



Conquest, holy war, and crusade. The plan of the military campaign against the Slavs. A new interpretation of the so-called Magdeburg Letter of 1108¹

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Abstract. In the early twelfth century, it was possible to justify (morally and legally) the conquest of a neighbouring non-Christian territory using theological arguments from the Bible and Christian authors, including various narratives about the torture and suffering of Christians. Such conflicts were legitimised as holy wars fought for defensive purposes. This study will show that waging war against the neighbours, seen as “enemies of Christ”, was quickly associated with a crusade, and conveyed through preaching. The plan is included in the Magdeburg charter. The document believed to have been written in 1108 emphasizes the reconquest of a lost territory which previously held an ecclesiastical organization. The repercussions of the conquest of the Holy Land could be felt in Magdeburg. The event became a flexible model which could have been adapted according to the regional interests.

Keywords: Magdeburg letter, Archbishopric of Magdeburg, Elbe Slavs, Holy Land, Crusade ideology, Sanctification of warfare, Anti-Christian rebellions.

Introduction

In the early twelfth century, the conquest of a neighboring territory was morally and legally justified using theological arguments. The action itself was framed as a holy war fought, in theory, for defensive purposes. As we shall see, waging war against the “enemies of Christ” was associated with crusading in crusade appeals and preaching. This combination of ideas has been expressed in the so-called Magdeburg letter, also known as the Magdeburg charter, which was com-

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posed around 1108 by Archbishop Adalgot of Magdeburg (d. 1119) or one of his clerics. Opinions are divided among scholars regarding the nature of the letter, which is preserved in a single manuscript in Darmstadt (Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek), Cod. 749 (86v–88v)². It could have been a private letter addressed to German clergy and nobility, or a summons or an appeal for crusade, most likely a draft (Constable 2008, pp. 199-205). The proposed crusade never took place. However the most important thing is its content, which is a witness to the development of new ways of thinking about warfare, crusade, and conquest in the German lands in the twelfth century.

Although several scholars have analyzed the letter in connection to crusading ideology³, colonization (Krabbo 1926, pp. 250-262; Knoch 1974, pp. 1-33; Papiór 2006, pp. 49-63)⁴, as a call for conquest (Ščavinskias 2014, p. 506), driven by vengeance (Dragnea 2016, pp. 49-82)⁵ and even as a forgery⁶, none of them have actually interpreted its content as a sort of moral and legal justification for the reconquest of a territory through a holy war. More recently it has been stated that the letter suggests a defensive war against the pagan threat (von Güttner-Sporzyński 2017, pp. 205-206). It was also seen as an example of extension of the crusading concept of defending a holy territory, as part of which Jerusalem was symbolically “moved” to the North, east of the Elbe (Jensen 2019, pp. 114-115; Tamm 2013, p. 446).

As this study shows, the letter emphasizes the reconquest of a lost territory and indirectly the defense of what remained Christian within it. This plan was taken from the narrative of recovering the Holy Land. It has been adapted by Adalgot or his follower in order to resonate with the regional interests. There are two main actors in the scene: the victim (innocent Christians) and the supposed aggressor (“enemies of Christ”). In order to mobilize the Christian world for a crusade against the aggressor, who was said to have committed immoral and illegal acts

² The original title is “*Epistola pro auxilio adversus paganos (Slavos)*.” In this paper I use the Latin text from Wattenbach 1882, pp. 624-626. The content of the letter survived in a single copy in a manuscript from the Westphalian monastery of Graftschafft, which is dated to mid twelfth century.

³ For the Magdeburg letter and all references connected to the First Crusade and crusading ideology in general, see Constable 1999, pp. 283-299; Labuda 1975, pp. 233-269; Beumann 1963, pp. 121-145.

⁴ For the German eastward expansion and colonization in both theory and practice east of the Elbe in the twelfth century under the impulse of crusading ideology, see Dragnea 2021b, pp. 41-61. Marian Dygo believes that this is the first program to settle German and Flemish populations across the Elbe. Dygo 2001, pp. 319-325.

⁵ The concept of zeal as an emotion both positive and negative, involving love, passion, hatred, or anger was less analyzed in relation to crusading ideology and vocabulary of vengeance.

⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century it has been emphasized that the letter was a diplomatic forgery made by a private Flemish clergyman, who wanted to mislead the readers that it was an official document issued by the Archbishop of Magdeburg. The audience was composed mainly of his Flemish comrades who would have liked to settle across the Elbe. Tangl 1905, pp. 183-191.

against the victim, the author of the letter had to present a story with an emotional impact. In this study I will identify the sources from which the author took certain passages, included in the letter with the intention of eliciting an emotional response and presented to the audience as true dramas. The actions of the presumed aggressor as well as their motivation will be discussed in the political and religious context beyond the Elbe since the Ottonian era. The moral and legal framework in which the crusade would have taken place will also be analyzed.

