery Eldena near Greifswald. Eldena was a daughter of the Danish monastery Esrum and had been at the center of the political struggles in the area, among the grants that Valdemar now confirmed were lands that had been hard fought-over by the rulers of Rügen and Pomerania. Valdemar's charter was a recognition and acknowledgement of their efforts for Christianity, but also an attempt to put past conflicts at rest.⁵⁶

Unusually for a Danish royal charter from the period, the *invocatio* opens with a decorated cross. This has been read, passively, as evidence that the scribe was unfamiliar with Danish court custom, but it may be the result of a more deliberate choice.⁵⁷ Decorated crosses in the *invocatio* were often used by the princes of Rügen and Pomerania.⁵⁸ The decoration of Valdemar's charter may

⁵⁰ Kristjan Kaljusaar, 'Exploiting the Conquerors. Socio-political Strategies of Estonian Elites During the Crusades and Christianisation, 1200–1300', in Anti Selart ed., *Baltic Crusades and Societal Innovation in Medieval Livonia, 1200–1350*, Brill: Leiden 2022, 55–89. For Estonia, see in general Mihkel Mäesalu & Stefan Pajung, *Danish-Estonian Relations in the Middle Ages* (Studies from the Museum of National History at Frederiksborg 6), The Museum of National History at Frederiksborg: Frederiksborg 2022.

⁵¹ *Knytlinga saga*, ch. 130, at 320–1

⁵² *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, at 77.

⁵³ Arnold of Lübeck, *Chronica Slavorum*, ch. 6.17, at 223: 'infinita multitudine'.

⁵⁴ *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, at 78–9, see Hoffmann 1977 at 19.

⁵⁵ *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:5, nr. 71.

⁵⁶ *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:5, nr. 73; *Pommersches Urkundenbuch* 1, ed. Claus Conrad, 2nd edn, Historische Kommission für Pommern: Cologne 1970, nr. 172. On the conflicts, Rymar 2022, 30. On the monasteries, Stella Maria Szacherska, 'The Political Role of the Danish Monasteries in Pomerania 1171–1223', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 10 (1977), 122–55 and Jens E. Olesen: 'Der Einfluss dänischer Klöster auf den Ostseeraum', in Oliver Auge, Felix Biermann & Christofer Herrmann eds, *Glaube, Macht und Pracht. Geistliche Gemeinschaften des Ostseeraums im Zeitalter der Backsteingotik*, Verlag Marie Leidorf: Rahden 2009, 49–58.

⁵⁷ *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:5, nr. 73.

⁵⁸ *Pommersches Urkundenbuch* 1, nr. 51a, 61, 96, 145, 188.

reflect an attempt to align with local practices. Nicholas Vincent has shown that the practices of the Angevin chancery were ‘consciously remodelled to comply with regional custom ... and regional diplomatic traditions.’⁵⁹ Like the Valdemarians, the Angevin kings of England ruled a cross-regional realm incorporating very different societies.⁶⁰ The Danish court may have drawn directly on the Angevin example. Saxo Grammaticus informs us that the English king’s homage to the king of France and its implications was discussed by Valdemar I and his counsellors and the *Annales Valdemarii* show interest in developments in the Angevin realm continued under his successors.⁶¹ The Valdemarian court and chancery drew directly on English expertise: the first Danish chancellor, Radulf, appointed by Valdemar I, was an Englishman, while Valdemar II employed English craftsmen and coiners and clerks.⁶²

The central element in the package of ideas that the Valdemarians sought to convey about their rule was the promise of defence. This involved a concerted campaign of castle building from Stettin to Dithmarschen.⁶³ The most impressive was the Lübeck city wall which Valdemar II had erected in 1217, measuring 4.2 kilometres, half a kilometre more than Valdemarsmuren, the much more celebrated fortification that Valdemar I and Cnut VI erected at Dannevirke.⁶⁴ Jens Christian Holst has recently drawn attention to the place these fortifications had in communication of the empire’s power: this is seen in the carefully constructed border fortress, Grüttpott, on the border between Pomerania and Brandenburg, which Holst describes as a display-case of the expertise and resources of the empire. The Lübeck city wall was recalled on the coins issued by Valdemar II in Nordalbingia, where the king is depicted hovering over walls and towers.⁶⁵