The political and religious context beyond the Elbe

The Ottonian conquest of the whole territory up to Oder was followed by conversion. In 948, King Otto I (936–973, emperor from 962) founded the dioceses of Brandenburg (east of the Elbe) and Havelberg (at the confluence of the Elbe and Havel). In 968, another three dioceses were founded: Merseburg (on the Saale), Zeitz (later Naumburg, on the White Elster), and Meissen (on the Elbe). All five dioceses were suffragans of Magdeburg. A sixth diocese was Oldenburg (Wagria), a suffragan of Hamburg-Bremen (Dragnea 2019, p. 88).

At the end of the tenth century, the Slavs had pushed the Saxons back across the Elbe. From the Saxon point of view, this action was a rebellion, which led to a mass apostasy, and the bishoprics east of the Elbe were abandoned. Their bishops, whose names appear in the letter, were in exile. For the next century, the Ottonians and the Salians tried to retake control across the Elbe and reintegrate the Slavs within the Saxon Church. Sporadic missionary actions took place in the eleventh century. Yet it was the presence of lay and monastic settlers starting in the early twelfth century that made it possible to turn baptism into what churchmen from the Empire classified as genuine conversion.

Following the Ottonian conquest, the Slavic princes (e.g. the Obotrite Nakonid dynasty) became tributaries to the Saxon margraves (e.g. the Billungs). The relationship between them was based on verbal “pledges” (*sponsiones*) made by the Slavic rulers. These implied fidelity and obedience to both secular and ecclesiastical authorities. As long as they paid tribute and tithes, and maintained a Saxon ecclesiastical organization, the Slavs were seen as part of the Saxon *imperium Christianum*. This power relation made the Saxons consider themselves the legitimate rulers of the Slavic territory⁷.

⁷ One relevant example can be found at the eleventh century chronicler Adam of Bremen, who considered the Sorbian territory to be part of Saxony. “...eam partem Saxoniae, quae trans Albiam supra incolitur a Sorabis”. Lappenberg 1876, I, 1. In the first half of the twelfth century, Saxons also considered themselves the owners of the Slavic territory by the inheritance of the Billung lands. This was divided between Saxon nobles. For the legal inheritance of the Billung territory through marriage, see Dragnea 2021 p. 45; Dragnea 2019, p. 127.

The initiators of the call

The letter is given in the name of Adalgot, the five bishops from his archdiocese⁸ and several counts from the north and east of Germany⁹. It was addressed to a number of recipients which can be divided in two categories. The first is made up of clerics and nobles from Westphalia, Rhineland, Lotharingia and Flanders¹⁰, while the second include “all the faithful of Christ”, bishops, abbots, monks, hermits, cloistered clergy¹¹, provosts, canons, clerics, princes, knights, *ministeriales*, vassals and “all the great and small, charity, prayers”¹². All were summoned to a battle against the Slavs.

“The enemies of Christ” and their evil actions

The “enemies of Christ” (*inimici Christi*) in the letter are the Slavs across the Elbe, or the Wends, an exonym sometimes used in the neighboring vernacular languages (*vinder* is the collective name for them in skaldic poetry)¹³. According to the eleventh-century German chronicler Adam of Bremen, the most important Slavic groups beyond the Elbe were the Obotrites (*Obotriti, Reregi*), the Luticians (*Wilzi, Leutici*), the Rugians (*Runi, Rani*) on the island of Rügen, and the Pomer-

⁸ Albuin of Merseburg (d. 1112), Walram of Naumburg (d. 1111), Herwig of Meissen (d. 1118), Hezilo of Havelberg (d. 1109), Hartbert of Brandenburg (d. 1122/25).

⁹ Counts Otto of Ballenstedt (d. 1123), Wiprecht II of Groitzsch, later Margrave of Meissen (d. 1124), Louis the Springer of Thuringia (d. 1123), later Landgrave and “the great and small” nobles of all Eastern Saxony. Wattenbach 1882, p. 624.

¹⁰ Reginhard, Bishop of Halberstadt (d. 1123), Erchanbert, Abbot of Corbey (d. 1128), Henry II of Werl, Bishop of Paderborn (d. 1127), clergy from the diocese of Minden, Frederick, Archbishop of Cologne (d. 1131), clergy from Aachen and the Diocese of Liège (probably Bishop Otbert, d. 1119), Godfrey I, Duke of Lower Lorraine (d. 1139), Robert II, Count of Flanders (d. 1111), a certain Archdeacon Lambert, later bishop of Noyon and Tournai, Praepositus Berichold, philosopher Tanchrad. Wattenbach 1882, p. 624.

¹¹ Religious orders that follow the Rule of St. Benedict.

¹² “... omnibus Christi fidelibus, episcopis, abbatibus, monachis, heremitis, reclusis, prepositis, canonicis, clericis, principibus, militibus, ministerialibus, clientibus omnibusque maioribus et minoribus dilectionem orationem et in id ipsum salutem”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 624.

¹³ The Scandinavian (Varangian) leaders were called *Vinða myrðir* (murderer of Wends) and *Vinðum háttir* (danger to the Wends) because they defeated the Slavs living on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea. One of the most active leaders was the Norwegian King Magnus the Good (d. 1047), who crushed a Wendish invasion of Jutland at the Battle of Lyrskov Heath (north of Hedeby), with the miraculous support of his father, St. Olaf, who appeared in a dream. His cult reached up to Constantinople. For the Varangians in Constantinople and Olaf’s cult, see Dragnea 2020, pp. 145-167.

anians (*Pomeranos*), who lived east of the Oder (Lappenberg 1876, II. 18-19; III. 19, 21; IV. 13, 18, pp. 53, 54-55, 109-110, 111, 163, 165)¹⁴.

The Slavic attacks against churches and Christian symbols and killing of Christians are highlighted. Without giving any geographical or administrative details, the author of the letter said that the attacks took place in “our region”¹⁵. This could be within the boundaries of the ecclesiastical province of Magdeburg. Since there are no references to any of the high clergy of Hamburg-Bremen most likely the author did not refer to this ecclesiastical province as well.

The Slavs are described as “cruel heathens”, without mercy, who triumphed after a rebellion against the Christian authorities across the Elbe¹⁶. The churches were not destroyed but rather profaned with the Slavic “idolatry”¹⁷, and the altars were demolished. Since they are rebels, the Slavs do not hesitate to commit harmful, illegal, or immoral acts against Christians¹⁸. They are eager to pillage, kill, destroy and inflict chosen torments. Some Christians were sacrificed to mark the triumph of the rebellion and their heads were offered to the Slavic “demons”¹⁹. Others had their entrails pulled out and their bodies were mutilated (hands and feet were chopped off), to insult Christ²⁰.

Such kind of atrocities are not pleasing to God, who can seek for retribution. The idea of vengeance ordered by divine authority originates from both the Old and New Testament²¹. The biblical themes of divine vengeance were popular among twelfth-century writers such as Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux. In *Cur Deus Homo* (1090s), Anselm said that disobedience against those of high rank demanded a divine punishment. This is not a sin but only God’s work. His anger can led to moral and legal actions on Earth (Williams 2007, I, 12). The legitimacy of the vengeance was highlighted by Bernard of Clairvaux in 1138 when he wrote in one of his letters that “God sees and gets sad, He is wretched and He

¹⁴ For the diversity of the Slavic *gens* and *populus*, the geographical distribution of the tribes, their political structure, beliefs and social customs, see Mihai Dragnea 2021a, pp. 12-24; Roslund 2007, pp. 5, 22; Blomkvist 2005, pp. 132-136.

¹⁵ “In nostram regionem sepiissime efferantur nullique parentes rapiunt, cedunt, fundunt et exquisitis tormentis affligunt”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

¹⁶ “Insurrexerunt in nos et prevaluerunt crudelissimi gentiles, viri absque misericordia et de inhumanitatis sue glorientes malicia”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

¹⁷ For Slavic idolatry in a broader context in Latin sources, see Dragnea 2021a, pp. 45-67.

¹⁸ “Ecclesias Christi ydolatria prophanaverunt, altaria demoliti sunt, et quod humana mens refugit audire, ipsi non abhorrent in nos perpetrare”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

¹⁹ “Quosdam decollant et capita demoniis suis immolant”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

²⁰ “De quibusdam visceribus extractis, manus abscisas et pedes alligant, Christumque nostrum suggillantes: Ubi est, inquit, deus eorum?”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

²¹ In the Bible, only God had the right to revenge (Psalms 94: 1; 149: 7; Deuteronomy 32: 35; Romans 12: 19; 13: 4; Hebrews 10: 30).

girds on His sword to take vengeance on the malefactors, but also to praise the good”²².

Pripegala, a paradigm of apostasy and a symbol of immorality

The author of the letter expresses shock by the fact that the Slavs, who claim to be Christians, invade Christian territories and commit atrocities²³. He emphasized the religious status of the Slavs who become sworn enemies of the faith they have left. He did not explain why the apostasy occurred and to which beliefs and practices the Slavs return. It only mentions a supposed god called Pripegala²⁴, without giving any indication of his tribal affinity. Pripegala is described as thirsty deity for Christian blood, who demands sacrifices on his altar. The heads of Christians are his trophies²⁵ and their blood is collected and used in evil rituals. According to the letter, this sacrifice brings joy to the Slavs because it symbolizes the defeat of Christ²⁶.

Etymologically speaking, Pripegala is a combination between the Greek ithyphallic god Priapus and the demon Belphegor (Wattenbach 1882, p. 625)²⁷. Most likely Pripegala was not a real god but rather an amalgam created on accounts taken from Greek, Roman, and Israelite mythology. Belphegor is the Canaanite

²² “Videat et doleat, misereatur et accingatur ad vindictam malefactorum, laudem vero bonorum”. Leclercq and Rochas, 1974, p. 381.