The same theme is found in the historical writings produced in Denmark in the period. The terse *Annales Valdemarii* frames the conquests around the Baltic as defensive measures, mainly undertaken to protect the people who had sought the protection of the Danish crown. The subjugation of Pomerania was a necessary retaliation in view of Bugislav I’s attempt to ‘annihilate the Rani’ – the people of Rügen – in 1184. The conquest of Holstein in 1201, a response to count Adolf III’s ravaging of the Danish vassals in Dithmarschen earlier the same year.⁶⁶ In the *Gesta Danorum*, both Danes and Slavs are made to remark that the later need the protection of the former: a Rani messenger asks for peace because he represents ‘a people who need your protection’,⁶⁷ while a Danish agent contrasts the benevolent Danish empire with German expansionism:

⁵⁹ Nicholas Vincent, ‘Regional Variation in the Charters of King Henry II’, in Marie Therese Flanagan & Judith A. Green eds, *Charters and Charter Scholarship in Britain and Ireland*, Palgrave: New York 2005, 70–106, at 94.

⁶⁰ See John Gillingham, *The Angevin Empire*, 2nd edn, Arnold: London 2001; Martin Aurell, *The Plantagenet Empire, 1154–1224*, Pearson/Longman: Harlow 2007.

⁶¹ *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, at 70; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ch. 14. 28.16, at vol. 2, 1206.

⁶² Gelting 2012, 328–9; Matthew Paris, *Gesta Abbatum: Gesta abbatum monasterii Sancti Albani*, H. T. Riley ed. (Rolls Series 28), Stationery Office: London 1867–1869, vol. 1, p. 19.

⁶³ *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, at 76–9.

⁶⁴ Jens Christian Holst, ‘The Tower named ‘Grüttpott’ at Stolpe upon Oder: A Border Fortification of the Valdemarian Empire?’, in Birgitte Fløe Jensen & Dorthe Wille-Jørgensen eds, *Expansion – Integration? Danish Baltic contacts, 1147–1410 AD*, Danmarks Borgcenter: Vordingborg 2009, 95–118.

⁶⁵ Jens Christian Holst, ‘Die Stadt als Burg: Lübecks Befestigung zur Zeit Waldemars II.’, in Joachim Müller & Dirk Schumann eds, *Mittelalterliche Stadtbefestigungen in der Mark Brandenburg und in Norddeutschland*, Lukas Verlag: Berlin 2023, 76–193.

⁶⁶ *Danmarks middelalderlige annaler*, at 76–7: ‘deletioni Ruianorum intendens’.

⁶⁷ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.25.24, vol. 2, 1176–7: ‘homines patrocinii tui indigos’.

Whatever breadth of territory the Saxons took from the Wends they immediately settled and cultivated; not satisfied with booty or fame, and greedy to extend their empire, they confirmed their gains of victory by constant occupation ... The Danes, however, had different aims when they waged war, and did not strive to grasp their foes' lands[.]⁶⁸

The positive collaboration between Rani and Danes is a major theme of the final part of the *Gesta Danorum* and provides the climax of Saxo's story. After narrating Bugislav I's capitulation in 1185, Saxo completes his account with one last jump forward to Bugislav's death in 1186. Here, the old duke is made to command his wife and sons to continue to accept Cnut VI's sovereignty and to let him divide the inheritance between his sons:

He swore that he had no reservations about Danish reliability, seeing that he had many a time been given exceptional proofs of it, for this noble man recalled the great benefits the people of Rügen had gained by their preservation of firm friendship with the Danes.⁶⁹

Saxo wanted to give the last word in his long chronicle to a Slav, and through him to have the excellence of the Danes' practice of empire confirmed.