²³ “Quam plures vivos exoriant, et cute capitis abstracta, hoc modo larvati in Christianorum fines erumpunt, et se Christianos mentientes, predas impune abigunt”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

²⁴ According to Aleksandar Loma, the name of Pripegala, an Obotrite god, may be interpreted as a corrupt form of **Pribygolva* (“headhunter”). Loma takes his description in the letter seriously, considering that Pripegala could be connected to a specific cult in which the Obotrites used to scalp their enemies (Christians) and to disguise themselves as the dead. This ritual practice would be similar to the ghostly army of the German Harii, Odin’s Einherjar in Norse mythology. Loma 2002, p. 344.

²⁵ This description could come from the narratives of Adam of Bremen, who stated that during the rebellion of 1066, the Redarians, one of the rebel groups, who were part of the Lutician union, celebrated in Rethra the ritual decapitation of the captured Scottish bishop John of Mecklenburg. His head, stuck on a lance, was given to a certain Riedegost. Lappenberg 1876, III, 50. Rethra was the “seat of idolatry” (*sedes ydolatriae*) because there resided Redigast, “the prince of demons”. It is unknown if Redigast was a simulacrum of a deity, or the high priest of the temple in Rethra, who receive offerings from the Slavs. Lappenberg 1876, II, 18. Pripegala seems to meet the same features as Redigast (high rank deity, thirsty for Christian blood, source of idolatry etc).

²⁶ “Tunc decollatis ante prophanationis sue aras Christianis, crateras tenent humano sanguine plenas, et horrendis vocibus ululantes: Agamus iniquum diem leticie! Victus est Christus: vicit Pripegala victoriosissimus”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

²⁷ Kurt V. Jensen also observed that the profile of Pripegala is a combination of attributes from Priapus and Belphegor which may have been taken from the near-contemporary work on virginity (*De virginitate opusculum*) of the Benedictine theologian Guibert of Nogent (d. 1124). He also wrote one of the histories of the First Crusade called *Gesta Dei Per Francos* (c. 1109). Jensen 2016, pp. 168-169.

god Baal-Peor, a Ba'al who was worshiped by the biblical Moabites on a mountain called Peor. He was the counterpart of Priapus and Horus, being often venerated in the form of a phallus (Drummond 1814, p. 570). According to the Old Testament, widely used to justify various aspects of crusades, some of the Israelite men were seduced by the Moabite women and fell into apostasy. This sparked divine anger and implicitly the desire for vengeance on the part of the Saxons. The Israelites abandoned God for Baal-Peor, whose cult included sacrifices and sexual rituals (Numbers 25: 1-5).²⁸ Based on these elements, Pripegala could be explained as a paradigm of apostasy and a symbol of immorality. In a practical way he is a representative of Slavic religiosity detached from Christianity. For Christian clergy, Pripegala symbolizes the return to immoral practices and illegal actions. The author of the letter described him by choosing names and negative attributes widely known from ancient, classical mythologies and the Bible. The immoralities and illegalities from the Bible, as well as the legitimate reactions against them were transposed to the contemporaneity of the author of the letter.

The atrocities committed in Pripegala's name were no new events that suddenly appeared in Saxony. Similar atrocities were described by Robert the Monk in his version of Pope Urban II's sermon at the Council of Clermont in November 1095, where many French and German clerics gathered. Robert's account circulated in Magdeburg and Hamburg-Bremen and their suffragans as well²⁹. In the Rhineland, Lotharingia, and Flanders, the Slavic attacks were probably unknown before the Magdeburg appeal was written. Most likely the clergy, nobility, and knights from those regions took inspiration from the campaigns of the First Crusade and from Robert's account. The author of the letter relied on that fact, so he presented the Slavic actions in the same manner in order to start a new crusade. He was confident that the people would react in the same way as in the context of the First Crusade upon hearing news similar to those who answered the call for that expedition in 1095-1096. However, he does not hide his intention. The clergy from Saxony, France, Lotharingia, and Flanders are invited to follow the "good example" of "Gauls" and "imitate" them in this³⁰. The "Gauls" are the French clergy who preached the First Crusade after the Council of Clermont.

²⁸ For the complex relationship between Baal-Peor, apostasy and sexual relations or idolatry, see Pettit 2018, pp. 457-468. It has been stated that the worship of Baal-Peor included sacred (temple) prostitution. Scott 1941, p. 70.

²⁹ An English translation of the sermon can be found in Sweetenham 2016, pp. 79-81.

³⁰ "... de bonis sumite exemplum, et Gallorum imitatores in hoc etiam estote". Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

The sanctification of warfare

The defensive nature of the war against the “enemies of Christ” was highlighted by St. Augustine (d. 430) in the so-called *bellum iustum* theory³¹. The “just war” had at least two main components. First was juridical, based primarily on Augustinian doctrine and elements from the Roman law regarding warfare. This was promoted by the canonists in the twelfth century. The second component – theological – was based on the biblical ethical laws imposed by God upon humanity. It was promoted mainly by the popes and some theologians.

An offensive war was condemned by the canon law. It was considered illegitimate in both moral and legal aspects. However the Augustinian texts regarding the nature of war were gathered only in the eleventh century by Bishop Anselm of Lucca (d. 1086). Texts about “just war” theory rarely appear in the papal letters, sermons, and chronicles of the crusade period. There was no unified theory on warfare and its nature. Until the eleventh century popes waged aggressive wars against any enemies of the papacy who might come from inside or outside Christendom. Pope Leo IX (d. 1054) extended warfare ideology by using scriptural imagery to show the juridical influence of a “just war” theory. Directly or indirectly, divine vengeance was used by Christians to legitimate the fight with enemies of Christianity who were the enemies of influential figures (nobles and high ranking clergy). A type of institutionalized warfare emerged that distinguished crusades from the holy wars fought in the past for various reasons (Dragnea 2016, pp. 63-65).

Augustine’s theory had allowed the use of force in “winning back” the former Christians, usually heretics and apostates. It did not violate the canon law. The “holy war” became more and more connected to the crusade ideology, after furthermore it was an useful tool to justify a conquest. The war against the Slavs was defensive and thus legitimate because it referred to recovery of an occupied territory rather than a war of expansion to a land where there has never been a Christian presence. What can be noticed is that the human desire for revenge sprouted from the love for Christ and obedience to Him. His image had to be rehabilitated and the faith in Him had to be defended. The true God could only be a victorious one. At the same time, the passion for justice was maintained. This fight had no worldly stakes, but was rather a religious act, with spiritual aims. The ones who carried swords were the nobles and the knights, while the clergy preached what to do. Therefore a reaction was necessary to defend Christendom and to protect the Christian community who is living there. The result will be the reintegration of the Slavs into Christianity, from which they had willingly moved away, and reestablishment of Saxon ecclesiastical authority across the Elbe.

³¹ For the evolution of the “just war” theory of Augustine, see Gilchrist 1988, pp. 174-197.

The letter contains the prediction of the specific events of the crusade. First were emphasized the persecution of Christians, their suffering and fear regarding the troubles constantly caused by the Slavs³². The fear can be stopped, the Christian territories can be liberated, and Slavic idolatry can be annihilated³³. These can be achieved through an armed action blessed by the Church. Before “taking the cross”, preaching was needed. The first protagonists in this anticipated expedition were the clergy from Saxony, France, Lotharingia, and Flanders. They had to present the situation across the Elbe just as the French did after Clermont with the Holy Land. They were urged to preach through lamentations in the churches from all parts of dioceses and parishes³⁴.

Due to the critical situation, the clergy had to organize a “solemn assembly” and to “gather the people” while fasting³⁵ as God commanded in the Old Testament (Joel 1: 14; Joel 2: 12-17). During this time the nobles would have been encouraged to “take the cross” and fight, thus effectively becoming *crucesignati* (“signed with the cross”)³⁶. In the letter it is mentioned that the war waged by them has been sanctified by the clergy and only strong combatants are called to arms³⁷. This could mean both the powerful nobles, who can bring more knights, and professional men-at-arms, who taught the arts of war and are experienced in combat³⁸. Of course, simple pilgrims and commoners are not to be preferred, even if they are properly armed. The defensive nature of this “holy war” was highlighted by the author, who urged the combatants to “take up [their] shields against the enemies of Christ”³⁹. He did not say anything about drawing swords or any other gesture that would symbolize an offensive military action. Christian defense against the hostile Slavs will lead to victory. This is taken from the Book of Isaiah – *Oracles* (Isaiah 21:5), where there is a prophecy about the destruction of Babylon (oppressor) through a royal saviour (Cyrus the Great). The Slavs are the Babylonians, the Israelites are the persecuted Christians and their saviors are the crusaders.

³² “Hujusmodi afflictiones sine intermissione vel toleramus, vel formidamus, quoniam eos semper progredi, et in omnibus ingemiscimus bene prosperari”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

³³ “Tempus putacionis advenit ydololatrie”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

³⁴ “Clamate hoc in ecclesiis ... in omnibus terminis prelationis vestre”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

³⁵ “Sanctificate jejunium, vocate cetum, congregare populum, annunciate hoc et auditum facite”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

³⁶ There are only a few mentions on the liturgical ceremony of “taking the cross” (*crucesignatus*) in the twelfth century. In the thirteenth century the pontificals (service books for bishops) contained such a ceremony. For the rite of “taking the cross” in the twelfth century, see Pennington 1974, pp. 429-435. The next step was the rite of departure in which the insignia of the cross were blessed and sanctified by the clergy (bishops and priests as well) and handed over to the crusaders or pilgrims from the altar. For the rites of departure in the crusades to the Holy Land, see Gaposchkin, 2013, pp. 1-28.