Queen Dagmar and St Adalbert

I'd like to focus in slightly more detail on two, possibly connected events in Valdemar II's reign, which we can get a better understanding of by bringing together two aspects of Lind's work, the Danish-Slav connections and the Baltic crusades. In 1205 Valdemar II married Dagmar, the daughter of King Ottokar I of Bohemia and Queen Adelaide of Meissen. There has been much speculation in Danish historiography on why the king would marry a princess from such a distant country.⁷⁰ But a straightforward solution suggests itself if we consider that Valdemar was not just looking for a queen of the Danes – but also a queen of the Slavs. The Přemyslid dynasty was the only royal family among the western Slavs and the only Catholic Slavic royal family. With a background that encompassed both the Slav and, thanks to her mother Adelaide, a member of the Wettin family, the Saxon, Dagmar was excellently positioned to bind together the elites of the Valdemarian Empire.

The desire to strengthen connections with his Slav subjects also influenced Valdemar II's first crusade, which targeted Pruthensia in 1210. In preparation for the crusade Valdemar II had written to Pope Innocent III for support. The pope's answer shows that Valdemar had described his desire to convert a heathen people who "persecute those who preach the word of God as if they were sorcerers (*maleficos*)[.]"⁷¹

For Valdemar II's Pomeranian subjects and his Bohemian Queen Dagmar, these words would

⁶⁸ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 14.37.2, vol. 2, 1262–5: 'Quippe Saxones, quantum ex ipsorum finibus occupauerint, protinus cultu atque habitatione complecti, nec preda aut gloria contentos proferendi imperii cupiditate uictorie luca continua possessione firmare. ... Danos uero diuerso studio bella gerere nec hostium fines'.

⁶⁹ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 16.8.10, vol. 2, 1538–9.

⁷⁰ On the marriage, see John. H. Lind, 'Dronning Dagmar, biskop Valdemar og dansk korstogs politik', in Mikkel Kirkedahl Nielsen et al. eds, *Dronning Dagmar – tradition, myter og virkelighed*, Forlaget Liljebjerget: Ribe 2012, 33–52.

⁷¹ *Diplomatarium Danicum* I:4, no. 162: 'eosdem qui sibi predicant uerbum dei tamquam maleficos persecuntur'. On the crusade plans, see Iben Fonnesberg-Schmidt, *The Popes and the Baltic Crusades, 1147–1254*, Leiden: Brill 2007, at 85–9.

have resonated with the story of how St Adalbert of Prague (d. 997) had been martyred when preaching to the Pruthensians. According to the saints' life, *Tempore illo* (c. 1200), the Pruthensians had exclaimed: "look at the sorcerer (*maleficus*), that Christian, who brings down curses on us with his prayer."⁷² before proceeding to kill Adalbert and his companions. Valdemar may have been introduced to the story by either Queen Dagmar or the Pomeranians.

Adalbert was perhaps the most popular and certainly most hotly contested saint among the western Slavs.⁷³ Both Poland and Bohemia laid claims to Adalbert's relics. Adalbert was also popular in Pomerania. Pomerania's first cathedral, in Wolin, had been dedicated to St Adalbert, but it had been abandoned and the bishopric moved to the Church of St John the Baptist in Cammin (now Kamień Pomorski), in wake of the destruction caused in Wolin by the Danish-Rani attacks in 1184–1185.⁷⁴ According to the oldest *vita*, St Adalbert had exclaimed to the sceptical Pruthensians: '*Sum nativitate Sclavus*' – 'I'm a Slav by birth' – one of them. By framing his crusade as a continuation of Adalbert's mission, Valdemar made a similar point to the Pomeranians, he too was a Slav by birth and knew and respected their saints.⁷⁵