³⁷ “Sanctificate bellum, suscite robustos”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

³⁸ “Accingimini filii potentes, et venite omnes viri bellatores”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

³⁹ “Surgite principes, contra inimicos Christi arripite clypeos”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

Reconquest of formerly Christian territories

The combatants are invited to take part in a divine battle against the Slavs. The invitation is a quotation from the Old Testament Book of Joel (Joel 3: 9-13). This is a book of prophecy, mainly discussing the coming Day of the Lord and his battle with the nations (i.e. pagans), in which all His enemies are defeated. The battle is waged through a proxy (the Israelites). This eschatological view reflect a challenge of God to the enemies of His people⁴⁰. The battle is legitimate because the Israelites are commanded by God. The war is just because it is waged for God's kingdom on earth. The Christian domination across the Elbe will be restored following the pattern of biblical prophecy about the restoration of the "Kingdom of God" on earth (i.e. the original Kingdom of Israel).

What the author of the letter wanted to emphasize is that the crusaders are in God's service and the divine message is delivered by the clergy⁴¹. Since this is a holy war, where faith is a central element of identification, mercenaries cannot take part in it, but only "all those who love Christ and the Church"⁴². Their faith and obedience makes them worthy to be in God's army. Their task is to liberate the Slavic territories, once Christian, as the French liberated Jerusalem in the First Crusade⁴³. A holy war can be waged only for spiritual purposes or, in this case, a territory sanctified through the Christian identity, faith, martyrdom, and suffering. The Slavic territories as a whole, not as separate region(s), are described as "our Jerusalem". These were "free" from the "origin" (i.e. Christian), that is, from the time of Otto I when bishoprics were founded there. It was the "cruelty of heathens" that made a "servant girl" of "Jerusalem"⁴⁴, which is also located in an easterly direction. The "servant girl" will be freed from the heathens after they will be defeated and their territory seized. This will ensure the integration into the Saxon ecclesiastical network.

It is not clear if by *Hierusalem nostra* the author refers to a specific episcopal see, or to the whole territory across the Elbe that belonged to the ecclesiastical province of Magdeburg. Most likely it was an earthly paradise oppressed by the heathens. Its function was that of a substitute for the Heavenly Jerusalem, meant to legitimate the reconquest. It was described as the "chaste mother Church", which

⁴⁰ "Infirmus dicat quia fortis sum ego, quoniam dominus fortitudo plebis sue, et protector salvationum Christi sui est". Wattenbach 1882, p. 625.

⁴¹ "Vobis loquimur, immo in nobis Christus loquitur vobis". Wattenbach 1882, p. 626. Matthew 10: 20; 2 Corinthians 13: 3.

⁴² "Erumpite et venite omnes amatores Christi et ecclesie". Wattenbach 1882, p. 625-626.

⁴³ "Et sicut Galli ad liberationem Hierusalem vos preparate". Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁴⁴ "Hierusalem nostra ab initio libera, gentilium crudelitate facta est ancilla". Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

“groans in the filthiness of idolatry” and needs to be saved⁴⁵. Its walls had collapsed because of Christian sins. The ruins are connected to the sins and the fate of the city is in the hand of crusaders. The “precious stones” of its walls and the towers will be built with “jewels”⁴⁶. Its streets will be paved with worldly gold, and a song of joy will be sung there to replace the terrible song of heathens in sight of Pripegala⁴⁷.

The image of Jerusalem as a holy city, prepared as a bride, descending from Heaven, made of gold, with its walls of jasper, its gates of pearls, and its foundations decorated with precious stones comes from the Book of Revelation (Revelation 21: 2, 10-11, 18-19, 21). In the letter, Jerusalem is depicted as “the bride of Christ”⁴⁸. In medieval symbolism, the Heavenly Jerusalem has twelve precious stones that symbolize the “twelfth apostles of the Lamb”. The precious stones can be identified with Christ, the saints, and the martyrs (Šedinová 2000, pp. 31, 40). In the early twelfth century, the celebration of the liberation of Jerusalem became a feast and was performed through a special office which became standard for the Catholic Church. It contained verses from the book of Revelation and Psalms. After 1149, this rite was subordinated to the Dedication celebration. Both were celebrated in the Holy Sepulcher⁴⁹.

In the letter it is said that the Danish king Niels (d. 1134) with his people and other princes round about were ready to participate in the planned crusade against the Slavs⁵⁰. The war was “initiated” by the German king himself, Henry V (d. 1125, emperor from 1111), who is ready to support the project with all the men at his disposal⁵¹. It is presented as a legitimate war because its initiator was *rex noster*, the highest secular authority. Yet, nothing was said about the pope. Merseburg and other places in eastern Saxony were envisioned as departure points for the crusading expeditions. The ceremony of solemn vow and/or the blessing of the distinctive insignia of the cross which marked the status as pilgrim and crusader should have taken place there. The “voice sound of the faithful of Christ”, which is a sort of alarm of war⁵², was broadcast through the sermon. It will quickly gather other

⁴⁵ “Quoniam casta mater ecclesia ingemiscit de ydololatrie spurciciis”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁴⁶ “Hujus muri propter peccata nostra corruerunt, sed ruina hec sub manu vestra, quatenus lapides preciosi omnes muri ejus, et turres Hierusalem nostre gemmis edificentur”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁴⁷ “Platee ipsius sternantur auro mundo, et pro horrendo sonitu gentilium in conspectu Pripegale, cantetur in ea canticum leticie”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁴⁸ “Surge itaque sponsa Christi et veni”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁴⁹ For the ritual processions in the liturgical programme used in Jerusalem to celebrate its liberation, see John 2015, pp. 409-431.

⁵⁰ “Ad hoc bellum devotas offert manus cum populo suo rex Dacorum, et alii principes per circuitum”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁵¹ “Ipse etiam rex noster, huius belli auctor, cum omnibus, quos poterit adducere, promptissimus erit adiutor”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁵² “The sound of the trumpet”. Jeremiah 4:19.

volunteers who will support the “soldiers of Christ” in His war⁵³. Their mission is to “subdue” the “nearby” and “most inhuman heathens”. With divine help they will “prosper in all things” regarding the conquest. The power of crusaders came from Christ, the same who through the strength of his arm led the French crusaders from the extreme West to victory in the farthest East⁵⁴.

The submission of the Slavs and the conquest of their territories is emphasized in relation to colonization and land ownership. Saxons, Franconians, Lotharingians, Flemings, and the “most famous men and conquerors of the world”, are invited first to “save their souls” and second if they wish, to “acquire the best land to live on”⁵⁵. The salvation of souls cannot be achieved by voluntary conversion, which would formally integrate the Slavs into the Saxon Church, but only through conquest. This would ensure a forced baptism. The benefits from the conquest of the territories across the Elbe is described following the rhetoric from Clermont. The Slavic land is fertile and it could be very productive if it is cultivated well. There is also the possibility of breeding various domestic animals on rich pastures and meadows⁵⁶. The source of this information are “those who know the land”⁵⁷.

Crusade ideology without the Papacy

It has been stated that a crusade, seen as a pilgrimage, and colonization are totally different actions. The settler is searching for material gains while a crusader, who is technically a pilgrim, seeks heavenly rewards⁵⁸. It is no coincidence that in the Magdeburg letter the formula of pilgrimage, in the sense of a journey (*iter*) or expedition (*expeditio*) to a holy place, is absent. Instead, there is the concept of a “holy war” for the liberation of a place considered metaphorically as sacred. The material reward (land ownership) was temporal. Since it was under the jurisdiction of the secular authorities, the pope could rather bless the acquisition. The author of the letter knew pretty well how people would react regarding the partic-

⁵³ “Sonet vox tua in auribus Christi fidelium, quatenus omnes ad Christi festinent bellum, Christianique militibus veniant in adiutorium!” Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁵⁴ “Qui Gallos ab extremo occidente progressos in brachio virtutis sue contra inimicos suos in remotissimo triumphavit oriente, ipse tribuat vobis voluntatem et potentiam hos affines et inhumanissimos gentiles subjugare et in omnibus bene prosperari!” Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁵⁵ “Quapropter o Saxones, Franci, Lutaringi, Flandrigene famosissimi, et domitores mundi, hic poteritis et animas vestras salvificare, et si ita placet optimam terram ad inhabitandum acquirere”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁵⁶ “Gentiles isti pessimi sunt, sed terra eorum optima, carne, melle, farina, avibus, et si excolatur omnium de terra ubertate proventuum, ita ut nulla ei possit comparari”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁵⁷ “Sic ajunt illi quibus nota est”. Wattenbach 1882, p. 626.

⁵⁸ For ideological arguments that separate the colonization from crusade, see Beumann 1963, pp. 121-145.

ipation in the armed pilgrimage. Spiritual rewards were less important than earthly ones for the Saxon nobles. More exactly, the prospect of obtaining lands for the faithful was an additional inducement, while the main one was the salvation of souls⁵⁹. This could have been taken from the biblical concept of the Promised Land (*terra promissionis*). In this sense the conquest and also settlement were presented as a legitimate action because the land was chosen by God.

What can be noticed is that the letter contains no plenary or partial indulgence despite the fact that the author followed the rhetoric of Urban II at Clermont. A high-ranking cleric was not able to offer any indulgence because this was a papal privilege. A crusade enjoyed papal blessings and was based on a formal papal proclamation of the war. The responsibility to initiate a crusade belonged to the popes, while the clerics preached it. In the Magdeburg letter it was mentioned only the possibility of “saving souls” (*animas vestras salvificare*) without giving any theological detail.