The benefits of combining approachability and military strength can be seen in the events of 1210. The *Annales Valdemarii* state that 'Mestwin, *dux Polonie*, did homage to King Valdemar II'. Mestwin was ruler of Gdańsk which had hitherto owed homage to Krakow. The subjugation had traditionally been read as the result of military action by Valdemar II, operating under the cover of crusade. Recently, however, the Polish historian Mariusz Bizewski has argued that Mestwin of Gdańsk may have played a more active role. Since Valdemar's last intervention in Pomerania in 1205, Władysław III Spindleshanks' hold on power had collapsed, and Mestwin may have been using the opportunity – and Valdemar II's military presence – to establish a more independent position. Bizewski points out that Mestwin had not previously been called *dux*, a title reserved for the Piast family.⁷⁶

The collapse and rebirth of the Empire

The Valdemarian empire has often been described as collapsing on itself after Valdemar II's capture by Count Henry of Schwerin in May 1223. But a closer look at the sources suggest that the ties established in the period 1168–1223 held up well. The princes of Mecklenburg seem to have been split in their allegiance: one of Henry Borwin's sons, Henry of Werle, sided with Henry of Schwerin, but the other, Nicholas of Rostock, stood by the Valdemarian party. He appears among the witnesses to a grant issued by Albert of Orlamünde during the Christmas festivities 1223–1224.⁷⁷ Marek Smoliński has shown that Western Pomerania, then under the control of the

⁷² 'De sancto Adalberto episcopo', Max Perlbach ed. (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum 15:2), Hahn: Hannover 1888, 1178–1184, at. ch. 15, 1182: 'Ecce maleficus ille christianus ad nos maledicendos precantiamina sua exercet'.

⁷³ For an introduction to a vast field, see Wojtek Jezierski, 'St Adalbert as a Stranger-King: The Heroization and Estrangement of a Holy Man in the Middle Ages', *History and Anthropology* (2023), 1–22.

⁷⁴ *Pommersches Urkundenbuch*, 786–1253, vol. 1, no. 30, 111.

⁷⁵ *Vita Adalberti. Früheste Textüberlieferungen der Lebensgeschichte Adalberts von Prag*, Jürgen Hoffmann ed. and trans. (Europäische Schriften der Adalbert-Stiftung-Krefeld), Klartext: Essen 2005, ch. 28, at 156.

⁷⁶ Mariusz Bizewski, 'Hołd lenny Mściwoja I złożony Dani w 1210 r. Próba rekonstrukcji epizodu z dziejów panowania pierwszych Sobiesławiców', *Studia z Dziejów Średniowiecza* 23 (2019), 17–64, at 25–6.

⁷⁷ *Schleswig-Holsteinische Regesten und Urkunden* 1, Paul Ewald Hasse ed., Hamburg: Voss 1886, no. 415.

widow-duchesses Ingrid of Denmark and Mirosława of Gdańsk, long remained aligned with the Valdemarian-Welf alliance.⁷⁸ An interesting source that offers an insight into attitudes in Pomerania is a charter issued at a great assembly of the Pomeranian elite at Ueckermünde in 1223. The charter is, frustratingly, otherwise undated, but was probably issued after Valdemar II's capture. Certainly, the size of the assembly – which also featured Valdemar's seneschalk (*dapiferibus*) suggests that more than routine matters were discussed. In the charter, Duchess Mirosława and her son Barnim granted lands to 'our brothers' in the Danish-Pomeranian monastery Kolbatz. These grants were intended to compensate for the losses the monastery had suffered 'when the Germans invaded and occupied Stettin'. This was a reference to 1214, when the Margrave of Brandenburg had invaded in support of Count Henry of Schwerin. That Mirosława choose to commemorate this event, in such a pronounced anti-Teutonic manner, in this year should probably be read as part of a public commitment to the Valdemarian empire.⁷⁹

The Valdemarian empire may not have collapsed, but it did fall, although only after three hard-fought battles, at Mölln (1224), Rensburg (1226) and Bornhöved (1227). Valdemar II's imperial ambitions, however, were undiminished. In 1238 he compelled the Teutonic Order to hand back Northern Estonia. The agreement between Valdemar and the Order also included references to future joint conquests: these would be divided so that 2/3 would go to the Danish king and 1/3 to the Teutonic Order.⁸⁰