The precise nature of the spiritual rewards offered by Urban II at Clermont in 1095 is not clear. The accounts on Urban’s sermon written later differ widely from one another in some aspects. In Fulcher and Robert, Urban II offered crusaders remission of their sins. In Guibert of Nogent, the crusaders who died in battle had the chance to become martyrs. In the account of Archbishop Baldric of Dol, the rewards were both spiritual and material⁶⁰. All are said to have been witnesses at Clermont, but it is unknown which of their records is a faithful reflection of Urban II’s words. The author of the Magdeburg letter could have made use of all accounts from where he extracted the information he needed⁶¹.

Urban’s contemporaries embraced the general idea that the participants in crusade would benefit from the forgiveness of sins and their souls would be saved. His offer was subject to interpretation among the people who heard it. Many saw the participation as an access to heaven. Urban made it clearer after the Council, when he adopted the term “remission of sins” (*remissio peccatorum*) in the letter of instruction to the assembling crusaders from December 1095 (Erdmann 1935, pp. 316-317; Krey 1921, pp. 42-43). Yet the nature of papal indulgence in connection with crusade begins to be somewhat clearer during the twelfth century and more so in the thirteenth century⁶².

⁵⁹ The promise of double reward originates from the Bible (Matthew 19: 29).

⁶⁰ For the spiritual and material rewards in the First Crusade, see Flori 2005, pp. 27-28.

⁶¹ More recently John Eldevik noticed that there is also a manuscript (*Passio Thiemonis*) that could have inspired the author of the letter. There are records about the torture inflicted by the Saracens or Turks to Archbishop Thiemo of Salzburg, as well as his suffering and martyrdom. In 1101 Thiemo joined Duke William IX of Aquitaine on his crusade to Palestine, where he was killed. For the legend that emerged after his death in the German lands, and the depiction of Muslims as pagan idolaters, see Eldevik 2016, pp. 260-262.

⁶² An indulgence (*indulgentia*) is an ecclesiastical grant that refers to the remission of temporal punishment due for past sins already forgiven, or rather to remission of penance. This idea is more

It is not known for sure if the letter reached Pope Pascal II (d. 1118). Even if he might have seen it, there are reasons to believe that the planned crusade was seen favorably by the pope. There is no papal authorization for preaching for this call. First of all, Pascal would not have felt comfortable approving a crusade by which the Danish king sought to extend his realm. Niels was in dispute with the pope regarding the celibacy of the priests following the Gregorian reforms. Bishop Arnold of Roskilde (d. 1124) was not able to impose celibacy among the clergy and Niels had no interest in forcing him to do this⁶³. Second, the content of the letter fits very well into the general framework of the political plans of King Henry V. His reign coincided with the final phase of the Investiture Controversy between the papacy and the secular powers. Adalgot was appointed in 1107 as Archbishop of Magdeburg by Henry. He and probably other high rank clergy from Magdeburg were supporters of Henry in the dispute with the pope⁶⁴.

Conclusion

The author of the Magdeburg letter used the accounts of violence against Christians. These were taken from the Bible with analogy to Israelites, certain well-known narratives like Adam of Bremen, or accounts on martyrdom. The image of atrocities committed by the heathen was a good instrument to motivate the nobles to “take the cross”. From a moral and legal point of view, cruelty, torture and suffering are actions that always violate Christian ethics. When described in an eschatological way, these atrocities can arouse emotional reactions among Christians.

Taking the sword for no reason was an evil action and thus a sin. A higher sin was disobedience to the ecclesiastical authorities. The Slavic attacks targeted first the Church and its innocent members who were obedient to it. Their atrocities were presented as sins who fueled divine anger and seek for revenge. The Christian attitude towards the Slavs was created following this logic. At the same time, unfulfilled vengeance led to hatred which had to be directed somewhere and consumed somehow. Humans perceived God’s judgment as a moral and legal action meant to punish the enemies of Christ and His Church. Humans acted as God’s agents and had to fulfill this divine task on Earth through military actions. If these

precise from the twelfth century. For the emergence of the Crusade indulgence and the use of the formula “remission of sins” (*remissionem peccatorum*), see the monograph by Bysted 2015. Ernst-Dieter Hehl believes that the decision to take the cross meant that the person already had remission of sins and therefore no other penitential work was necessary. This is due to the fact that the person lived in the grace of God. Hehl 1994, pp. 314-315.

⁶³ In a letter to Paschal II written in 1115 or 1116 it was requested that Danish priests should be exempted from the demand for clerical celibacy. Pedersen 2010, p. 152.

⁶⁴ For the biography of Adalgot, see the doctoral dissertation Ostwald 1908.

were carried out for worldly purposes, then they would have been considered offensive and therefore illegitimate since they were not approved by God. At the same time, any action who followed God's will on vengeance was sanctified through the preaching of the clergy and approval by the highest ecclesiastical authority.

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