Although the treaty specifies pagans as the intended target, both Valdemar II and the Order's ambitions very quickly began to focus on their Orthodox neighbours and rivals to the east. In 1237–1238 Rus' had been thrown into turmoil by the Mongol Invasion, which had strayed into Novgorod's territory before turning south.⁸¹ Over the next few years, several Western powers sought to capitalise on this, including Valdemar II. Interestingly, it was also in these years that the information about Valdemar I's childhood in Novgorod which formed the basis of Lind's article, seems to have reached Óláfr Þórðarson and through him *Knytlinga saga*.

Valdemarian forces participated in the attacks on Novgorod. According to the later *Livländische Reimchronik* a 'glorious force' from the Valdemarian vassals in Estonia participated in the Teutonic Orders' attack on the border-fortress Isborzk.⁸² The older *Chronicle of Novgorod* reports another attack in the winter of 1240–1241, along the Gulf of Finland, in which a castle was erected in Koporje. As Lind notes, this area lay just east of Valdemarian Estonia, and it is very likely that Valdemar II's vassals were behind it. A passage from the well-informed contemporary, the English chronicler Matthew Paris suggest that they received support from Denmark itself. According to

⁷⁸ Marek Smoliński, 'Wends/Slavs/Pomeranians as Allies of the Margraves of Brandenburg in 1229. Voice in the Discussion on Political Alliances of the Rulers of West Pomerania in the 1220's', *Studia Maritima* 35 (2022), 5–39, at 19–21

⁷⁹ *Pommersches Urkundenbuch* 1, no. 213: 'fratribus nostris in Colbas ... cum Stetin a Theutonicis invasa fuisset et possessa'; Edward Rymar, 'Księstwa zachodniopomorskie, zwłaszcza ich połąć zaodrzańską u schyłku dominacji duńskiej (1215–1223/1228)', in Joachim Zdrenka & Joanna Karczewska eds, *Scriptura, diploma, sigillum. Prace ofiarowane Profesorowi Kazimierzowi Bobowskiemu*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego: Zielona Góra 2009, 323–39, at 330.

⁸⁰ *Diplomatarium Danicum* 1:7, ed. Herluf Nielsen, Ejnar Munkegaard: Copenhagen 1990, nr. 9.

⁸¹ Alexander V. Maiorov, 'The Mongol Conquest of Rus', in Timothy May & Michael Hope eds, *The Mongol World*, Routledge: London 2022, 164–82.

⁸² *Livländische Reimchronik*, Leo Meyer ed., F. Schöningh: Paderborn 1876, l. 2082; 'hovelichen schar'; Lind, Jensen, Jensen & Bysted 2004, 280.

Matthew, England had been griped with anxiety about a possible Danish invasion, this anxiety only abated when, in 1240,

the ships loaded with men and women were sent elsewhere in order to repopulate, cultivate and occupy the lands that the Mongols had devastated.

Most likely a reference to the same establishment of a garrison mentioned in the *Chronicle of Novgorod*.⁸³

The winter of 1240–1241 was a particularly tense moment in Novgorod, according to the *Chronicle*: the prince Alexander Nevsky and the people of Novgorod had a dispute which resulted in the prince leaving the city.⁸⁴ This was, as we saw above, the same winter in which Óláfr Þórðarson visited Valdemar II and learned many stories from him, presumably also the one about his father, Valdemar I's childhood in Rus'. We can only speculate, but it seems plausible to me that this was not just coincidence and that Óláfr Þórðarson has preserved a glimpse of the way in which Valdemar II was presenting his family story in this last winter, in a similar vein to how he had used it in Pomerania years before.

The Latin forces that attacked Novgorod and its allies in 1240 were keenly aware of the advantages to be won through cultivating political alliances among the Rus'.⁸⁵ The Latin forces that invaded Pskov did so in alliance with the exile Yaroslav Vladimirovich. Yaroslav's father had been prince of Pskov until he was driven into exile in 1212 by the people of the city – because, the chronicler Henry of Livonia reports, Yaroslav's sister had married a brother of bishop Albert of Riga.⁸⁶ A story that, in outline, is not so far different from that of Valdemar the Great, whose uncle Vsevolod had been driven out of Novgorod. In Pskov, the invaders received support from the local magnate Tverdilo Ivankovich and his allies. Tverdillo was left to run the city in collaboration with representatives of the Teutonic Order.⁸⁷ The army that pushed east out of Danish Estonia and into Koporye in the winter of 1240 also made local alliances. The *Novgorod Chronicle* speaks of the execution of local traitors in Koporye, after Alexander Nevsky reconquered the area in 1241.⁸⁸

By burnishing his Novgorod credentials in 1240–1241 Valdemar II may have been trying to demonstrate his legitimacy as ruler in the East. That winter the ruling council, the *Veche*, in

⁸³ Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, H. R. Luard ed. (Rolls Series), 7 vols., Stationery Office: London 1872–1884, at vol. 4, 9: 'navibus oneratis hominibus utrisque sexus, terras a Tartaris vastatas disposerunt colere et inhabitare et populis restaurare'; See Lars Kjær 'Remembering the Vikings in Thirteenth-Century England and Denmark', in A. M. Spencer & C. Watkins eds, *Thirteenth Century England XVII*, Boydell: Woodbridge 2021, 1–21.

⁸⁴ *Novgorodskaya pervaya letopis' starshego i mladshego izvoodov*, ed. Arseny Nikolaevich Nasonov, Institut istorii (Akademiia nauk SSSR): Moscow 1950, 78, trans: *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016–1471*, Robert Michell & Nevill Forbes trans. (The Russian Series 18), Academic International: London 1914, 86.

⁸⁵ Anti Selart, 'Confessional conflict and political co-operation: Livonia and Russia in the thirteenth century', in Alan V. Murray ed., *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier, 1150–1500*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2001, 151–76.

⁸⁶ Henry of Livonia, *Chronicon*, Leonid Arbusow & Albert Bauer eds (Monumenta Germaniae Historica, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi* 31), Hahn: Hannover 1955, ch. 15.13, at 100–1.

⁸⁷ *Novgorodskaya pervaya, sub anno 1240*, at 77–8, trans. Michell & Forbes 1914, 85; *Livländische Reimchronik* 1, 2165–2203, at 50–1.

⁸⁸ *Novgorodskaya pervaya, sub anno 1241*, at 78, trans. Michell & Forbes 1914, 86.

Novgorod was shopping around for a new prince.⁸⁹ They had asked Yaroslav II of Vladimir for a replacement for Alexander Nevsky, but relations with his appointment, Alexander's brother Andrey, foundered and he soon left the city.⁹⁰ Valdemar II may have hoped for an invitation to take over his great-uncle Vsevolod Mstislavich's principality.

This was, after all, the methods that Valdemar II had applied when he won Nordalbingia in 1201. The conquest had to a considerable extent been due to support from the aristocracy of Holstein and facilitated by a Danish-friendly party in Lübeck which had already for years been advocating that the city should seek support and protection from the Danish king.⁹¹ Valdemar's record in Lübeck would certainly have provided the right credentials from the perspective of the *Veche*: Lübeck had grown in wealth and power under Valdemar and he had governed in collaboration with the local elite – it is in Valdemar II's reign that we first hear of Lübeck being governed by locally elected consuls.⁹²

Whether with a crusading-army at his back or at the invitation of the Novogord *veche*, Valdemar II would have been able to present himself as a suitable candidate for the vacant position of prince, with a track-record of negotiating between the claims and ambitions of Eastern and Western elites.

The afterlife of the Valdemarians and the Slavs

Valdemar II died on 27 March 1241, and did not live to see Novgorod throw of the ambitions of western crusaders. Alexander Nevsky was invited back to Novgorod the same year and reconquered Koporje. A year later, 5 April 1242, he defeated the forces of the Teutonic Order at lake Peipus, the so-called 'Battle on the Ice'.

In the centuries that followed, as Lind has shown, and on both sides of the Latin-Orthodox divide, the wars of the thirteenth centuries came to be read as emblematic of deeply rooted, unbridgeable conflicts between East and West. In Russian historiography, the opportunistic Latin attacks on Novgorod in 1240–1242 came to be read as part of a long-planned conspiracy against Orthodoxy.⁹³

When Danish artists and authors depicted and narrated the story of the Valdemarian empire, the slavs were depicted as antagonistic others. B.S. Ingemann's hugely successful novel *Valdemar Sejr* (1826), had considerable time for the contribution of Valdemar II's German relatives – but not his Slavic subjects. In one scene, Ingemann depicts Count Henry of Schwerin plotting with Henry Borwin I of Mecklenburg and his relatives. The German count is an arch-villain, devious and conspicuously Catholic, but the slavs are presented as fundamentally other, blood-thirsty and

⁸⁹ For an introduction to Novgorod's political system, see V. L. Ianin, 'Medieval Novgorod', in Maureen Perrie ed., *The Cambridge History of Russia, volume 1, From Early Rus' to 1689*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2006, 188–210.

⁹⁰ *Novgorodskaya pervaya, sub anno 1240*, at. 78, trans. Michell & Forbes 1914, 86.

⁹¹ Arnold of Lübeck, *Chronica Slavorum*, 5.12, at 186.

⁹² Manfred Gläser, '... viel ärger geplagt... als die Kinder Israels unter Pharao ...: die Dänenzeit in Lübeck 1201–1227; Mythen, Sagen und Forschungen', in Ortwin Pelc ed., *Mythen der Vergangenheit: Realität und Fiktion in der Geschichte: Jörgen Bracker zum 75. Geburtstag*, V & R Unipress: Göttingen 2012, 67–87.

⁹³ See John H. Lind, 'Consequences of the Baltic Crusades in Target Areas. The Case of Karelia', in Alan V. Murray ed., *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150–1500*, Ashgate: Aldershot 2001, 133–49.

impulsive: Henry I Borwin has a ‘wild animal-like face’.⁹⁴ On Lauritz Tuxen’s famous depiction of the subjugation of Arkona, *Arkonas indtagelse af Valdemar den Store og Absalon, 1169* (1894), Valdemar I, with a big blond beard, stands aloof next to Absalon, while the Rani drag away the statue of Svantevit. It’s not an unfaithful depiction of the scene as depicted by Saxo, but the exclusively Danish perspective is sharpened. Valdemar’s allies from Pomerania are nowhere in sight, nor is it easy – from the painting – to imagine that Valdemar had already begun making peace with the Rani elite. Karl Hansen Reistrup’s *Völmerslaget*, also from 1894, depicts a fiercely-blond Valdemar II – cross-banner fluttering above him – riding down the Estonians at Lyndanisse in 1219. The Estonians carry strange helmets seemingly made from bulls-heads, making them look exotic, not to say demonic.

But the stories we tell matter – and can change the meaning even of old paintings. In 2023, the Ukrainian ambassador visited the Danish Museum of National History at Frederiksborg Castle, where Tuxen’s painting of Valdemar the Great dominates the central hall. The ambassador was delighted when he learned that the great Danish hero had been born in Kyiv. John H. Lind’s pioneering work had rescued and retrieved a story of connections from underneath the detritus of a small millennia of national mythmaking.⁹⁵ It is an important story to remember in a moment where the dream of a united Europe is once again under threat.

⁹⁴ B. S. Ingemann, *Valdemar Seier*, ed. Marita Akhøj Nielsen (Danske Klassikere), Borgen: Copenhagen 1987, 131: ‘hans vilde dyriske ansigt’, cf. p. 128.

⁹⁵ I’m grateful to Tore Leifer at the Danish Museum of National History for telling me about the visit.